

Identity Crisis in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i
hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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Kriza identiteta u *Klubu boraca* Chucka Palahniuka

Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Associate Professor

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Abstract

Fight Club is a satiric novel written by Chuck Palahniuk portraying the society of late capitalism. It deals with the topics such as anarchy, romance, life tragedies, struggles of human existence, and identity crises. The primary focus of this paper is the analysis of identity crisis depicted through various aspects of the novel. Starting with the definition of identity and putting it in the context of late capitalism and post-modern literature, the paper discusses the concepts of name, gender, and consumerism in the context of identity issues in the novel. The paper further analyses the identity of the main character, the Narrator, and Tyler Durden, his alter ego, by focusing on mental health problems and the importance of fighting in regard to personal identity.

Key words: Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, identity, mental health, post-modernism

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Introduction

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is a famous novel that received even more attention when it was turned into a movie a few years after its publication. It depicts violence, acts of rebellion, and conflicting social situations, which is why it was proclaimed to be controversial and has been subjected to discussions through various groups. Although the novel is multilayered and offers an insight into a plethora of different concepts, themes, and motifs, the one that stands out is the concept of identity. Throughout the novel, the reader is introduced to different characters and the inner struggles they confront. Those struggles testify to the characters' identity crises and how they handle them. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to define what identity is and then to discuss the identity crisis the novel's/the film's characters face.

Firstly, the paper will discuss what the identity is to understand what the novel is about. The concept of identity will then be put in the context of late capitalism and postmodernism. The analysis of the identity crisis in *Fight Club* will start with stating the importance of names, not only in the movie and the novel but in real life as well. In *Fight Club*, the protagonist remains nameless throughout the whole novel, while his alter ego has both the first and the last name, which points out that naming is an important factor in forming identity.

Furthermore, this paper will focus on the identity of the protagonist, who seems to be struggling with the sense of it. As it has been mentioned, the protagonist is an unnamed character who seems to have a sense of identity only as his alter ego. He can also be seen as the representative of a post-modern man. The paper will then explore whether mental health disorders can influence one's identity as Tyler Durden is just the projection of the protagonist, therefore, there is a doubt that the protagonist struggles with mental health disorder that causes his lost sense of identity. One of the main questions in *Fight Club* is a question of masculinity. Masculinity as a factor influencing the identity of the novel's characters will be discussed as well. Lastly, the paper will look at the concept of consumerism as an important factor in forming a person's, and by extension the novel's characters', identities.

1. Identity

In order to understand the concept of identity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, it is necessary to define it first. In *Handbook of Self and Identity*, identities are defined as “the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is” (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 69). Furthermore, it is stated that “identities can be focused on the past – what used to be true of one, the present – what is true of one now, or the future – the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become” (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 70).

Moreover, there are two core issues regarding identity: “the feeling of knowing oneself and the dynamic construction of who one is in the moment” (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 70). Identities are made and remade, which does not mean identities are made radically new every time they are made, but only that it takes a certain period of time for identities to be formed. Koëter further asserts that identity is a conscious effort and that person cannot simply “be” one thing or another; they have to consciously *want to* be so (6). In fact, if we ask what is distinctive about “being human, it will probably turn out that human being is always about becoming. . . . In this sense, it is always in the context of a certain constellation of social power” (Köeter 6) that we are able to pose the question of our becoming.

There are two main approaches to the question of identity formation. The first approach is an essentialist approach, and it assumes the existence of an inner essential content, with the identity perceived as a kind of essence that is neither prone to change nor influenced by any individual or a group. This type of identity is approached as “natural” or “self-explanatory”; it is immanent to a subject, and some examples of it are an identity of “female,” “Indian” or “teen.” An opposite approach is an antiessentialist approach through which an identity is seen as changeable, “plastic,” and fragile, associated with a specific time and space, and unstable in a sense that the shaping of unchangeable or full identities is impossible (Peternai Andrić 49).¹

1.1. Identity in Postmodernism and Late Capitalism

Although always questioned in literature, identity has become the focal concept in the era of postmodernism. With the rise of capitalism and mass production, humanity has started

¹ If not otherwise stated, all the translations from Croatian to English are done by the author of this thesis.

searching for comfort in material things, which resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness increasing among people. The question of identity is also

associated . . . with the breakdown of the welfare state and the subsequent growth in a sense of insecurity, with the “corrosion of character” that insecurity and flexibility in the workplace have produced in society. The conditions are created for a hollowing out of democratic institutions and a privatization of the public sphere, which increasingly resembles a talk show where everyone shouts out their own justifications without ever managing to affect the injustice and lack of freedom existing in the modern world. (Bauman 6-7)

Postmodernism is largely a reaction to late capitalism and its hierarchy of power, which are exposed in the postmodernist works.

