

The Persistence of Modernity in Affecting Identities in Literature and Comic Studies

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Abstract: For a long time, since Descartes came with his *Cogito Ergo Sum*, modernism has shaped human's identities marked by the shifting points from theocentric to anthropocentric perspectives. The modernity itself affects matter of everyday life both in general and particular aspects, from ideas of being a good individual to matters of social interactions and from imitating psychological ethical deeds to concentrating on unconscious evil of self. The condition then also signifies the developments of literature to its core by approving the cruciality of individuality furthermore. The effect is either points out to comic studies in which its triviality has evolved into a more serious literature. From those backgrounds, this paper would like to examine the question of how and why modernity shapes and represents intricate issues of identity, including but not limited to dark tetrad personalities, as seen in comics studies. Through explorative approach and qualitative method, this article explores the analysis of identity in the midst of modernity in literature and comic studies. In conclusion, modernity may shape literature, but the looseness of literature may still be free by accentuating its flexibility toward any civilization.

Keywords: comic studies, identity, literature, modernity.

Introduction

Modernism has profoundly influenced the construction of human identities, particularly in the context of modernity. The phenomenon of modernity itself impacts various dimensions of quotidian existence, encompassing both broad and specific elements, ranging from notions of exemplary conduct to issues surrounding social interactions and from the emulation of ethical psychological behaviors to a focus on the inherent malevolence of the self (Barker, 2012). This condition consequently highlights the evolution of literature at its core by affirming the significance of individuality. The resultant impact either directs attention towards comic studies, wherein its previously perceived triviality has transformed into a more substantive literary form. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to investigate the inquiry of how and why modernity influences and encapsulates complex matters of identity, including but not confined to the dark tetrad of

personality traits, as examined within the realm of comic studies. This article then consists of five sections. Those are Introduction, The Condition of Modernity and Its Influences on Identities, The Consequences of Modernity to Literature and Comic Studies, Conclusion, and References.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine certain concepts and written data address the research question. It explains the significance of the modernity in literature and comic studies. The data for analysis is obtained by closed reading the discourses of modernity, literature, modernism, and also comic studies. This article provides quotations from various philosophical and literary discourses that support the analysis. Content analysis is used as the technique of data analysis to

underline correlations between modernity and its impact to literary analysis including comic studies.

The Condition of Modernity and Its Influences on Identities

Modern condition began around 16th century marked by the shifting points from theocentric to anthropocentric perspectives. Human beings are getting more attention and even considered as the center of the world in the world of humanism (Barker, 2012; Shetty, 2020). Various indications to culture also shape further influence for people to identify themselves in such spaces of individuality. Indeed, individualism is one of main emphasis in modernity that provides foundations for further modern development. The main idea is defining one's self by differentiating it from others.

Simply put, modernity shapes the idea of how self should be different from otherness. Such core should always be different from the peripheries and such progress will always move forward and leave anyone who does not nod to such conditions (Barker, 2012; da Silva, 2023). Another is cultural context, according to which people are defined by their cultural characteristics. The environment that individuals grow up in determines who they are or how they perceive themselves. For example, in collectivist cultures, people are encouraged to succeed for the team and the importance of the group or family. In contrast, collectivist cultures require individuals to see themselves and their personal identity in the context of family and community (Barker, 2012; da Silva, 2023). From this it can be seen that self-construction acts as a mediator to help an individual to construct themselves in relation to these cultivated signs.

Modernity then emphasizes more in matter of individual beings. At this point, it is different from aspects of communitarianism in which a person belongs to wider society. Someone is him/herself in whom his/her existential aspects matter. However, being individual brings two sides of a coin. On a hand, individuality makes people aware of themselves by indicating any kind of point that shapes or is shaped by self and others (Bauman, 2013; da Silva, 2023; Shetty, 2020). By stating so, human beings understand that identity is matter of consciousness as any kind of perception is on their

hands. Humanism widens and deepens perspectives of how human could rise above any other creature and even various differences. On the other hand, individuality accompanied by progress is not that easy to predict. It does not automatically reflect such positivism as human is not totally about being in individuality. Individuals contain various understandings that even him/her self may not really know who he/she really is. Modernism tends to work like a juggernaut that eats up everything; including human beings with their individualities, making people get involved in such dictations rather than uniqueness believed by existentialism (Bauman, 2013; da Silva, 2023).

