

The Problem of Self-identification in the Short Stories of Bernhard Schlink

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The problem of self-identification is of course not a discovery of the twenty-first century. Some issues of the nature and limits of human individuality, some issues of its integrity and self-reliance, have been discussed in earlier times too. However, in the current sociocultural reality where people are losing moral reference points, we need, because of our human nature, the questions related to overcoming crises of identity to be central in today's literature. The matter concerns the possibilities of meeting our need to feel the authentic reality of a true life, to feel the happiness of being ourselves.

For Bernhard Schlink, as one who continues existentialist traditions in German literature, the problem of self-identification is one of the most important. His collection of short stories *Flights of Love* exemplifies this commitment.

The problem of self-identification is developed here predominantly in the space of relations between the character and an Other. A human is known to be a social being, to be substantially created by their environment, so that the family and the circle of contacts considerably influence our personal self-determination. In some stories of the collection, Schlink shows the characters which perceive an Other as a part of their personality: "He felt as if they had become intertwined, she a part of him and he a part of her" (Schlink 148). The narrator describes what the character of "Sugar Peas" feels when he gets ready to leave his wife for a new woman. Such feelings are also experienced by many other characters of the collection.

We see here different types of relations and different outcomes. The narrator shows that an Other may save the character or else may cause their downfall. In this regard, the question of adequate self-identification, of understanding personal needs and of being ready to defend one's own interests are of crucial importance. It's seldom easy, and many characters make false steps along the way which become fatal.

As an example, the mother of the central character in “Girl with Lizard” can’t imagine her life without her husband even though she feels nothing but contempt for him. Her personality develops under the influence of psychological trauma, in fear and lies. She was never happy in her marriage. Moreover, she faced violence at the hands of her husband. However, a quite natural question of her son—why she didn’t leave his father against all odds—floors her:

“Was für eine Frage“. Sie schüttelte den Kopf. “Eine Weile kannst du wählen. Willst du dies tun oder das, mit diesem Menschen leben oder mit jenem. Aber eines Tages sind diese Tätigkeit und jener Mensch dein Leben geworden, und warum du beim Leben bleibst, ist eine ziemlich dumme Frage“. (Schlink 16)

[“What a question.” She shook her head. “For a while you have a choice. Do you want to do this or that, live with this person or that? But one day what it is you’re doing and that person have become your life, and to ask why you stick with your life is a rather stupid question.”] (Schlink, trans. Woods 27)

Her case is an example of false self-identification, of an erroneous merger of herself and an Other, which results in the substitution of her own spiritual needs with the wants of an Other. Her weak will and apathy, indifference to the likely misdeeds of the husband and insensibility to the son, display her inner examination, an extreme oppression of her ego.

In “The Son,” we get to know a tragic story of a man who spends his entire life trying to adapt to people and conditions he doesn’t like. After divorce he abandons the struggle for his only son, a betrayal of both the child and himself. While trying to avoid possible conflicts and observing common decencies, the man gives ground in confrontation with his environment. Relations with the son who needs his love and care can save the man as a person with his own wants and rights, but he lets slip his last chance of self-affirmation. His further life seems to be all right, but as a natural result, he’s slowly moving to his downfall. The story ends with the murder of the man, but his feelings before the death are still more terrible than the experience of homicide.

Ihm kamen andere, ähnlich beschämende Szenen in Erinnerung. [...] Ihm brannte das Gesicht. Er hielt die Scham kaum aus. Die Erinnerungen an die Niederlagen seines Lebens, die gescheiterten Vorhaben, die gestorbenen Hoffnungen – nichts war so körperlich wie die Scham. Als wolle er von sich los und komme doch nicht von sich los, als zerre und reiße es ihn auseinander. Als halbiere es ihn. ... Und meinem Sohn war ich nur ein halbiertes Vater. (153-54)

[Other similarly shameful scenes came back to him. [...] His face was burning. He could barely stand the shame. Memories of his failures in life, of frustrated plans, of hopes now dead—nothing was as physical as shame. It was as if he wanted to get away from himself but couldn't, as if he were tugging and tearing himself apart. As if it were ripping him in two. ... And I was only half a father to my son.] (271)

By contrast to the weak-willed man from “The Son,” the woman from “The Little Fling” is a strong, mature personality who is clearly aware of her needs and ready to fight for them. She is not afraid to defy the state system, but she also doesn't find the inner strength to defend her own identity in conflict with her husband. Note that the typically existentialist conflict between personality and society is often aggravated by Schlink through opposing the inmost ego of the character with their immediate surroundings, e.g., with the family.

