

Reclaiming Identity, Asserting Self: A Critical Exploration of Identity Crisis and Self-Assertion in
Paulette Jiles' *News of the World*

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ABSTRACT

News of the World (2016) is a fictional historical novel written by American writer Paulette Jiles. This novel spins around the experiences of two protagonists, namely Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd, a 71-year-old veteran, and Johanna Leonberger, a 10-year-old girl. Captain Kidd is assigned to return a girl named Johanna Leonberger to her relatives in San Antonio, who has been captured by the Kiowa tribe at a very young age. On their way, both face lots of difficulties, which create a bond between them and help them overcome their dual identities. This paper analyses the complexities of identity crisis and self-assertion in the novel *News of the World*, which is set against the backdrop of Post-Civil War Texas. This study explores how the protagonist overcomes the imposed and occurs self-claimed identity. This paper highlights Jiles' novel as it involves meaningful insights into identity, culture, history, and belonging. It highlights identity crisis and self-assertion in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Self-assertion, Post-Civil War Texas.

Identity crisis can be characterized as a phase of confusion or doubt in an individual's life. It occurs when one's self-understanding about who they are becomes unstable or unsettled. It usually occurs from significant life changes that happen in one's life. This concept explores the complexities of character, their perception, values, conflicts that they face and their position in the world. Erik Erikson, in his work *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, says that identity crisis happens to an individual in many situations as follows: "a crisis in individual development or in the emergence of a new elite, in the therapy of an individual or in the tensions of rapid historical change" (16).

Self-assertion can be understood as a characteristic nature of an individual who speaks firmly about their opinion and speaks of their rights, ideas, feelings, and needs. It also means having confidence in oneself and one's skills, expressing oneself openly and courteously, building solid connections, communicating effectively, and preserving a positive sense of self-dependability.

Paulette Jiles' novel, *News of the World*, centers on Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd, a Civil War veteran, as he journeys through Texas and develops a relationship with a young girl named Johanna Leonberger, who is rescued from the Kiowa tribes. Johanna Leonberger is a white girl of German descent, captured by the Kiowa at a very young age near Castroville. During the raid by the Kiowa, her parents and younger sister are killed. Her relatives from Castroville have sent a letter requesting her return, offering fifty dollars for her safe return. Captain Kidd accepts the demand to deliver the girl to her relatives. Johanna is accustomed to the Kiowa language, having been taken captive at such a young age. She cannot remember her mother tongue and does not know English either. Tragically, she has forgotten her name and her parents' names and believes her Kiowa parents to be her biological parents.

Captivity was most common in the Pre-Civil War era in America. As many European immigrants began to settle in Texas, there arose problems between the native tribes and European immigrants. Many children were captured by Native American tribes in Texas as bargaining chips in negotiations with the US

government. The tribes usually adopted the captured white children. The children too preferred to lead a tribal life. Even after they were forced back to their original families, they held on to the experience gained during their captivity. This is mentioned in the book *The Captured* by Scott Zesch as follows:

Dozens of children on the Texas frontier were captured by Southern Plains Indians in the 1800s and adopted into the tribes. Many came to prefer the Native American way of life, resisting attempts to rescue them. Long after they were forced to return to their former families, they held fast to what they'd learned while they were away. Some anthropologists call these assimilated children white Indians (4).

Despite Johanna's desire to return to her Kiowa family, her Kiowa parents are unwilling to take her back as having a white captive would present them with difficulties. Keeping white captives may lead to a loss of their rations. Britt, a freighter, says, "The Kiowa don't want her. They finally woke up to the fact that having a white captive gets you run down by the cav. The Agent said to bring all the captives in or he was cutting off their rations and sending the Twelfth and the Ninth out of them" (Jiles 9). Consequently, Johanna's Kiowa mother sells her.

Having been brought back from the Kiowa people, Johanna is unfamiliar with the customs of white society. In a mere few years of her captivity, she has forgotten her mother tongue, her parents and her people. She remains a Kiowa girl. The author captures her state of mind in the following way:

As far as she knew she was walking into disaster, into a land blighted and starved. All around in the rolling hills, there were neither Buffalo nor canyon wrens with their spilling of song. In this land, there were no Kiowa or mother or father. She was utterly alone, trapped in peculiar clothing, a dress made of cloth with blue and yellow stripes and a tight waist. She had been laced into a thing that she could only imagine was for magical purposes, meant to confine her heart and her breath in a sort of cage to hold her forever like a shut shift that would never open (Jiles 31).