Furthermore, modernity as a condition is such ideology of modernism itself. It works through such understanding that any kind of dissimilarity should be tamed. It shifts from duality that appreciates differences to dualism that puts hierarchies as one value is considered higher, better, and more modern than the other (Bauman, 2013; da Silva, 2023; Levin, 2023). It leaves out any traditional value that could not cope up with progress, especially in matter of information and technology nowadays. Only those who always say yes to such progress are considered as modern. Then, since technology and information are always driven by the spreading capitalism, modernity is also in line with it. Modernity firstly was believed as a thought that will liberate human beings from dictating theology in Dark Age, but then it devours individuality to its human nature (Barker, 2012; da Silva, 2023; Levin, 2023).

Progress in modernity shape the world through trends. Those keep moving on and dictating rather than liberating identities. It is true that the thought of individualism influence people to think more of them by differentiating themselves from communities. However, the progress works more than what people could imagine. It is out of prediction that internet could change people's identities including the existence of multiple digital personas. People are more pushed not only to know in their passive conditions, but they are urged to actively know more so that they are moreinvolved in the progress either (Bauman, 2013; da Silva, 2023; Levin, 2023). Furthermore, the more people know, identities are getting more

plural and complex, and somehow people could only live them without knowing the essences of them. People are leaving the perspective of them as a whole and entering the deeper connections of networks and multitudes and multiplicities.

The ugly side of modernity above shows that its affection to identities is not simple at all. Modernity directs humanity into such uniformity that both individuals and societies are pushed to always progressing ahead. However, human beings are more complex in their both essence and existence. On a hand, modernity shapes such perspectives that everyone could be anything that he/she wishes. On the other hand, what people wish somehow is dictated by such trends that result to such pressures on the shoulders of them (da Silva, 2023; Giddens, 1991; Levin, 2023). In simple modernity, indeed individuality could shape various awareness and consciousness to anything. Today, modernity is more exaggerated as shown by its diverse and impactful aspects in social issues. Modernity shapes people to be powerful in their own power, but then it shows more that they are actually powerless. People are not told to create such self-finding identities, but they are pushed to follow the trends of progress (Barker, 2012; Dube, 2020). Simply put, people are pushed to be more creative as individuals, but they are actually structured by the notions of modernity.

Modernity is mentioned to bring various positive impacts on individualization as they are more open to change and growth in progress. In reverse, those directions are objectifying human beings and slowly devaluing people's subjective matters as those should be kept in private matters. This is the side effect of modernity, especially when matter of subjective individual experience is ignored. People are getting more alienated day by day from modern conditions since many times they are fed up with unlimited growth and progress that they should always nod to (Dube, 2020; Giddens, 1991). They are not only limited to themselves, but also restricted by modern era. In this sense, consciousness, which is in line with modern condition, is not enough to contain everything that modernity expects people to be.

What actually happens is that people are driven more by their unconscious than their conscious matters. Modernity pushes people to always say yes to desire to their foundations of unconscious levels. That condition provides anything for people to be satisfied. However, people are never getting satisfied, yet they pile up various societal anxieties and fears regarding human nature (da Silva, 2023; Levin, 2023; Smith & Riley, 2009). Slowly but sure, the unconscious levels of people challenge the notions of morality as the dark side of modernity. It is not the unexpected aspects of modernity, but it is the consequences of modernity that shapes darker personalities as well (da Silva, 2023; Forsyth, et al., 2021). Especially when people could not always cope up with various progresses, they tend to shape other values that indeed represent the intricate identities.