In “The Little Fling,” Paula actively advocates the idea of German reunification. Her husband Sven, trembling for her safety and wishing to spare her trouble with the law, gets in touch with the secret service of the former East Germany. When Paula finds out, she views it as a betrayal, as his unreadiness to accept her as she is and to recognize her right to pursue her own interests, even if they are fraught with risks for the family:

Du hast nicht mich gerettet, mich, wie ich bin, sondern wie ich denen genehm war. Wahrscheinlich bin ich auch dir so genehm – als eine harmlose Frau, gut im Bett, aber sonst nicht ganz ernst zu nehmen. So hast du mich gerettet, und wie ich bin, war dir völlig gleichgültig. Dass ich für das, was ich für richtig halte, mich auch verhaften lasse, lieber verhaften lasse, als es zu verraten... Du hast den Boden unter meinem Leben weggezogen. (49)

[You didn't save me, not the me I am, but the me that pleased them. Apparently that's how I please you, too—as a harmless woman, good in bed, but otherwise don't take her too seriously. That's how you saved me—but who I really am doesn't matter to you at all. That I'd let myself be arrested, would prefer to be arrested, for my beliefs, rather than betray them.... You pulled the rug right out from under my life.] (78)

In a fit of anger, Paula is ready to leave Sven, but she doesn't do it. Her decision can be interpreted in different ways, but it seems to point to secrets within the marriage. After their quarrel, the storyteller loses touch with them for a while. In the end, some episodes suggest a reconciliation of the characters as not only a triumph of their love and mutual understanding but also a weakness in Paula, who stops defending her truth anymore.

Attention should be paid to a detail such as Paula's hairstyle. For a long time, all surrounding people know only one Paula—the one with her hair pulled into a tight bun on the top. After the German reunification, many changes have taken place in the life of the characters. Among other things, we see some new habits and preferences in Paula's wardrobe, but her hairstyle remains the same, displaying her fighting character, her permanent internal tension, self-discipline, categoricity. Sven asks Paula one day to give up her traditional bun and to wear her hair down, but she rejects the offer “as if her hair were a secret she shared only with him and that he had now betrayed to fashion” (62). The storyteller describes the pain in Paula's reaction. Paula's loose hair, significantly in contrast to her tight bun, starts being associated with her “secret,” something very personal and innermost that she is not ready to flaunt. This association becomes stronger in the episode of the little fling, when after the couple struggle, the storyteller stays overnight in their house and Paula secretly comes to him. Describing the image of Paula tersely, the storyteller pays special attention to her loose hair, which appreciably changes her and which is accepted by him as a sign of confidence, intimacy, and revelation. And later, when he occasionally sees her in the theatre with loose hair, it gets a rise out of him. He feels behind these changes in appearance an internal change, namely, that Paula has betrayed her secret, and it is very painful for the man because this secret was opened to him once, and he has been feeling implicated ever since.

With all his seeming welfare, the character of “Sugar Peas” mentioned above is constantly experiencing an oppressive feeling of disappointment. The man can’t come to terms with himself. The title itself, a quote from H. Heine’s *Germany: A Winter’s Tale*, refers to the problem of meeting one’s own needs. This is a life principle of the character, a wish to be happy here and now. But his trouble is that he doesn’t know how to deal with himself. Because he doesn’t understand his real needs, the happiness he is rushing for always turns out to be a mirage.

In the pursuit of happiness, the man enters relationships with three women, and this triple life eats away at his personality, splitting his ego, left to dissolve into the variety of roles played:

Jetzt hatte er das Gefühl, er müsse sich jedesmal wieder neu erfinden, den Helga-, den Veronika- und den Jutta-Thomas, den Architekten- und den Maler-Thomas, den Vater-Thomas mit drei heranwachsenden Kindern und den Vater-Thomas, der mit einer einjährigen fast ein Großvater-Thomas sein könnte. (97)

[Now he felt as if he had to constantly reinvent himself: Helga’s, Veronika’s, Jutta’s Thomas, the architect and artist Thomas, the father Thomas with three growing children and the father Thomas who could almost be a grandfather Thomas of a one-year-old.] (165)

Thomas loses himself completely, his nervous tension gradually escalating into severe depression. The experience pushes him toward the desperate decision to give up everything and run away just “to get hold of himself” (173). It’s as if the narrator punishes Thomas for his levity. Initially, the man—not without pleasure—imagines himself a skillful juggler, but then he starts dreaming about himself buried under a pile of plates, burning torches, and rings which are too many for him to control. Thomas’s experiment with an Other surprisingly results in an experiment with his own identity, which is dangerous and foreboding.

