

The Impact of Immigration on Identity Crisis: An Analysis of Aravind Adiga's *Amnesty*

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ABSTRACT

Arvind Adiga's novel *Amnesty* explores the complexities of immigration, identity crisis, and moral dilemmas through the story of Dhananjaya Rajarathnam, known as Danny, an undocumented immigrant in Australia. Danny's life is marked by the constant fear of deportation, forcing him to navigate the precarious balance between survival and ethical responsibility. This paper examines the novel's engagement with the themes of immigration and identity loss, arguing that the notion of "illegality" is a socio-political construct rather than an inherent condition of human existence. Through a critical lens, this study investigates how Adiga portrays alienation, hybridity, and cultural displacement faced by immigrants in host societies. The paper further explores the psychological toll of statelessness and the moral dilemmas faced by undocumented individuals, highlighting the contradictions between legal systems and humanistic values. This research situates *Amnesty* within the broader discussions of migration, nationalism, and the ethics of belonging. It highlights the need to reexamine borders and the rights of displaced individuals in a world that is increasingly influenced by globalisation and restrictive immigration policies.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Cultural hybridity, Alienation, Cultural conflict, Ethics, Immigration.

Immigration is a crucial aspect of human history. The change it has in a person's life is highly significant, which leaves an indelible mark on the individual's psyche. The process of immigration is a journey that is purposely undertaken with the aim of residing in a new landscape or country to settle there either temporarily or permanently. Because of certain reasons like the financial and the political unstable life, a common man's life in the new landscape is placed at high stakes. These journeys are not the kind that has been embraced by people who travel at their leisurely pace but by the ones who are strained by the so-called rules and regulations of immigration policies. A terrible thing to be combated by the immigrant is the tag or the label of being undocumented or illegal.

In Adiga's *Amnesty* the protagonist Danny is a Tamilian from Sri Lanka, who arrives at Sydney, Australia. He flies there under student visa to get enrolled in a particular university. But unfortunately, he finds himself scammed by the university and the education system. As the situation in Sri Lanka is impossible to survive, Danny finds it difficult to handle the societal pressure put on a youngster to get settled in life and he decides to move somewhere else in search of a safe and secure life. Despite facing legal issues Danny consciously takes the decision to stay there even after dropping out of the university which may lead to deportation. For nearly four years, Danny lives the life of an invisible man by suppressing his identity. But things change upside down when he gets to know about the murder of his client, Radha Thomas. It seems that Danny knows some unrevealed facts about the murder. If he discloses this to the police, there is a high chance for him to get deported to his native country. But his righteousness urges him to talk to the officials.

Danny understands that his presence is an act of defiance against the rigid immigration laws of the country. Yet, his struggle is not only external but deeply internal, as he wrestles with feelings of guilt, shame, and displacement. Adiga explains this feeling of alienation in *Amnesty*, "Because there is a difference between us, thought Danny, looking at the other illegals. For them, shame was an atmospheric

force, pressing down from the outside; in him, it bubbled up from within. Even if I were granted citizenship in this country, I would still be ashamed of myself' (134).

This statement captures the heart of Danny's identity crisis. It reveals that his struggle is not about legality but about his perception of self-worth. Even if Australia were to officially recognise him as a citizen, the stigma of being undocumented and the feeling of guilt that is associated with it would never leave him. His shame is not merely imposed by the legal system but is also deeply ingrained in his psyche. The years of hiding, feeling like an outsider, have shaped his self-perception to the point where he cannot imagine himself belonging, even if the country were to accept him.

Danny's shame is rooted in multiple layers of identity conflict. First, there is the guilt of leaving his home country. Although Sri Lanka is unsafe for him, it is still his homeland, the place where his roots lie. The act of leaving, seeking a life elsewhere, can sometimes feel like betrayal, particularly in cultures where strong ties to one's homeland and community are emphasised. He carries with him the burden of knowing that back home others are suffering, while he is in a foreign land trying to carve out a space for himself.

Secondly, Danny's struggle with identity is amplified by the racial and cultural dynamics of Australia. As an immigrant, he is hyper-aware of how Australians perceive him, both white Australians and other immigrants. He understands that he is different and that he does not naturally blend in. His attempts to assimilate like changing his posture, altering his accent, and even dyeing his hair are all acts of survival and they also highlight his internal conflict. He wants to belong, but at the same time, he knows that no matter how much he tries to pass as an Australian, he will always be seen as an outsider. Adiga writes,

After all: in a city like Sydney, how can you tell who is a foreigner? Observe, understand, and make a chart. Danny's way. Us and Them

1. 1st and foremost difference: posture.
2. Beards (us—too wild) and then haircuts (too docile).