At this point, modernity is also changing the psychological aspects of people, but not in predictable matters. The complexities of unconscious level actually could not be totally tamed by modernity. Unconscious conditions always escape from the tight grasps of modernity in the sense of progress (da Silva, 2023; Levin, 2023; Smith & Riley, 2009). In matter of Id, the desire is not always about moving forward, since somehow various desires must be oppressed so that those could not destroy the stable modern conditions. The desired satisfactions also could not merely be fulfilled by indications of advancing technology and information since those progress could also shape such dominations and other darker personalities in advance (da Silva, 2023; Dube, 2023; Levin, 2023). While stable modern conditions expect people to be predictable and measurable, unconscious levels are moving to various directions making them quite unknown.

People then also tend to define their identity by their purchasing power and the type of culture they belong to. Consumers communicate through the things they use, the things they buy, the things they consume; they consume clothes, electronics, movies, and so on. Icons that were originally local-media icons, such as Batman or Superman, have evolved into true cultural images, symbolizing universally accepted values such as justice or right and wrong (Dube, 2023; Levin, 2023). Through

them, these characters offer ways to connect their individual self-images with social images. However, this expression through consumer products can sometimes modify established values, making them a negligible commercial option.

Modernity has profoundly shaped both societal and individual identities, including a linear shift that is reflected in literature. This transformation of identity parallels the broader philosophical changes brought about by modernity, particularly in how the self is understood (Bode, 2024; Dube, 2023; Levin, 2023). In contrast to pre-modern societies, where identity was largely stable and tied to fixed social and metaphysical orders, modernity introduces a fluid and fragmented sense of self, shaped by the forces of technology, globalization, and shifting cultural norms.

In pre-modern literature and society, identity was often tied to fixed, external markers—such as social rank, religious faith, and family roles. A character's sense of self was largely dictated by their place in a divinely or socially ordained hierarchy. Modernity, however, introduces a radical break from this worldview (Bode, 2024; Dube, 2023; Levin, 2023). The rise of Enlightenment thinking, along with the Industrial Revolution, secularization, and the expansion of capitalism, brought about the notion of the individual as autonomous, self-determined, and disconnected from traditional anchors.

There are two points regarding relations between modernity and unconsciousness. On a hand, modernity consequently shapes unconscious levels as well since it shapes such anxieties and even alienations. Modernity worsens the conditions of unconsciousness by contributing trauma, defense mechanism, fear, guilt, and many more (da Silva, 2023; Fox, 2020; Levin, 2023). On the other hand, from the beginning, unconsciousness level is indeed far wider, deeper, and more complex than modernity. Yet, any effort from modernity to dominate unconscious levels is useless. In reverse, modernity creates various situations that bring advantages for unconscious levels to come to surface. It is true that various personalities such as pedophilia and sadomasochism are oppressed in modern conditions, but the advancement of information

and technology could also give chances for other personas of people to realize their desire (da Silva, 2023; Forsyth, et al., 2021; Pasopati et al., 2024). Identities of people are getting more plural in modernity as that play more into multitude. It is also true that modernity could not dominate them all, but rather gives spaces for them to grow even darker.

The persistence of modernity in shaping identities within literature is a reflection of the broader human experience in an ever-changing world. Whether through the fragmented identities of early 20th-century modernism, the hybrid selves of postcolonial and globalized narratives, or the existential challenges posed by dystopian fiction, modernity continues to provide fertile ground for writers exploring the complexities of identity (da Silva, 2023; Forsyth, et al., 2021; Levin, 2023). As the forces of modernity evolve, so too does the literary exploration of the self, allowing readers to engage with the multifaceted, often contradictory ways in which modern life shapes who people actually are.

The idea of modernity is also treating personalities differently. People must be normal and should be cured through modern psychology. However, psychoanalysis speaks differently. Psychoanalysis does not proliferated dark personalities, but it tends to think that people's deviance is quite inevitable (Fox, 2020; Oktafiani & Pasopati, 2024; Pasopati et al., 2024). Therefore, psychoanalysis could understand more to any dark personality rather than psychology that always sees such differences as disorders. One of dark personality is dark tetrad that tends to be condemned by modernity. It underlines matter of dark desire as negative personality as seen in narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism (Forsyth, et al., 2021; Oktafiani & Pasopati, 2024; Pasopati et al., 2024). All of those are reasoned by indications of egoism, moral disengagement, psychological entitlement, spitefulness, and physical and psychological abuses. All of them are caused by side effects of modernity that contributes to trauma, depression, self-loathing, and self-entitlement as inability and unwillingness to follow such trends in the name of

the progress in modernity (Oktafiani & Pasopati, 2024; Paulhus, et al., 2021).