In her article “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Identity,” Steluța explains the connection between postmodernity and the identity crisis:

Of all the crises postmodernity continues or itself generates, the identity crisis tends to be considered symptomatic. The search for identity was an imperative in modernism, culminating in the literature of existentialist influence. In postmodernism, the individual’s cutting off from transcendence, the loss of essence and meaning of existence itself are no longer considered a tragedy. He turns towards the past in an ontological need for spiritual regeneration, the modernist epistemological doubt being replaced by the ontological one. That one of the dominant, obsessively resurfacing issues of the mid and late twentieth-century fiction is the problem of the subject, of constructing identity, has probably been due to the tremendous influence that psychoanalytic writings have had upon the contemporary mind and stage. Postmodern, hyperrealist, magic realist, and all the other experimental types of writing have primarily focused on this problem reflected in fictional characterization, authorship and intentionality, reception and readership, narrative technique, style, genre and thematics. (325)

Furthermore, the identity crisis is a consequence of social changes in which the feelings of loneliness and isolation occurred, with people finding different interests to identify themselves with:

Alienation, this cliché of cultural criticism, a result of personal identity issues and simultaneous search for a principle to reconcile the self with the world and individual existence with society, starts to make room for acceptance and adaptation, that state of the spirit emerging when the revolt is exhausted, when, all of a sudden, the manner in which the individual – intellectual, writer, or any other person – confronted society is no longer certain, when there are no conventionalisms meant to limit freedom, when all theories seem to disappear. Although we are skeptic about such a stage coming into being any time soon, nevertheless, we can credit the idea that the individual (writer)’s priorities can be different, function of a variety of social, historical, cultural, religious factors. A contemporary postmodern psychoanalytic view is that the increase in consumerism coincides with the individual’s attention to and concern with their identity, as they form their aspirations, choose their ideal objects and construct themselves. (Steluța 327)

When talking about postmodernism and late capitalism, Jameson defines the term late capitalism as “the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world” (xx). Furthermore, he states that some of the synonyms for it are “‘multinational capitalism,’ ‘spectacle or image society,’ ‘media capitalism,’ ‘the world system,’ even ‘Postmodernism’ itself,” meaning that the late capitalism and postmodernism are sometimes interchangeable.

In its plot and themes, *Fight Club* reflects on the late capitalism and postmodernism: as it “appears to offer a critique of late capitalist society and the misfortunes it generates out of its obsessive concern with profits, consumption, and the commercial values that underlie its market-driven ethos” (Giroux 5). It is, however, “less interested in attacking the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated with neoliberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality and puts into place an enervating notion of male identity and agency” (Giroux 5).

2. Identity Crisis in *Fight Club*

If Bauman is right that “[w]hen you hear . . . word [identity], you can be sure that there is a battle going on” (77), then in *Fight Club* this battle is present in almost every situation with most characters, whether in form of the support groups where people struggle with their sense of identity after going through great tragedies or in an individual, which is shown through the Narrator and Tyler Durden trying to control a single body. In the following chapters, the occurrence of identity crises in *Fight Club* will be analyzed with the help of different elements that can trigger an identity crisis in contemporary society, such as mental health problems, gender issues, and consumerism.

2.1. The Significance of Names as an Identity Element in *Fight Club*

Personal name is one of the crucial elements in forming one’s identity, as well as the main factor one is remembered by. According to Peternai Andrić, the name is what separates the individual from others, marking them by reserving a specific spot in language for them. It is further described as “the beginning of the process of forming identity” (2).

In the novel, the Narrator is not the only one losing the sense of identity by being stripped off of his own name. When Project Mayhem is established, one of the rules is that there are no names: “There are no more names in fight club. You aren’t your name. You aren’t your family” (Palahniuk 200), and the members get to have them back only after they die: “Because only in death do we have names. Only in death are we no longer part of Project Mayhem” (Palahniuk 201). In the movie, after the Narrator claims that Big Bob had a name, one of the members asserts that in Project Mayhem there are no names. The members of Project Mayhem purposely discard their own names, thus losing the huge part that makes up their identity, becoming known as “Space monkeys” as they get rid of their human labels, becoming more like animals in the process.