Thomas doesn’t just lose interest in life, he is really disgusted with it. The lived years seem meaningless, even his own children are of no importance anymore. The idea of death becomes increasingly seductive. Severe injuries caused by an accident turn Thomas into a

feeble invalid, and this is perceived as a materialization of his spiritual failure. The episode with the Bible illustrates it well. A nun, who looks after Thomas, gives a Bible to him, but after a short reading he puts it away because there's "too much life" (177) in it. The narrator shows the moral degradation of the character who takes an aversion not only to himself but also to people around him. Looking out the window in a café, he catches himself thinking that he's ready to shoot dead all the passers-by without the slightest regret. He's calmly observing the boy sinking in a lake and rushes to his aid at the last moment only for fear of being seen by somebody while failing to help. This crime of omission could become the subject of judicial proceedings and finally lead to disclosure of the character hiding from everyone under the mask of a monk.

In "The Circumcision," we see some kind of levity and subsequent punishment, too. German by nationality, Andy decides on the circumcision to put an end to the growing divide between him and his Jewish girlfriend related to the tragic experience of the Holocaust. A simple solution is not easily seen here. The question of German national guilt is not clearly perceived by Andy, not, at least, how Sarah sees it. No discussions lead to consensus. They argue and cannot work out consensus. A salient difference between the two worldviews is laid bare. As a result, Andy goes for an operation, viewing it as an easy way to align with Sarah and the key to solving their disagreement:

Ich liebe die Frau, und sie liebt mich, und mit unseren verschiedenen Welten kommen wir nicht zurecht. So wechsle ich eben aus meiner Welt in ihre. [...] Entweder sie wird wie ich, oder ich werde wie sie. Man erträgt nur seinesgleichen. (139-140)

[I love this woman, and she loves me, and we can't handle the fact that we come from two different worlds. So I'm simply changing over to hers. [...] Either she has to become like me, or I become like her. You really tolerate only your own kind.] (242)

The attempt to go into another world is not successful. The circumcision doesn't form the Jewish conscious mind, doesn't bring Sarah and Andy closer together. It does just the opposite. The man becomes more sensitive to the gap between him and his girlfriend and decides to leave Sarah. And even worse, the circumcision delivers a crushing blow to Andy's German identity. He feels like a stranger in his native Heidelberg. His own past appears irreversibly cut

from his present. He doesn't get closer to Sarah's world and loses connection with his own world, doesn't belong to it anymore, feeling stranded somewhere on the border of a no-man's land. His mistake is that he doesn't understand that harmony in relationships with an Other cannot be reached through assimilation if that inevitably means a rejection of one's own identity.

In *Flights of Love*, as well as in other books, Schlink often shows the characters in a situation of making a choice, and this choice is, in a sense, an existential one, because the decision leads the character to losing themselves or, on the contrary, to gaining vitally important harmony with themselves. Such a decision doesn't come easily. It requires some serious self-reflection and bravery to listen to one's inner voice. This is, after all, about the personal strength of the character, about how accomplished they are as a person. In the collection of stories, Schlink shows such characters, too.

The central character of "Girl with Lizard," for example, doesn't make the mistake of his mother. Burning the picture, which, as it turns out, came into his family as a result of his father's criminal actions, is an act of self-identification, an affirmation of himself as an autonomous, independent personality. The burned picture means a lot to the character—much more than just an expensive thing or a masterpiece destroyed. From an early age, he is extremely attached to it, and this strange connection grows stronger every year. The picture is his treasure, his secret, an integral part of his life and, therefore, of himself. But after learning about its history, he decides on the painful break of this link, because keeping the picture would mean to him something like acceptance of his father's misdeeds and, therefore, a betrayal of his own moral principles that form the basis of his existence as a personality.

The man from "The Woman at the Gas Station" has enough bravery to make the only right decision for keeping his personal identity, too. His family life is more prosperous than the life of the parents from "Girl with Lizard," but his marriage is also on the rocks. In both cases, the couple continue living together out of habit, and the force of habit should not be underestimated here. Yes, the habitual present doesn't make them happy anymore, but they feel deeply rooted in it, and this makes a flight extremely difficult. The habit gets in the way of

an adequate self-identification of the character. It muffles the voice of his true ego coming from deep inside, but the needs of this ego cannot be met by the illusion of family well-being.