That is why identity in today's world is changing, fluid, constantly evolving and navigating this complex landscape. Individuals are constantly interacting with consumerism, technology and culture to shape and reshape their sense of self. In doing so, however, they are in danger of completely losing their natural selves and being increasingly dictated by the outside world as to who they are and how they are perceived (Bode, 2024; Dube, 2023; Levin, 2023). It reveals the conflict attached to the promise of individual freedom offered by modernity and the constraints imposed by societal expectations and technological advances. The challenge for the modern individual is to balance personal authenticity with the push and pull of a consumerist, technology-based world.

From the discourse above, it can be seen that self-identity will follow what is being done or being used or what is seen. And from that, in this modernization period, people can become a person who is not them self. The modern age is both an opportunity and a challenge to find self-identity (Bode, 2024; Dube, 2023; Levin, 2023). Consumer culture and technology can facilitate new ways of expressing oneself but can also be part of the challenge to authenticity by encouraging it to be in tune with social trends. These influences of today's modern individual need to be carefully navigated, working to create something that defines who they are and is based on that person's values and beliefs, rather than just something to conform to (da Silva, 2023; Smith & Riley, 2009). The feeling of this ongoing tension between personal autonomy and societal expectations will be that the modern inhabitants of this world will continue to define themselves.

The Consequences of Modernity to Literature and Comic Studies

Modernity affects literature in various ways especially to the matter of individualism as well. The main idea is that modern literature focuses on matters of intrinsic values that are reflected in the texts. Written texts are also considered more valuable than speech in modern contexts. The

intrinsic parts are called as elements of literature in which plot, settings, characters, conflicts, tones, and many more, are ordained to be stated in literature. Modern literature is also said to be more objective supported by various theories that direct literature to follow such progress (Bode, 2024; Giddens, 1991). For example, such stories should follow the exact patterns of introduction, conflict and resolution in which conflict is the highest point of them all. Such stories should also contain moral messages to direct the audience to have normal personalities. The themes are also related to human beings that should always win against any of their enemies, including other humans, nature, and even wars.

However, modernity shapes literature through identities in between. It does not only affect characters, but also settings, tones, and others. Post-modernists and post-structuralists mention modernity as the one that represents such meta-narrative that should be opposed. The meta-narratives include, first, matter of dualism in which differences are not equal, but hierarchical. One point is not only considered different than the other, but also contains higher and better values (Bode, 2024; Giddens, 1991). In literature, this idea shapes further identities as well, such as women are considered having fewer values than men, the rich people are considered more powerful than the poor ones, and humans are stated far more rational than animals. Those ideas shape more oppressions and dominations rather than understanding otherness better.

Second, though putting more emphases on individuality, modernity does oversimplifications to any aspect. Simpler is considered more beautiful as well. However, it indeed ignores complexity of human's experience (Bode, 2024; Giddens, 1991; Wijaya et al., 2024). In literature, such conflict could be easily solved by resolution. However, it ignores matters of potential hatred that may come thereafter. Humans are considered as simple and do not have uniqueness. They are considered having similar attributes of identities as any difference is always inside the normal situations. Anything in modern condition is seen as such necessities that reject ideas of giving chance to further flexibilities.

Third, modernity shapes such absolute, universal, and single truth that should be internalized by individuals and societies. If something is considered good, everyone should follow it, despite any different contexts that may show up (Bode, 2024; Giddens, 1991; Wijaya et al., 2024). If such traditions of marriage have been inherited for generations, it must be so to keep such stability in narrow and wide civilization. People should understand more rather than keeping mind open for various ambivalence. Any order should be kept since world is structured and human beings should follow it as natural as possible. In modern literature, though reflecting matter of human condition, if people stay away from traditions, they should not be considered as normal and in various cases are needed to be dehumanized or even demonized (Bode, 2024; Whitla, 2010).