In *Fight Club*, both the novel and the movie, the name of the protagonist is never revealed. In the movie, he is referred to as “the Narrator” in the opening credits. Throughout the whole plot in both the novel and the movie, he is known by different names, none of which is his real one. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that he prefers to remain

anonymous; “I never give my real name at support groups” (Palahniuk 19). Later on, he becomes known as Tyler Durden, his real identity is easily overshadowed by a different one. As the Narrator is depicted as the character struggling with his identity, having a name that stays hidden throughout the novel/the film further separates him from any sense of importance, stripping him of anything he could be remembered by. By refusing to reveal his name to even the closest people to him, he deliberately strays further from gaining any identity, despite being known as a legend and influencing many around him. As Gold asserts, “the fact that the protagonist remains nameless throughout the book, and is designated only as ‘Narrator’ in the film credits, suggests that he is an ‘everyman’ character whose flord dissociation does not connote the exotic and pathological, but rather the mundane and status quo” (14).

2.1.1. The Unnamed Narrator Versus Tyler Durden

Unlike the Narrator, his alter ego has both his first and last name. Since he showed up in the Narrator’s life, Tyler Durden has been a person he has looked up to. He appears as a polar opposite to the Narrator, possessing all the traits the Narrator would like to have. Durden appears as incredibly smart, good-looking, rebellious, and capable of making changes in the world; possessing all the characteristics the Narrator does not have as the original self: “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. I’m not Tyler Durden” (Palahniuk 174). Similarly, in Fincher’s movie adaptation, Tyler’s words to the Narrator when he discovers they share the same body are: “You were looking for the way to change your life, you could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I’m free in all the ways that you are not” (*Fight Club* 1:53:19-1:53:35).

Tyler Durden’s appearance could have been the consequence of the Narrator’s insecurities and inabilities to change his boring life. This is visible in all the actions Durden does to destroy the Narrator, such as blowing up the apartment he cared so much about, and scarring his hand with a dangerous chemical. Even the revolutionary fight club, which attracted so many men to join, could have been created as a consequence of the Narrator punching himself repeatedly.

2.2. The Identity Crisis of the Protagonist

At the beginning of *Fight Club*, the Narrator discloses the fact that he suffers from insomnia, which has a negative impact on his life, leaving him tired and barely functioning. He is shown as the middle-class man working at the office and wearing plain clothes, revealing nothing that would make him stand out from the crowd. He treats his insomnia by coming to support groups, finding comfort in life tragedies. This changes when Marla Singer joins those groups as well, preventing him from crying and releasing the tension, as he is aware that she lies about herself just like he does, which worsens his insomnia condition. Not long after that, he meets Tyler Durden and comes to live with him after his apartment burned down, which changes his life immediately. Throughout the novel, the Narrator's personality starts shifting, as Tyler's ideas influence him greatly, making him even threaten his boss:

My boss brings another sheet of paper to my desk and sets it at my elbow. I don't even wear a tie anymore. My boss is wearing his blue tie, so it must be a Thursday. The door to my boss's office is always closed now, and we haven't traded more than two words any day since he found the fight club rules in the copy machine and I maybe implied I might gut him with a shotgun blast. Just me clowning around, again. (Palahniuk126)

The Narrator appears to be fully aware of Tyler's influence over him: "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person" (Palahniuk 98), his influence being of a doubtful quality.

2.3. Mental Health as a Cause of Identity Crisis

The fact that Tyler Durden is just the Narrator's alter ego raises questions about his mental health: "This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination" (Palahniuk 168). In his article "*Fight Club: A Depiction of Contemporary Society as Dissociogenic*," Steven N. Gold thus states that

[t]he Narrator's "story" is set in motion by his frustration with the experience of what he refers to as "insomnia." However, his account of the influence of insomnia on his

daily life contains subtle hints that what he is actually experiencing is not insomnia, but dissociation. In the film, the Narrator says, “With insomnia nothing’s real. Everything’s far away. Everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy.” A similar passage in the novel concludes with the following sentence, “The insomnia distance of everything, you can’t touch anything and nothing can touch you” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 21). Practitioners who treat dissociation will recognize these words as ones that could easily constitute a client’s attempt at describing derealization and the accompanying sense of estrangement and isolation from her or his surroundings. (16)