3. Paunch. Young Australians don't have paunches.
4. Also don't spit in public.
5. Class (but have no class compared to people back home) (17).

This constant negotiation between who he is and who he needs to be to survive creates a fractured identity. He is neither a Tamilian nor an Australian. He exists in a space of ambiguity, where his sense of self is unstable. This is the effect of an identity crisis, the inability to reconcile different aspects of oneself into a coherent whole. Moreover, Danny's relationship with legality further complicates his self-perception. To be undocumented is to live in fear, to always be on edge. It means being unable to access basic rights and protection and constantly being aware that a single misstep could lead to deportation. The psychological toll of this existence is immense.

The depth of emotional scars he has borne would never be eradicated comfortably from his mind, even if citizenship were granted. The shame or fear is not about being labelled as undocumented and illegal, but the concern is all about how well he has been impaired. Danny's identity crisis is shaped by his interactions with others. His relationship with Sonja, a vegan and socially conscious Australian woman is highlighted in the novel. Through her, he experiences moments of acceptance, but he also realises the limitations of this acceptance. Sonja represents an idealised version of Australia, progressive, open-minded, and welcoming. Yet, Danny knows that their relationship exists in a fragile space. His legal status, his background, and his constant fear of being discovered create an invisible wall between them. He can never fully share his reality with her, and this reinforces his sense of isolation. At its core, Danny's identity crisis revolves around his sense of belonging and his legal status.

The novel suggests that for undocumented immigrants, belonging is always tenuous. Even when they build relationships, find work, and feel at home in a place, there is always the lurking fear that it could all be taken away in an instant. Danny's shame, then, is not just personal it is systemic. It is the result of a

world that divides people into categories of documented and undocumented. It is the result of a system that forces people to erase parts of themselves to survive. His story is a powerful exploration of what it means to exist in the margins, to be caught between worlds, and to never fully feel at home either.

The immigrant experience is fundamentally a journey of navigating cultural shifts and preserving personal identity. Upon entering a new country, individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural norms, values, and behaviours, initiating a complex process of negotiation. This negotiation where one's cultural identity interacts with the dominant culture often leads to internal conflict, particularly when assimilation pressures are high and cultural diversity is suppressed. The extent to which individuals can retain their original culture while adapting to the new one directly influences their sense of self and belongingness. When the dominant culture demands complete assimilation, forcing individuals to abandon their heritage, it creates psychological tension. Conversely, societies that embrace cultural pluralism, allowing diverse cultures to coexist, foster a more stable sense of identity. The presence or absence of these cultural dynamics determines how individuals adapt and if they can reconcile their past with their present.

Danny's identity crisis is evident from his constant fear of getting exposed to society; this has become a facet of his identity. This is magnified further through the lens of Michael Foucault's concept of panopticism, where he has theorised that the authority will be in full charge only when the common individuals internalise the fear and sense of being monitored by the upper hands even in their absence. Foucault's states in *Discipline and Punish*, "A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (221). This means that people can be genuinely controlled and shaped by rules or hierarchies that do not physically exist but are socially constructed. These systems create an illusion of constant surveillance and discipline, leading individuals to regulate their behaviour automatically. Foucault's idea shows how power does not always need physical force; it works best when it becomes psychological. In *Amnesty*, Danny's life

is shaped by invisible laws and imagined surveillance, just as people in everyday life conform to rules out of an internalized fear of authority.

Danny's life is precisely precarious. He is conscious of the possibility of deportation. This internalised fear leads him to adopt strict survival strategies, constantly calculating his movements, words, and actions to avoid suspicion. He is never at ease, as even the smallest mistake can lead to devastating consequences. His paranoia is not irrational but a learned response to a world, where undocumented individuals are treated as though they do not belong. As he reflects, "It meant: each time a door opened or slammed in Glebe, Danny's heart contracted; he saw a brown man who held a cigarette in the fork of his fingers; a Sri Lankan interrogation officer normally stationed somewhere around Bandaranaike International Airport. Each time a door opened or slammed, he wanted to shout, I am sorry, sir. I am so sorry. But what was the point of saying that now? He was now a man without rights in this world" (Adiga 41). The sense of powerlessness shapes every interaction, reinforcing his need to remain unseen. Through the lens of Foucault's panopticon, of identity crisis, and psychological research on undocumented immigrants, Danny's experience becomes a case study of the consequences of forced invisibility. His life is not just a story of immigration but a story of what happens when a person is denied the right to exist completely. His struggle is not just about finding a place to stay it is about finding a way to live, to be seen, and to reclaim a sense of self that has been eroded by years of fear and isolation.

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