In both stories, we see only some semblance of family and this surrogate as a factor of self-determination can only disturb the judgment and never help the character to come to terms with themselves. The narrator emphasizes the ritual character of family life, where the substance is fully replaced by the form. So, the boy in "Girl with Lizard" is surprised to find two separately standing beds in his parents' bedroom, though it was always forbidden for him to enter the room. This restriction preserved the room as a secret place, a place of intimacy between a man and woman. By contrast, the couple in "The Woman at the Gas Station" are bereft of an intimate relationship despite continuing to share a room following their timeworn ritual:

Nur das Ritual des Miteinander-Schlafens war verlorengegangen. ... Aus dem gemeinsamen Schlafzimmer zog allerdings auch keiner von beiden aus. ... Auch sie wollte, was an Ritualen geblieben war, nicht verlieren. Sie wollte ihr gemeinsames Leben nicht verlieren. (162)

[Only the ritual of making love had been lost. ... Neither of them had moved out of their shared bedroom, however. ... She didn't want to lose what was left of their rituals, either. She didn't want to lose their life together.] (287)

The narrator shows how the couple literally cling to the rituals developed in previous happy years, because this is the only thing keeping them on their habitual life-track that they are afraid to leave. Even following the rituals, however, doesn't save the characters from feeling more and more keenly the need to reassess their place in their current circumstances. The enduring longing of the character betrays the traces of his inner disharmony. He can't deceive himself and give meaning to his life, and so he is not able to get rid of obsessive thoughts about the transience of time, which he is just wasting now.

The man is saved accidentally by meeting a woman at a gas station during his journey together with his wife, meant to reawaken their faded love and preserve the marriage. This woman at the gas station is a mystical embodiment of the man's long-term hidden fantasies

which are not just about a little erotic adventure, as it may seem at first glance. They are about much more serious things—about freedom and harmony between the man and an Other.

The narrator emphasizes the extreme rationality and strict discipline of the characters' life together:

Das alles verlangte einen disziplinierten, ritualisierten Umgang mit Zeit und ließ für Spontaneität wenig Raum [...] sie hatten sich das Leben in seinen Ritualen durchaus vernünftig und befriedigend eingerichtet. (162)

[All of this demanded a disciplined, ritualized management of time, leaving little room for spontaneity [...] their life was a series of rational and soothing rituals.] (287)

Under such circumstances, the fantasies of the man should probably be interpreted as a voice of his true ego missing freedom. It's no accident that the author notes that our fantasies often contrast sharply with our lifestyles. Meeting a woman at the gas station doesn't let the man ignore his inner voice anymore and becomes a turning point in his life. After breaking up with his wife, the man comes to terms with himself and gains a happy sense of having "an infinite amount of time" (311), time to find himself again.

The story of the character in "The Other Man" has a relatively happy ending, too. After the death of his wife the man loses his habitual conditions of life, and after learning about her adultery, he gets a still more serious shock. For many years of their marriage, Liza has become a very important part of his life, a very important part of himself. The fact of marital betrayal pulls the rug out from under him and causes him to question all his previous experience. It, in a sense, deprives him of his past and so of the opportunity of self-identification:

Der Verdruss fraß in ihm und zehrte in kleinen Bissen sein vergangenes Leben auf. Was immer seine Ehe getragen hatte, Liebe, Vertrautheit, Gewohnheit, Lisas Klugheit und Fürsorge, ihr Körper, ihre Rolle als Mutter seiner Kinder – es hatte auch sein Leben außerhalb seiner Ehe getragen. Es hatte ihn getragen sogar bei seinen gelegentlichen Phantasien von einem anderen Leben und anderen Frauen. (67)

[Vexation was eating away at him, consuming his past life in little bites. Whatever had kept his marriage afloat—love, intimacy, habit, Lisa's cleverness and solicitude, her

body, her role as the mother of his children—it had kept his life outside their marriage afloat, too. It had even kept him afloat during his occasional fantasies of another life and other women.] (113)

His correspondence with the former lover of his wife and his decision to meet the lover are about his effort to understand his past in light of the newly discovered facts and so to get it back in one form or another. Everything which seemed to be stable and definite raises several doubts now. The figure of Liza splits in two: in addition to the Liza he knew before, another Liza appears which he gets to know from a letter of his rival. The man himself puts on the mask first, pretending to be his wife and then, when meeting in person, posing as a neighbor of their family. The lover is also not whom he pretends to be. He praises it as his unique ability to see beauty where nobody else can. The deceived husband views it as posturing and demagoguery. However, the man reveals the truth. The figure of his wife and all his past recover their unity when the man understands that there was only one true Liza, differently perceived by two different people.

