

The Quest for Identity in Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*: A Psychosocial Reading Through Erikson's Identity Development Theory

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Abstract—This research examines the psycho(social) identity development of Isa (also referred to as Jose), the protagonist in Saud Alsanousi's novel, *The Bamboo Stalk* (2012), through the lens of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Applying Erikson's eight stages of identity development, the paper explores Isa's progression from infancy to adulthood, focusing on his journey from identity diffusion to identity achievement. The study centers on Isa's maturation, using detailed examples from the novel to illustrate his internal struggles and personal growth. While the paper primarily focuses on Isa's identity exploration, it briefly touches on social, economic, and cultural issues that intersect with his development. Ultimately, this research highlights how Isa, despite a challenging environment and difficult childhood, successfully attains the virtues of fidelity and love—core to Erikson's adolescent and young adulthood stages—through processes of sublimation, understanding, and forgiveness. This study eventually affirms the applicability of Erikson's theory to Isa's narrative, providing valuable insight into his quest for self-discovery.

Index Terms—*The Bamboo Stalk*, Alsanousi, identity, Erikson, psychosocial

I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

In 2012, Kuwaiti writer Saud Alsanousi won the International Prize for his Arabic novel, *The Bamboo Stalk*, which garnered widespread acclaim. The novel was translated into English by Jonathan Wright (Qualey). It chronicles the life of Isa/Jose, the son of a wealthy Kuwaiti father, Rashid Attarouf, and a Filipino maid, Josefina Mendoza. Following Isa/Jose's birth, the Attarouf family disowns him and rejects him as a part of their family. Josefina is also compelled to return to the Philippines. Isa/Jose faces dual hardships: discrimination in the Philippines due to his Arabic heritage, poverty, and fatherless status, as well as maltreatment in Kuwait because of his mother's social status and his Filipino background, evident in his appearance. Throughout his journey, he grapples with internal conflicts concerning his true identity, torn between two names, languages, religions, social classes, countries, and lives.

II. ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

In the 1950s and 1960s, the American psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson developed the idea known as the Stages of Psychosocial Development in his books *Childhood and Society* (1950) and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). Erikson held the same view as Sigmund Freud that personality evolved throughout successive phases. Erikson also agreed with Freud that the unconscious plays a crucial role in personal development (Cherry, 2023). However, Erikson's psychosocial development theory expanded upon Freud's psychosexual development theory through the establishment of parallels between childhood phases. Erikson also added to Freud's theory by incorporating the impact of social dynamics and the continuation of psychosocial development into maturity (Carrey, 2010). According to Cherry, "Freud's approach has fallen out of favor with many modern psychologists and researchers, but Erikson's views remain popular and relevant" (2023). Erikson's theory, in contrast to Freud's theory of psychosexual stages, addressed the influence of social experiences throughout the individual's lifespan. Erikson, therefore, was concerned about the roles that relationships and social contact play in human development. Erikson emphasizes the role of cultural, social, and environmental influences in personal growth as individuals encounter new challenges (May-Varas et al., 2023).

According to Erikson, personality evolved through a succession of stages. Erikson's theory posits that human progress

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includes eight predetermined stages from infancy to late adulthood. According to Vogel et al. (2009, p. 406), the following are the stages that comprise Erikson's theory:

- Stage 1: Trust vs. Mistrust (Infancy from birth to 18 months)
- Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (Toddler years from 18 months to three years)
- Stage 3: Initiative vs. Guilt (Preschool years from three to five)
- Stage 4: Industry vs. Inferiority (Middle school years from six to 11)
- Stage 5: Identity vs. Confusion (Teen years from 12 to 18)
- Stage 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young adult years from 18 to 40)
- Stage 7: Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle age from 40 to 65)
- Stage 8: Integrity vs. Despair (Older adulthood from 65 to death)

Each stage has characteristics such as virtues, psychological conflicts, significant relationships, and existential questions. Successfully resolving these conflicts is essential for individuals to transition confidently into the next new phases of life. It is important to note that resolution does not necessarily involve complete mastery or elimination of confusion but rather achieving a necessary balance without regression (May-Varas et al., 2023).

Erikson's theory entails that the eight consecutive phases of a person's development are impacted by social, psychological, and biological variables at different phases in one's life (Kivnick & Wells, 2014; Knight, 2017). Erikson contends that within each stage, individuals encounter a pivotal conflict in their growth (Malone et al., 2016). According to Erikson, these conflicts are predicated on developing a psychological quality or failing to develop that quality. There is a high likelihood of personal development during this period but also a high likelihood of failure. According to Orenstein and Lewis (2022), people who resolve the conflict effectively leave the stage with psychological assets that will benefit them throughout their lifetimes. These conflicts may prevent them from acquiring the fundamental skills necessary for a robust sense of self if they are not addressed effectively.