The three aspects above underline matters of modern literature as canon literature in structuralism matters. Symbolism and formalism are stated as main indications of modern literature that also contain three elements above. Symbolic meanings are necessary since those reflect representation of other aspects outside literature. Those could also give more nuances to the writings such as putting more depths by stating colors or seasons (An & Craig, 2021; Whitla, 2010). However, the symbols must be objective and should not be ambivalent at all. It should be derived from previous traditions with structured patterns. In this sense, the signs shown in literature should be in line with its meanings and even its intrinsic points as well.

Formalism then is also part of modern literature in which it plays role as a crucial literary criticism. Close and closed reading of a text should be done by taking out any interest or even external factors of the text. The text should be seen as it is without considering any added values and even surplus of meanings (An & Craig, 2021; Whitla, 2010; Wijaya et al., 2024). It is what it is. Formalism is also familiarized with structuralism in which language is used through such patterns in literature. It should always be certain and must not be vague or even ambivalent. It even creates such model for

future literature to be made so that the traditions keep going on.

Even so, modern literature does not treat various types of it equally. Written literature for a long time has been considered as canon literature, especially drama. Comic books, for example, are considered as trivial (An & Craig, 2021; Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; Mikkonen, 2017). Those should only be categorized as comedies though the development of comics is even staying out of them. Comic books should never be compared to canon literature since those do not contain complex intrinsic points like written ones. Comic books are not writings; they are art full of drawing for kids. Literature in its modern concepts should be for adult full of writings and deep conceptions (McCloud, 2001; Mikkonen, 2017). That is also one effect of modernity in literature, especially when literature is only for those mature and even educated people but not for everyone in every level provided.

Comic studies prove that the books contain complexities like the canon literature. Comic books eventually reflect more freedom by widening literature into art. Art is not the enemy of literature since aesthetically, literature is part of art. Drawing as an art could also walk together with literature since it could complement the stories as well (McCloud, 2001; Mikkonen, 2017). The symbolisms are not also that simple bit enriched. The existence of onomatopoeia, for example, brings better senses to literature by accentuating the power of showing rather than merely telling. While novel should list everything that a character does including the settings and plots, comics could draw the sequences by pointing to the matters of space and time (Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; McCloud, 2001). While comic books firstly were intended for kids, the realities today show more mature and complicated topics in its compositions.

McCloud provides insights into how the medium may be utilized to depict and explore complicated themes of identity, particularly in the context of modernity, through his examination of the visual and narrative elements of comics (McCloud, 2001; Mikkonen, 2017). His work revolves around the notion of the "close-up." This is a reference to comics' capacity to zoom in on particular features of a character or scenario,

enabling a more in-depth examination of their innermost feelings and thoughts. Comic studies have done a comprehensive analysis of the complex and multifaceted issue of the connection of modernity and identity. By examining the ways in which modernity has influenced the construction and representation of identity, researchers may gain a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges that people face in the contemporary world (Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; McCloud, 2001; Mikkonen, 2017). It also emphasizes how important modernity is in forming identity. Modern life's rapid changes and difficulties have given rise to fresh perspectives on and experiences with the self.

Somehow, the way why comic books are considered trivial is the way how power in literature world works. Modernism works by identifying any kind of literature that is important intrinsically. Then, it defines the idea of being in uniformity and excludes any other writings that are not conformed. Later, modernity also dominates the literature by prolonging not only the concepts, but also the discourses from literary world to education worldwide (An & Craig, 2021; Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; Whitla, 2010). Then, it also tries to change the stream of otherness to be in line with the condition of self that is inside the modern ways. However, through times, various comic books are coming to surface and show themselves as not the trivial ones. Many of them contain various psychological and unconscious matters that both visible and quite hidden in comic books.