According to *National Alliance on Mental Illness*, dissociative identity disorder, also known as multiple personality disorder, is a mental health illness in which multiple identities take control of a person’s body. They can possess unique names, character traits, and mannerisms. Persons who have this disorder experience gaps in memory, which is the case with the Narrator who expresses uncertainty over sleeping and functioning in his daily life: “Still, I have the insomnia, and can’t remember sleeping since three nights ago . . . I haven’t slept in three days unless I’m sleeping now” (Palahniuk 97) as well as “Last Thursday night, I was awake all night with the insomnia, wondering was I awake, was I sleeping. I woke up late Friday morning, bone tired and feeling I hadn’t ever had my eyes closed” (Palahniuk 158). In chapter 28, after learning that he has more than one personality, he repeats the phrase “I remember everything” multiple times, suggesting that his loss of memory is not completely triggered by insomnia. His state of mind raises questions of his storytelling ability throughout the novel as he might be considered unreliable due to his mental state.

2.4. Identity and the Concept of Masculinity

Gender plays a huge role in the formation of one’s identity. It is about the roles assigned to a person since birth that are hard to change as nothing about it can be chosen in advance. According to *World Health Organization*, “gender is used to describe the characteristics of women and men that are socially constructed, while sex refers to those that are biologically determined. People are born female or male, but learn to be girls and boys who grow into women and men. This learned behaviour makes up gender identity and determines gender roles.”

In the last few decades, the definition of gender has changed, as it has become a socio-cultural term instead of biological, but despite the changes the concepts of patriarchy and dominant masculinity are still relevant. According to Raewyn Connell, there are different types of masculinity, but the most relevant for *Fight Club* would be hegemonic masculinity. The term refers to “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77). In other words, it is a need to idealize stereotypical male characteristics – the tendency to be dominant and the avoidance of being associated with stereotypical female behaviors as they represent weakness. It is interesting to note that the concept of “hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated in tandem with a concept of hegemonic femininity – soon renamed ‘emphasized femininity’ to acknowledge the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order” (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). The theory of hegemonic masculinity can be associated with the male characters in *Fight Club*, who express their need for masculinity through violence.

In *Fight Club*, except for Marla Singer, there are no other female characters. Women are only referred to in a negative context when Durden comments on people from the fight club: “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 50), implying that they are weak and fragile. Furthermore, *Fight Club* implies that the greatest male fear is the fear of emasculation and/or feminization. At the beginning of *Fight Club*, the Narrator is hugged by Big Bob, a man from his support group, whose estrogen level increased after he suffered from testicular cancer:

Bob cries because six months ago, his testicles were removed. Then hormone support therapy. Bob has tits because his testosterone ration is too high. Raise the testosterone level too much, your body ups the estrogen to seek a balance. This is when I'd cry because right now, your life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion. (Palahniuk 17)

Big Bob is a personification of “how masculinity is both degraded (he has breasts like a woman) and used in a culture that relies on so-called feminine qualities of support and empathy to bring men together rather than on so-called masculine attributes of strength and virility” (Giroux 10). Furthermore, Giroux asserts that “when Bob hugs Jack and tells him ‘You can cry now’, *Fight Club* does more than mock New Age therapy for men; it also

satirizes and condemns the ‘weepy’ process of feminization that such therapies arguably sanction and put into place” (10).

In addition, Jon A. V. Robstad points out the feminine nature of the support group the Narrator attends: “[t]he support group for testicular cancer, where The Narrator and Bob meet, is poignantly named Remaining Men Together. Its name paradoxically entails that the last place where they can actually remain men, among men – is a place where the men are completely stripped of their manhood epitome” (56). In that group, men do not behave like common, stereotypical men, as they display behaviors stereotypical to women; they hold each other, cry, and display emotions they would usually keep to themselves. Furthermore, the fear of castration is what drives the club members: when Project Mayhem was established, the members confronted their enemies by threatening to cut their organs if they did not retreat. Men in *Fight Club* prove to value their masculinity more than their lives.