Erikson's psychological theory entails that an individual undergoes a psychosocial crisis during each stage, which may positively or negatively impact on the growth of their personality. Erikson claims that these crises are psychosocial in nature, as they arise when the psychological requirements of the individual collide with those of society. Based on the theory, the effective completion of each stage leads to the development of fundamental virtues such as hope and integrity and a healthy personality. The ego can utilize basic virtues as defining qualities to overcome later crises. An unhealthy personality and sense of self can result from the inability to complete further phases, which can be caused by the failure to complete a stage. Failure results in negative consequences such as despair and mistrust; nonetheless, these phases can be effectively rectified in the future (McLeod, 2024).

Erikson's bio-psychosocial theory has impacted numerous academic disciplines, including identity formation and modern literary theory. Within the context of Saud Al-Sanousi's novel, *The Bamboo Stalk*, and upon assessing Isa's/ Jose's psychosocial development, the focus will be on the following phases in his lifespan: infancy, early childhood, play age, adolescence, and early adulthood. The protagonist's prenatal conditions will also be examined due to their significance and applicability to the subject of study. The issues of trust, shame, initiative, industry, and intimacy will also be explored to gain insight into how the protagonist grappled with and resolved his internal complexities while coming to terms with identity diffusion.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have explored the identity and identity crisis theme in Saud Al-Sanousi's novel, *The Bamboo Stalk*. Within this context, they also investigated issues pertaining to religion, culture, discrimination, sexual exploitation, social inequalities, exclusions, and marginalization from various perspectives. For example, Al-Mutairi (2016) examined the novel as a Bildungsroman novel and explored the main character's identity quest from childhood to adulthood. On the other hand, Bouazza (2022) and Al Areqi (2015) discussed cultural hybridity in the novel, and Mohammed (2021) deployed intersectional theory to illustrate the protagonist's experience of oppression and discrimination in its various manifestations. Hammoud (2023) exposed the novel's depiction of female sexual exploitation; Almutairi et al. (2019) emphasized the novel's binary cultural identity; and Jarrar (2015) scrutinized the novel's dual identity and identity division; Abdu-Alhakam et al. (2020) examined the identity crisis associated with religious confusion.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a Bildungsroman is "a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character." As a Bildungsroman protagonist, Isa begins a quest for maturity and growth, showcasing the transitional stages from childhood to adulthood and his psychological evolution. His introspective journey culminates in the Philippines, where he comes to terms with the challenge of integrating into Arabic Islamic culture despite sharing the same blood and genetics. Isa/Jose tries hard to embrace his duality and reconcile his contradictions, even when others may not (Al-Mutairi, 2019). Isa has to experience all the stages of his life to reach his final decision. When he decides to return to the Philippines, his feelings of social exclusion, confusion, pain, bewilderment, and suffering culminate, and he ultimately achieves a sense of resolution. Isa reconciles with his dual reality of double cultures, names, nationalities, and religions as he realizes he is not a bamboo stalk. However, realizing that he is not the same as a bamboo stalk, he confesses that he cannot uproot his roots and transplant them into another soil where they can grow and thrive naturally (Mohamed, 2021).

Other studies that dealt with Isa's grafting or "planting himself" in another culture addressed a different view. They examined the novel through Colin Richards's Graft Theory lens. Isa's identity construction is manifested as he tries to ascertain himself into two different and incompatible cultures. However, he fails to claim recognition of Kuwaiti society for wider cultural, religious, national, and social reasons (Almutairi et al., 2019). Isa's inability to integrate into another culture is not addressed negatively in all studies where "vulnerable" Isa suffers from societal denouncement. On the contrary, Jarrar highlights the significance of Isa's hybridity in overcoming the tension of diaspora and multiculturalism. Isa resolves his insider and outsider conflict by compromising the two cultures, nations, and religions so he doesn't have to choose one of them (Jarrar, 2015).

Although Jarrar, Almutairi, and Mohamed focus on multiple facets of the cultural complexities of Isa's identity, others investigate religion, social exploitation, social marginalization, and social class as major themes in the novel. By following the descriptive discourse analysis method, researchers suggest that Isa's identity crisis emerges from a religious dilemma in his father's community. The predominant power of socioeconomic norms and entrenched traditions prevent religion (Islam) from playing its true role, manifested in equality and justice among people regardless of their ethnicity or social class. In the same way, Isa's diffusion among the three religions, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, aggravates his loss. Isa experiences internal contradictions between Islamic teachings and Muslim behaviors, which affects his religious identity negatively and ultimately impedes his identity achievement during adolescence (Abdu-Alhakam et al., 2020).