For example, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck comics are intended for kids. Those contain funny and colorful drawings. However, those comics could also contain such deep and even hidden meanings. Minnie Mouse is the female character that is drawn to wear full dress, but Mickey Mouse as the male one only wears pants without any top clothes. It could be analyzed as how women should be dressed fully and formally while men have more freedom to choose what he wears. Scrooge McDuck or Uncle Gopher is the uncle of Donald Duck who is considered very rich after he found a golden goose egg. His richness is outstanding, but he is so selfish and cruel. The portrayal of the comics also shows how he

undermines other people who are considered as poor. This is not merely trivial, but such depiction of class conflict indicated by Marxian theories.

Other comic books such as *Maus* and *Watchmen* also contain various deep meanings. *Maus* speaks about the victims of Holocaust dominated by the Nazis. The characters are mice hunted by cats. This is also a rising of graphic novels in which drawings could complement the writings and enrich them consequently. *Watchmen* is also not merely such superhero comic books. There is a character named Rorschach who is seen as an anti-hero that speaks violence as his power. His face may change according to his emotion as it reflects idea of Rorschach tests in psychology. The existence of Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen* is also intriguing since he condemns human beings and finds out that only science that could fix humans' problems. Later on, he kills all of the *Watchmen* members and tries various efforts to destroy the world.

The prolonging conflicts between Batman and Joker in DC Comics are also proofs that comics are not always for children. Batman is told as a superhero that only has the power of wealth without any superpower. However, he is the one that makes Justice League and be trusted by Superman, The Flash, and other superheroes. He is very smart and has high moral judgments. Towards Joker, Batman will never kill him though in one of its series, it is driven that Joker is the one that killed Batman's parents (Brown, 2018). It is due to high moral standards of Batman. He knows every single weakness of his superhero friends and bloody villains, but he still believes that police should be the one that bring justice. On a series of *Dark Multiverse* in 2017, the reality changes. It is interesting to see how Batman finally let go his desire to kill. He uses various powers from other superheroes to dominate and destroy various universes (Brown, 2018). In this sense, comic books are ways to upheave the conditions of various personalities, including the dark ones. What Batman does in *Dark Multiverse* is considered as dark tetrad that outlives anyone who stands before his way.

Pre-modern culture is foreign to each individual; everyone has particular potentialities

that may or may not be realized. The transition from pre-modernity to modernity has influenced the production and consumption of comics significantly, as seen in the field of comic studies. Comic books were frequently employed in pre-modern communities to uphold beliefs and values (An & Craig, 2021; Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; Mikkonen, 2017). For instance, comic book characters are frequently interpreted as personal goals and dreams. They can be interpreted as manifestations of people's capacity to rise above the boundaries of their cultural environment. This change has made it possible to reflect a wider range of voices and viewpoints, which has had a significant impact on how comics are made and read.

Moreover, comic books are such mediums to explore any kind of identity reflected in personalities of the characters, setting, and others. The literature does not omit the importance of intrinsic values, but it demystifies the uniformity of modernity into appreciating any difference shown by human beings (An & Craig, 2021; Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; Mikkonen, 2017). Even in many comic books, moral messages are quite blurred and even non-existent. It does not mean that the comic books are not suitable for wider communities. Those reflect the realities of human beings alongside their dark personalities in between.

Conclusion

Modernity influences identities of human beings through values of individuality and progress. Individuality pays attention to how human beings should live as the ones that could control the world by knowledge and power. The progress is about any development that should be brought further by any advancement. Both individuality and progress make people to understand more on their consciousness by thinking that anything should be known and best understood by them. However, the reality of unconsciousness is never tamed by modernity. The existence of desire will never be satisfied by modernity. The situation is also reflected in literature in which modernity through individuality does oversimplifications on

everything and defines absolute, universal, and single truth. Intrinsic elements of literature should be analyzed through exact symbolism and formalism in which its signs must be conformed to its meanings as seen in structuralism. However, comic books break the chains by showing various differences in human's personalities including the dark ones. The comic books are not merely for kids, but they also consist of psychological, social, and even political tensions faced by human beings in everyday life. By stating so, comic books have proven themselves not as a trivial, but one of prominent literature.

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