Tyler Durden is not only presented as a person the Narrator wants to be, but is depicted as an ideal man as well, proving that the Narrator struggles with his masculinity, along with other problems. As a role model to men around him, he establishes fight club, a place where men get therapeutic experience from being violent to each other:

[f]or Tyler, physical violence becomes the necessary foundation for masculinity and collective terrorism the basis for politics itself. In other words, the only way Tyler’s followers can become agents in a society that has deadened them is to get in touch with primal instincts for competition and violence; the only way their masculine identity can be reclaimed is through the literal destruction of their present selves (that is, beating each other senseless); and their only recourse to community is engaged in acts of militia-inspired terrorism aimed at corporate strongholds. (Giroux 11)

Eventually, when it comes to the characters’ masculinity and often damaging sense of self-importance, “a man’s status as a man, his masculine identity—his *honor*—has been so critical to his sense of self-worth that throughout human history innumerable men and women have worked to shape the ‘Form’ of masculinity to reflect their interests and values. Manly pride can be a man’s greatest asset and his greatest weakness” (Donovan 38).

2.5. Identity and Consumerism

The period of modernism, greatly influenced by capitalism, brought the new form of identity expression – consumerism. With the increase of mass production and the development of advertising, people tend to express themselves through material things, choosing the way they want to be perceived:

Consumption came to play an increasingly important role in people's everyday lives. People were not only offered what they needed but also what they desired, while simultaneously “wants” actively became “needs”. For instance, whereas previously a very basic functional pair of spectacles may have been sufficient for the partially sighted consumer, in a consumer culture functional items became designer items in the sense that a pair of spectacles became another means by which the individual could express his or her self identity. Consumer capitalism was able to exploit a situation where the *symbolic* value of consumer goods was endowed with an increased social significance. It is in this sense that the ideological impact of consumerism became increasingly subtle in nature. (Miles 7)

In *Fight Club*, the concept of consumerism is one of the main issues that Tyler Durden rebels against. Before the Narrator met Durden, his main source of satisfaction was his apartment full of furniture. Before his apartment was blown up by Tyler Durden, he took great pride in buying and owning things:

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (Palahniuk 44)

and

“You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. (Palahniuk 149)

According to Gold, the Narrator's obsession with buying new things might be the need to fill the emotional void in his life: "[t]here is no indication that he has any intimate relationships, any friendships, any family life, any interpersonal life outside the office, or, later, outside of his interactions with relative strangers at self-help groups" (19). Gold continues to describe him as "a single young adult without any discernable family ties whose life is centered on a job he hates and whose personal time revolves around an intense preoccupation with accumulating possessions" (19).

In the movie adaptation, the Narrator speaks about his obsession with owning things, which is a trait shared by many people living in contemporary times: "*Like so many others*, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. If I saw something clever like a little coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang, I had to have it... I would flip through catalogs and wonder, 'what kind of dining set defines me as a person?' *We* used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow collection" (*Fight Club* 00:04:47–00:05:42) The idea of collective obsession with consumerism is further emphasized by his choice of words: "we" instead of "I."

Similarly, Featherstone implies that "the identity conferring nature of consumption is not something that is merely restricted to the young and the rich but potentially affects the lives of everybody in as much as the postmodern world encourages us to believe that anything is possible" (qtd. in Miles 33). The Narrator perfectly fits this description as he is a middle-class worker for a car company. Buying and owning things gives the Narrator a sense of control over something in life, and the ability to affect or change something in it, even if it is only his apartment and the only way to achieve that is by paying it with money.

Conclusion

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* satirically portrays the struggles of modern society, living through the rise of capitalism while being blinded by what it has to offer. This paper follows the protagonist's (lack of) identity in both the novel and the movie in a society that forms one's identity through the excessive purchase of material things. Furthermore, this paper illustrates the importance of one's name, or the absence of it, for the formation of individual identities. One of the main concerns of the paper was the protagonist, the unnamed Narrator, who turned out to be struggling with mental health problems regarding identity, letting his imagined persona, who possesses all the characteristics the Narrator wants to have, take over his body and do rebellious actions in the world. The concept of masculinity and gender identity has also been discussed as the most characters' masculinity has been based on the fear of emasculation/feminization. In conclusion, *Fight Club* approaches identity crisis from multiple perspectives, proving that it is unstable, fragile, and can be easily taken over if the individual blindly follows the crowds and temporary ideals of the world.

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