Concerning social vulnerability and discrimination against women, another study explores the theme of sexual exploitation manifested in Filipino women's relationship with Josefine, the maid, and her wealthy employer. This insight spreads to cover a wider vision, including that of other women in the novel. Josefine, her sister, and other Filipino women are forced to use their bodies under economic and social weakness, which violates their dignity and leaves them with irremediable psychological and physiological effects of anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, and unwanted pregnancies (Hammoud, 2023). Although Hammoud calls for social acts of women's protection against sexual exploitation, she doesn't elaborate on its disastrous effects on their children. In the case of Isa and his cousin Merla, both victims suffer the most from the illegitimate relations of their parents.

These studies are important because they connect Isa's identity construction to a wider socio-cultural environment. However, they provide neither a precise analysis of the protagonist's inner conflict throughout his lifespan nor shed light on his psychosocial development stage by stage. Following Erikson's psychosocial theory and based on evidence from the novel, this paper analyzes Isa's growth from infancy to adulthood and from identity diffusion to identity realization. It traces how he finally achieved his identity despite the challenges and contradictions.

Erikson's psychoanalytic theory has been employed to analyze numerous fictional characters in numerous articles. For instance, Santoso and Fajar (2023), Putra (2024), and Peterson and Stewart (1990) have all implemented Erikson's psychoanalytic theory in their research. However, *The Bamboo Stalk* novel has not received a systematic analysis within Erikson's theory, despite a proliferation of studies discussing the concept of identity confusion and its cultural impact. Throughout his life, Isa has experienced numerous conflicts resulting from the surrounding environment, which shapes his personality. Erikson has addressed those conflicts and related them to cultural factors following a gradual description of negotiated achievements and failures. In the novel, Isa gradually experiences psychosocial dilemmas by providing a detailed description of them. Even infancy and preschool stages are addressed from different social, cultural, and psychological perspectives. This makes Isa's character a good example to be understood through Erikson's lenses.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The novel is divided into five parts: Isa before birth, Isa after birth, Isa: the first wandering, Isa: the second wandering, and Isa on the margin of the homeland. The first part describes the circumstances of Isa's parents and how they met and got married. It gives a clear background of their cultural and socioeconomic classes.

A. *Issa Before Birth*

Although Erikson doesn't address the role of the prenatal surrounding environment in shaping human characters and identity, many other recent studies have shed light on it. The circumstances of Isa's creation are mentioned and analyzed to provide background knowledge and to add a deeper understanding of the character based on Erikson's framework, which contributes to affording an overall picture of his life.

Before his birth, Isa / Jose describes his mother and the women alike as handkerchiefs that strange men use before throwing them away (Alsanousi, 2012). Isa states that they are "objects of unidentified fathers" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 18). However, Isa /Jose feels privileged over them because his father doesn't deny him. He promises his mother will acknowledge him when the time comes. The circumstances of his mother's pregnancy are not ideal. His mother is a maid in a house of people who abuse her verbally. Her constant anger and dissatisfaction force her to avenge them on purpose, especially the lady of the house, Ghaneemah. Ghaneemah doesn't like Isa's mother because she thinks Josefine is ominous.

Along with her three daughters, Ghaneemah is meant to be her daughter-in-law. Isa's mother's forced labor as a servant in a foreign nation, despite her desire to further her education as a woman who enjoys reading as a hobby, highlights another aspect of her suffering. (Alsanousi, 2012).

Secrecy and skepticism surround Isa's first creation. His parents agreed to marry secretly on an unofficial marriage contract at night. Isa's father is unwilling to tell anyone about his relationship with his mother because it is a disgrace to

his family. Isa's mother hides her pregnancy at first. Then, when Ghaneemah discovers this, she expels her son and his wife out of the house. Her pregnancy is surrounded by doubt. It is a secret that must be hidden because it is a shame, a curse, a mistake, an infliction. It wasn't a real marriage (Alsanousi, 2012).

Recent studies in psychology have revealed that the emotional distress, anxiety, or depression of prenatal mothers has serious effects on their offspring and later impacts their long-lasting psychological growth (Glover, 2019). This explains how Isa suffers from anxiety and an inferiority complex later in his life. He calls himself a "number" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 17); a "thing" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 211); a "rat in front of an eagle" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 220); "the rat which is me stays silent" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 221); "a pet dog" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 253), and "a rotten fish" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 245).

B. Stage One: Infancy (0–2)

In the first moment of Isa's birth, his father refuses him unconsciously. Isa's mother describes him: "he looks at you for a long time looking for even one thing that looks like him, but he was watching a mixture of different faces, his face isn't among them" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 49). This might explain why Isa has never been satisfied with his face later in his life: "damn this face, multiple names but my face remains steadfast" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 252); "I am rejected, I am not a king, I am Isa Rashid Attarouf, a name brings honor and face brings shame" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 214); "I stand in front of the mirror watching myself nothing resembles me except my face" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 285).