While developing the theme of self-identification, Schlink tries to show a complex organization of human personality, some aspects of which seem hard to understand. And this is why they often discover themselves in psycho-emotional states—in fantasies, dreams, fears, and so on. The problem of communication is closely connected with it, too: failing to understand the real personal needs of a character is a failure of discerning the right words:

Musste Sarah, wenn er ihr das beschrieb, nicht denken, ihre Fremdheit sei noch grösser als bisher bemerkt, da sie bei ihm in Tiefen wurzele, die er nicht begreife und über die er keine Auskunft geben könne? (131)

[If he were to describe these feelings, wouldn't Sarah have to think their strangeness to one another was even greater than she had ever realized, since with him it had its roots in depths that he could not understand or put into words?] (228).

This moment is reminiscent of Andi in "The Circumcision" when he refuses to speak with his girlfriend because of a feeling of inadequate comprehension to explain his emotions. The issue of communication is really important in this story. In the beginning, the characters are enjoying

their communication and reasonably see in it an opportunity for harmonious coexistence. Sarah says:

Wir kommen aus zwei verschiedenen Kulturen, wir sprechen zwei verschiedene Sprachen, auch wenn du aus deiner gut in meine übersetzt, wir leben in zwei verschiedenen Welten – wenn wir aufhören, miteinander zu reden, treiben wir auseinander. (121)

[We come from two different cultures, we speak two different languages, even when you're good at translating from yours into mine, we live in two different worlds—if we ever stop talking to each other, we'll drift apart.] (211)

Communication slowly gets complicated and then turns into torment. Conversations increasingly result in controversies. Wishing to avoid new conflicts, Andy determines the range of taboo subjects, and this range gets wider and wider. Each day after the circumcision, Andy calls Sarah. It looks like he is trying to convince himself that the target is successfully achieved and that he is no longer a stranger in Sarah's world. But he only discovers that he understands every word and yet doesn't understand a thing. Communication becomes impossible, and the characters, as predicted by Sarah, break up.

The character of "The Woman at the Gas Station" doesn't understand himself, either. At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes his long-term fantasies, noting that the man shared them with his friends earlier once or twice but has not been doing it for a long time because he doesn't understand what these fantasies can mean:

Außerdem wusste er nicht, warum der Traum ihn begleitete; er wusste, dass er etwas von ihm preisgab, aber nicht, was, und die Vorstellung, dass ein anderer es sehen könnte, war ihm unangenehm. (159)

[Besides, he didn't know why the dream had stayed with him. He knew that it betrayed something about him, but not what, and it was unpleasant to think that someone else might be able to see it.] (282)

Striving to save their marriage from its imminent collapse, the characters reasonably try to solve the problem through communication. This has some success: they get closer to each

other for a while, the man feels attached to the wife again, she seems to him beautiful and sexually attractive. However, the most hidden things remain unspoken, and this is out of his fear caused by misunderstanding the reasons of his mental state.

Er plante auch mit. Aber eigentlich wollte er an ihrer beider Leben nichts ändern, mochte es nur nicht sagen. Er mochte nicht von seiner Angst vor dem Unerledigten reden, von der er nicht wusste, was sie bedeutete, woher sie kam und warum sie wuchs, je älter er wurde. Sie steckte in seiner Ablehnung von Veränderungen; mit jeder Veränderung fühlte er die Bürde des Unerledigten schwerer werden. Aber warum? Weil Veränderung Zeit kosten und die Zeit immer schneller läuft und davonläuft? (165-166)

[He planned along with her. But actually he didn't want to change anything in either of their lives; he just didn't want to say it. He didn't want to talk about his fear of unfinished business. He didn't know where it came from, what it meant, and why it kept growing the older he became. It lay behind his rejection of change—with every change, whatever was still unfinished became an even greater burden. But why? Because changes cost time, and time was running past and away from him faster and faster?]

(293)

The character of “The Son,” as if anticipating his quick death and experiencing an urgent need to have it out with the son, is unable to find the right words to express his feelings at the crucial moment. He cannot describe his pain and repent. As a result, a timid attempt of the father to tell the son about his love just makes them both uncomfortable. The most important things are left unsaid and probably misunderstood by the other side. It appears especially dramatic against the background of the father's hours-long conversations with the ex-girlfriend he doesn't love anymore. It appears that speaking about false feelings, which are mere illusions, is much simpler than articulating the most profound experiences and real emotions of life.

The ability to distinguish the truth from what is false, namely the true ego from a habitual one that is nonetheless alien to what is true, proves critical for an adequate self-identification of a character. Schlink shows how fatal the existence under a mask may be: it significantly limits the freedom of personality, turns people into a hostage of their habits, old

rituals which replace the substance with the form and cannot give full meaning to an authentic life, depriving them of an opportunity to be happy.

Works Cited

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