However, his father carries him to his grandmother, hoping to forgive them when she sees the baby. Instead, she refuses to accept them, calls Isa a "disgusting thing who likes his mother, a curse!" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 51), and urges her son to get rid of them quickly. Under the family pressure, Isa's mom returned to the Philippines with her son. There, they live in absolute poverty, in an overcrowded and unhygienic house, suffering from her father's addiction, gambling, and abuse. His grandfather also refuses him as the son of an unidentified father. Despite her dismal situation, Isa's mother takes care of herself and her son by adapting to her father's expectations and sharing her money with the family. As a mother, she protects and loves her son, which might help Isa not mistrust all the people around him and mitigate the incoming psychosocial damage inflicted upon him later.

Isa's mother's care and affection make up for the sense of abandonment from his father, grandmother, and grandfather. Erikson contends that infants experience the dilemma of trust vs. mistrust, which is shaped by the caregiver's relationship with them. In Isa's case, despite the skeptical environment, Isa's mother (his caregiver) harnesses him with love and care. Eventually, he has achieved the virtue of hope required to move on successfully to the next stages, although he must face other challenges that create some psychosocial complexes as he is growing up.

C. Stage Two: Early Childhood (2-4) & Stage Three: Preschool (4-5)

This is a distinguished phase in Isa's development. His mother marries another man, travels away, and leaves Isa with her sister, Aida, who takes care of him. Aida is an anxious young woman who walks with red eyes and a solid countenance because she is addicted to Marijuana. She suffers from sex exploitation because she was forced to work in prostitution when she was seventeen years old, in addition to having a fatherless baby girl. Although Aida tries to take care of her daughter and Isa, especially when his grandfather abuses him, "I will take care of him," she says" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 79), her efforts wouldn't affect the children positively. Young children who stay with addictive, troubled caregivers suffer anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and cannot regulate their emotions (Manza, 2023). In these two stages, where family and parents play a crucial role in Erikson's interpretation, Isa suffers from shame, guilt, and doubt due to his grandfather's abuse, his mother's abandonment, and his aunt's neglect, which minimizes his abilities in exploration and self-assertion.

Later in the adult phase, he encounters challenging situations that mirror these circumstances. For example, when a stranger tries to rape him, he feels guilty. Instead of blaming the rapist, he doubts himself and wonders if the reason is his physical appearance: "My appearance doesn't tell if I am one of those feminized men, although many of my homelands are like that" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 336). When he fears spoiling the seats, he doesn't value himself as a worthy human; "I liked the place although I shrank in my seat afraid of spoiling anything unintentionally" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 217); he happily accepts a room in his father's home, which is an "annex for servants" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 229); and he "never claims his right to his father's money" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 243). He frequently reminds himself of his unworthiness: "I am of no value; they don't need me" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 224); "My grandmother doesn't look at me as if I am invisible" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 247). Furthermore, he believes he is undeserving of love: "I don't know; she used to hate me" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 206). He doesn't even have a favorite food, as he is willing to accept anything offered to him: "I didn't think before if I liked the food or not; the food is for me to stay away from hunger" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 197).

Erikson suggests the importance of the second and third stages in achieving the virtues of will and purpose. These pertain to children's relationships with parents and family. It seems that Isa has a toxic, troubled relationship with his family, exacerbated by the absence of his parents. As a result, Isa's conflicts remained unresolved, leading him to grow up with self-doubt, low self-esteem, and guilt, all of which heavily influenced his later life.

D. Stage Four: School Age (5-12 Years)

Unlike the previous stages of Isa's life, this phase stands out due to the significant events that have shaped his identity construction and personal choices in adulthood. Some events pertain to his exploration of his religious identity, while

others focus on acknowledging the existence of his other identity. His mother reveals his other identity by narrating his father's memories and the necessity of returning to Kuwait to claim his real heritage as a member of the Attarouf family.

When he is nine, Isa has to attend a confession ritual at school, imagining his father's promised land. At this point, Isa has contemplated his faith as a means of salvation, confessing his minor transgression of stealing a half-cooked chicken from an elderly woman out of hunger. However, he doesn't feel relieved, and the sin of "bee buzzing" has been following him ever since. The priest reassures him, "God will forgive you if you pray, and the bee buzzing will fade" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 70), but Isa wonders: "I pray a lot, but the bee likes staying in my head for a long time" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 70). When he is twelve, Isa visits the church to do "a confirmation ritual according to the seven holy secrets despite receiving only three of their baptism, confession, and confirmation" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 67).

According to Erikson, children at this age seek answers to their existence and consciously explore their abilities to claim competence. However, abuse, ridicule, or punishment can cause them to regress (May-Varas et al., 2023). Isa tries to enhance his independence by questioning his relationship with God and dreams of having a more comfortable life in Kuwait as the son of a rich and honorable man. He also develops a specific emotion towards nature: "I imagined myself as a tree in my grandfather's land" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 93). He distinguishes his feelings: "As much as I love the green color in Mendoza's land, I hate Mendoza" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 93). He also develops a personal ethical commitment towards saving the environment around him.

On the other hand, Mendoza, his grandfather, has turned Isa's life into an inferno, both physically and psychologically. The old man doesn't hide his hatred toward Isa; he hallucinates under the influence of drink, keeps telling the boy frightening myths to torment him, assigns him frequent arduous, tedious work, and shouts at him day and night. Isa's anger, bitterness, and hidden hatred towards his grandfather's abuse have intensified, leading him to rebel, complain, and draw comparisons between his life and that of his cousin Merla. Ultimately, he leaves the family and school, looking for a job in the city a few years later.

In addition to the timeline and circumstances around him, two pivotal events affect Isa's life. The first event is the accident that befalls his younger brother, Adrian, while the second is the frequent trips he takes with his cousin Merla. Adrian manages to crawl to the nearby river and falls into the water, resulting in an intellectual impairment. Even at age five, Isa takes responsibility for caring for his brother. The incident has torn Isa between guilt and shame. Scientific studies relate childhood trauma to delayed psychosocial development, low well-being, and depressive thoughts (Dorresteijn et al., 2019), which makes it hard for Isa to feel fully competent and independent later in his teens.

Contrary to the first incident, Isa's multiple journeys with Merla in the mountains, caves, and markets enrich his soul and allow him to explore intimacy as another dimension of his identity for the first time. Merla is the feminine version of Isa; she also suffers from identity diffusion, like him. She is fatherless and a daughter of an addicted, and broken woman. However, she deals with her psychological problems differently. Unlike Merla, Isa's nurtured environment and his grandfather's maltreatment largely subjugate him, with "no one submissive to Mendoza but me" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 106), whereas Merla frequently exhibits rebellious behavior. She is aggressive, doesn't adhere to her mother's instructions, smokes Marijuana, has a girlfriend, and treats her grandfather abhorrently. Her feelings of inferiority and social exclusion have impeded her from achieving Erikson's virtue of competence at this stage of her life.

Similarly, Isa remained far from achieving competence. At this stage, the child compares himself to other children, according to Erikson. Isa compares himself to his cousin Merla, questioning his status as a submissive and weak individual. Erikson argues that children must achieve themselves through social activities, sports, schoolwork, and family life. Isa has endured significant hardships at this point in his life due to the denial of his natural rights as a child. Still, his discovery's journeys with Merla compensated for some voids in his life and contributed to saving him later from self-damage.

E. Stage Five: Adolescence (13-19)

This is a critical stage in Isa's life because he leaves his family and school to explore other identities. Religious affiliations, occupational roles, and self-definition, including nationalities, values, defenses, capacities, idealizations, and rejection or acceptance of individual and group identifications, are among other characteristics related to identity in Erikson's theory (Peterson, 1990). At this stage, achieving identity requires answering Erikson's theory's main question, "Who am I?" (May-Varas et al., 2023).

(a). Isa's Exploring His Religious Identity

Isa, the son of a Christian mother and a Muslim father, can't decide which religion to follow. His mother doesn't encourage him to embrace Christianity when he is young. Because she believes he is going to convert to Islam like his father, his aunt insists on taking him to the church to complete the sacred rituals, and the other members of his family call him Buddha. Isa hesitates to embrace any faith; he is perplexed and wonders, "What if I borrow my faith?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 85).

In his journey to explore his faith, Isa visits the Seng Guan Buddhist temple in Manila. The candles and prayers reassure him of the same feelings in the church: "Was it faith that gave me this feeling of awe about the place? Or do candles, statues, and icons play a role in this?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 104). As Isa leaves the temple and enters the taxi, the driver wonders about the presence of the cross around his neck while visiting the temple. Isa replies, "To bring something, although I am uncertain of it" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 180).

Even after traveling to Kuwait and learning to pray and fast as a Muslim, Isa continues to wear the cross while imagining his father whispering in his ear, "Allah Akbar," when he is born. Isa is not convinced of the privilege of one religion over the other because he believes that Christianity and Buddhism "both call for tolerance, goodness, and favorable treatment. Would I treat one of them if I followed the others?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 36). Among his family in Kuwait, he acts like a Muslim, but he "wants to practice any ritual that makes me nearer to God" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 261).

At this stage, Isa feels lost among the three religions besides having complex inquiries within the same religion. He thinks about the priest in the church and asks, "How difficult are your questions, Father, and how straightforward are my answers?" Yes, Yes, Yes!" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 105). In the same way, Islam arouses Isa's curiosity. He has two contradictory images of Islam: the first is the heroic Muslim leader Makataan Sultan, who is a national figure in the Philippines, and the other is Abu Sayyaf, who is known for robbery, kidnapping, extortion, and killing of hostages (Alsanousi, 2012), he wonders: "Which one is Islam? Which is Islam, the one depicted in the Ressala movie or the one that led to the death of the film's director?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 273).

(b). Isa's Exploring His Occupational Roles

Overwhelmed by his demanding grandfather, sixteen-year-old Isa decides to travel to the city looking for a job. Upon his arrival, he realizes his potential: he must perform numerous tasks for Mendoza in the town at no cost, and he can exchange these tasks for monetary compensation. He begins his career as a street banana seller, transitions to a professional massage therapist at the Chinese center, and eventually secures a position in a tourist company, albeit at a modest salary. Working for the company allows him to mix with other nations, especially Arab Kuwaitis, enabling him to explore his inner affiliation with his other identity. He immerses himself in the Arabic language, music, and culture. He becomes accustomed to them. "I started to recognize Kuwaitis because I am one of them; I convinced myself" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 151), and one day, he finds himself telling a group of Kuwaitis that he is just like them. "Hey, stop. My name is Isa. I am one of you; please wait for me" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 151). Moreover, Isa feels surprised and confused because his sadness over Kuwaiti stranger tourists traveling back to Kuwait surpasses his grief over his grandfather's funeral (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 161). At this point, he questions his real national and familial identity. These thoughts and feelings have led to an increase in Isa's space for another identity. As he wanders through Manila's streets, he thinks, "Despite the years I have lived among you, I don't belong to you" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 179).

(c). Isa's Exploring His National Identity

Several cultural, economic, and social factors affect Isa's perception of himself. Isa is torn between two nationalities, two countries, and two languages. He also suffers from a split in the body and mind. His outside appearance is Filipino, but he thinks he is Kuwaiti inside. In short, he is "Kuwaiti made in the Philippines" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 159). This conflict is not limited to inner complexities; it spreads to create externally complicated situations that have exacerbated his inner ones. Owning a Filipino face makes him vulnerable and marginalized in Kuwait. One policeman steals his money by asking for his identity card (Alsanousi, 2012); another takes him to jail without scrutiny; and an airport officer disrespectfully directs him to join the foreigners' queue without checking his passport. His voice has settled Isa's staggering thoughts: "Shall I go to the Filipinos' queue, or shall I stand with people who don't resemble me?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 184). "They must be Kuwaitis, like me" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 185). Without understanding the officer's Arabic language, Isa shivers and wonders if he is in a military zone, yet he protests silently, "He refused my face before he saw my passport!" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 186).

These situations aren't limited to strangers; they extend to his father's family. After finally accepting him as a family member, his grandmother feels ashamed of keeping him at her house. Isa is admitted to the servants' annex, made sure to be hidden, and forbidden to introduce himself as Attarouf's son. He feels "I am a secret that shouldn't be revealed to others" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 230). Isa makes a concerted effort to blend in with Kuwaiti society in various ways. He seeks to convince himself, among others, that he is Kuwaiti. He wears their clothes, shares their food, obeys their social and traditional rules, participates in their social and political activities, and takes care of his grandmother's hurt knee. However, all of Isa's attempts have gone in vain. Kuwait and its people have rejected him as an intruder, and he feels rejected and displaced: "I feel bitter alienation towards land and people" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 195). Isa assimilates himself: "The bamboo in those luxurious vases seems to be like me in Attarouf's house, not in its normal place" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 217). Paradoxically, Isa's pain and disappointments are proved to be his way to reconcile with himself and realize who he is.

(d). Isa's Identity Crisis Peaks

According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a turning point toward maturity because the individual seems to achieve a reconciliation between his past, present, and future on the one hand and forge a resolution between the inner self and society's expectations. It is a crossroads stage where adolescents must choose regardless of their upbringing (May-Varas et al., 2023). Isa must endure numerous traumatic experiences before he can ultimately discover his identity by confronting his circumstances.

The turning point happens when his aunt Noureyah calls her baby son Isa, but Isa (the protagonist) thinks she is calling him, so he comes to celebrate with the family and their guests. On that day, Isa faces immense humiliation in front of the

guests as his grandmother, half-sister, and aunts reject him as a member of their family. Later, his aunt follows him, cursing him, and says, "Shut up! If I call you Filipino, then you have to answer. I was calling my son, you jerk!" (Alsanousi, 2012, pp. 266-267). Isa, heartbroken, retreats to his room, shedding tears and experiencing hallucinations (Alsanousi, 2012). At this point, Isa realizes he can't be part of the Attarouf family. Submissive, kind Isa shows his first rebellious act when his half-sister calls him to congratulate his grandmother on Eid. His outrage is evident when he asks, "After everyone has left? Why are you treating me in this manner after she assured me that the 'shame' face would not be visible to anyone? Does God also refuse me?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 275).

During the same period, he receives an email from Merla asking him to reconcile with his reality: "Overcome your face as I have overcome mine; prove to yourself before others who you are; believe in yourself, and then others will believe in you. If they don't, that's their problem, not yours" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 282). The impact of the email, coupled with his inner depression, causes Isa to erupt in anger when the neighbor mistakenly believes he is the new servant. "I am Isa Rashid Attarouf; whether you like it or not, this is what I inherited from my father. While I inherit my mother's features, I do not inherit her previous occupation in this house. What should I do to recognize myself?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 287). Ultimately, Isa decides to leave the Attarouf family and hires a small flat in a Filipino building for immigrants, where he sees "the Philippines in the new flat, although it is in Kuwait" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 308). He realizes that he is living in Kuwait, just as any expatriate Filipino struggles to achieve his dreams as a machine (Alsanousi, 2012). Isa becomes brave enough to face people other than his family. He challenges Ibrahim's thoughts about miracles and Islam when he claims that the name of God is written on the clouds. He also doubts Ibrahim's faith logic when he says that God inflicts disasters on people to increase their faith. Isa asks him, "Does God send the waves to destroy the believers' homes around the mosque so that nonbelievers believe this is the true religion?" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 289).

(e). Isa Gains the Virtue of Fidelity

Isa believes that being the son of a Muslim father and a Christian mother is not a shortcoming. On the contrary, he allows himself to learn more about Buddha and feels grateful to his parents for introducing him to two different religions because this "makes me know my God by my way" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 66). Finally, he reconciles with his beliefs because he is confident that "there is no place for faith but heart" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 299) and is satisfied with his faith: "I pray as no one does but me" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 356) and "I have almost started to find my relationship with God; I am secure with it" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 312). The act of differentiation between God and believers is another dimension of Isa's religious maturity: "Religions are greater than believers. In my right ear, the voice of Adhan rises; in the left, the church bells ring; and in my nose, the smell of Buddha temple's incense; I know God is here" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 300).

Beyond religion, Isa has embraced his dual identity and social status as a source of joy. He holds the belief that a nation that rejects cultural diversity and its citizens who succumb to the influence of class and tradition are the true victims. He comes to believe that the Attarouf family is his curse, not vice versa: "Attarouf is my curse; I am not the curse of Attarouf" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 394). Moreover, he symbolically feels superior to the Attarouf family because it represents discrimination and social bias: "I will hurt Attarouf if I write" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 326). His realization that his late father has suffered special alienation (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 386) and that his half-sister and many others experience displacement in their homeland relieves him because he has a choice that is not available to them. Isa is also Filipino, so they are stuck, but he is free: "We are stuck in this Attarouf; we can't free ourselves from it, but you can" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 349).

The wealth and prosperity in Kuwait, which Isa once dreamed of as a paradise, have already suffocated him; "Kuwait becomes smaller as a matchbox" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 383); he admits to himself that "Kuwait is a false reality" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 323). Isa recognizes that there are more precious things to find, such as family, accessibility, and acceptance, "In my isolation, I find myself missing my family in the Philippines. The water in the Philippines is sweeter" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 303). Isa understands that if "Kuwait has spat him out" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 380), it is not his fault; it is the biased social system's responsibility.

Although Erikson discusses the importance of the adolescence phase in achieving an identity, he doesn't prioritize it as a crucial and distinctive stage. Other psychologists, however, are attentive to its role in shaping human identities. For instance, psychologist James Marcia, renowned for his research on the development of identity during the late phases of adolescence, primarily focuses on this phase under Erikson's theory. He proposes four types of identity, each based on the presence or absence of two variables: commitment and exploration (Adelson, 1980; Bohlin et al., 2009). According to Erikson, Isa begins to develop his identity by exploring various life choices. He sets out on a quest to find answers and resolve the entrenched psychosocial complexes from his childhood. He left his hometown and freed himself from Mendoza. However, he doesn't reach out for answers, as the curse of his past has followed him. This requires him to face challenges to resolve his identity confusion in the next stage of his life.

F. Stage Six: Early Adulthood (20-39)

In accordance with Erikson's sixth stage, Isa has finally achieved balance concerning religion, national identity, and self-worth. His self-esteem is achieved through a deep awareness of himself, and it peaks when he writes his own story in his native language. According to McAdams and Gietl, the most powerful tool to achieve psychosocial sameness and continuity in life is narrative because it is the point where culture and self may harmonize with each other (McAdams & Gietl, 2015).

Reading the novel's final chapter, Isa has achieved a balance of identity. Through sublimation and forgiveness, he grows on a psychological and physical level. His reconciliation with his life, his two families, double religions, dual nationalities, and reality sublimates into the abstract act of writing as he narrates his story. According to Freud, sublimation is a mature defense mechanism that challenges aggressive subconscious feelings (Cohen & Kim, 2020). Isa has found the answer to this stage: "Can I love?" (May-Varas et al., 2023).

Forgiveness is another sign that proves Isa's maturity. Self-control, well-being, and a developed sense of psychological health are associated with maturity (Allemand et al., 2022). Moreover, it is important to understand the different dimensions of empathy within an individual's roles and contexts because it helps to analyze a real-world situation (Joseph & Kaplan, 2024). Isa practices empathy toward himself and others regarding his newly discovered, well-defined psychological and social identity. He forgives his grandfather, Mendoza, his grandmother, Ghaneemah, and his aunt, Noureyah. Because he is fatherless, he sees his grandfather's harsh qualities and maltreatment as a sign of emptiness, weakness, and the projection of his inner misery. "I comprehend why Mendoza used to express, 'I am alone; I am weak'" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 202). His grandmother's rejection of him is a whole-culture and community decision (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 77). Even his aunt Noureyah's rage is justified: "I don't blame her if the small cat roars" (Alsanousi, 2012, p. 370).

According to Erikson, in early adulthood, intimacy vs. isolation is the stage of readiness to share life with others after achieving identity in the previous one, so it is necessary to resolve all the previous psychosocial conflicts to enjoy healthy intimate relationships. Isa has achieved his identity at this stage and resolved the lingering residues of the past. Not only did he come to reconcile with his past, duality, and psychosocial challenges, but he also overcame them by imposing his narrative through literature. He develops a special concept of himself based on accepting and submitting to all contradictions. So, he successfully got married to Merla, practiced gratitude, and experienced satisfaction.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to provide a thorough psychological analysis of Isa's character and traces his quest for identity at different stages of his life. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to gather and analyze data in detailed descriptions. It offers a profound comprehension of Isa's internal conflicts as he undertakes a spiritual and difficult journey to unearth his identity. Following Erikson's psychosocial framework, particularly in studying Bildungsroman novels, offers a thorough analytical exploration of the character's personality. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development allows us to deconstruct Isa's character in *The Bamboo Stalk*, tracing his life stages from childhood into early adulthood and exploring his inner journey from diffusion and loss to maturity and reconciliation.

The investigation demonstrates that the protagonist effectively achieves both fidelity and love, the virtue of the adolescent and adulthood stages, through sublimation, understanding, and forgiveness, despite contending with a difficult childhood and a challenging environment. Isa has achieved his individuality while also reconciling past issues. Through the medium of writing and literature, he was able to not only overcome his psychological and social obstacles but also achieve reconciliation with his past and dualities. It is through the acceptance and submission of all contradictions that he cultivates a unique self-concept. Therefore, he secured a fruitful marriage to Merla, cultivated gratitude, and experienced contentment. Isa takes over the Attarouf family's narrative by authoring the novel. Isa, the denial impoverished maid's son, constructs an alternative reality where he controls the scenes and events and underscores his marginalized identity through discourse. Isa, therefore, imbues his life and faces the traditional dominant forces of family and social class, and he reaches the ultimate self-authenticity by telling his story not in Arabic but in his Filipino language, Tagalog. Saud Al-Sansui presents his novel as a mere translation of Isa's voice in a call for inclusive, just communities.

The novel showcases individuals in a state of cultural hybridity, still in the process of discovering their true identities and grappling with the conflict between their native homelands and their adopted countries. The study may provide valuable insights for other expatriates, aliens, strangers, and marginalized individuals, helping them recognize the impact of external injustice and human limitations stemming from traditions, racism, and discrimination. Literature does not merely serve as "art for art's sake," but claims a social and ethical responsibility. *The Bamboo Stalk* is a compelling novel that delves into various issues while examining the protagonist's self within a broader social and ethical context. It embodies a humanistic, realistic narrative that offers an understanding of real situations and connections (Santoso & Fajar, 2023). It is possible to infer that *The Bamboo Stalk* is a narrative about the internal healing and forgiveness of underprivileged, virtually damaged humans who are bearing the heavy burdens of class and race. If we anticipate Isa's middle and late maturity in the context of Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity development, Isa will probably achieve success and fulfillment in his 70s or 80s and master the virtue of wisdom.

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