Johanna's behavior is notably different, as she has completely lost familiarity with the customs and practices of white people. One evening, while having dinner together, she picks up her smoked barbecued meat with her hands and tosses it into her mouth, causing the sauce to splatter on her wrist, which she begins to lick. The captain intervenes, trying to guide her, placing his hand over hers and demonstrating the proper use of the fork and bringing it to her mouth. This way, she starts to grasp some essential manners and daily habits of white people.

Johanna is intentionally unfamiliar with these new surroundings and wishes to reunite with the Kiowa community. While journeying with Captain Kidd, she tries to escape. Across the river at the Spanish Fort, she witnesses the Kiowa people. She cries out to them in the Kiowa language. She shouts, "I have been taken prisoner, rescue me, take me back" (Jiles 64). However, one of the Kiowa tribal men across the river throws a huge weapon aimed at her. It hits the stone near her. It clearly shows that the Kiowa people are not ready to take her back. Johanna's wish to rejoin her foster family can be compared to the post-captivity feeling of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Once she is rescued, she feels like an outsider in her own family, and she wishes for the life she lived during her captivity. It is described in the poem *Captivity* by Louise Erdrich as follows:

Rescued, I see no truth in things.

I lay to sleep.

And in the dark I see myself

as I was outside their circle (Erdrich).

Johanna continues her journey with Captain Kidd. She sits beside him and sings to herself. She accepts her fate that she cannot rejoin her Kiowa family. The captain is unexpectedly filled with compassion

for her. He thinks that though she is only ten years old, her life has drastically changed over the years. He thinks about her pitiful condition as follows:

Torn from her parents, adopted by a strange culture, given new parents, then sold for a few blankets and some old silverware, now sent to stranger after stranger, crushed into peculiar clothing, surrounded by people of un-known language and an unknown culture, only ten years old, and now she could not even eat her food without having to use outlandish instrument (Jiles 77).

Similarly, Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd is a multifaceted character who is also grappling with an identity crisis. Being 71, the captain has been significantly affected by his experiences. The emotional scars he bears and the haunting memories of his fallen comrades, along with the brutality he has witnessed, weigh heavily on him. He believes that if people are truly informed about the world, they might avoid conflict. He imagines himself as a purveyor of knowledge from far-off places, hoping that this could lead to a more peaceful world. He thinks "What people needed at bottom, was not only information but tales of the remote, the mysterious, dressed up as hard information" (Jiles 30). So, he commits his life to deliver news from around the world to small towns in Post-Civil War Texas. He travels from one town to another, sharing news articles with locals who gather to listen to his tales.

At his age, the captain has attained lots of experience which makes him look upon the world with strong disapproval. He asks, "Who cares for your fashion and your wars and your causes? I have seen many fashions come and go and causes passionately defended only to be forgotten" (Jiles 74). As he travels with Johanna, he begins to re-examine his life and consider what lies ahead. On his journey, he writes a letter to his daughters to call them to live together with them in their family house in Spanish Land near San Antonio. As he writes in his letter,

--- I must come to the important part of my Relations to you which is that I consider you would all do well here in Texas rather than in the Ruined and Devastated States in the East and please

consider the land owing to your late Mother. If you all were to return I would be happy once again in the company of my daughters and son-in-law and my grandsons, --- (Jiles 84).

Captain Kidd values honor, dignity, and respect for others. He regards his moral reputation and social standing to be his core identity. When he knows that Johanna has taken two hens from the broom man in Durand, he feels ashamed of not having noticed it. He is ashamed to be known as a chicken thief in Durand. It shows his pride. He considers his character and moral worth to be more important than material wealth. So, he arranges to pay two dollars in silver to the broom man as a token of apology.

Captain Kidd forms a deep bond with Johanna, who affectionately calls him "Kontah," meaning grandfather. She happily learns English from him while helping collect coins. However, the captain grows suspicious of her uncle and aunt, who claim to adopt her but treat her as a worker rather than as a child. Reluctantly, he leaves her behind and resumes his travels. Unable to shake thoughts of Johanna, he returns to the farm and is horrified to find her neglected. He witnesses dark red stripes on her hand. Anger overtakes him and he rescues her from her cruel guardians.

Johanna again joins Captain Kidd on his journey to read the news of the world. Now she cleans up nicely, wears shoes, and keeps the captain's money. She also begins to write letters under the patient guidance of the captain. It is to be noted that she doesn't value things of white people and remains in her heart as a Kiowa girl. Jiles remarks that

The greatest pride of the Kiowa was to do without, to make use of anything at hand; they were almost vain of their ability to go without water, food, and shelter. Life was not safe and nothing could make it so, neither fashionable dresses nor bank accounts. The baseline of human life was courage. Her gestures and expression were not those of white people and he knew they never would be. She stared intently when something interested her, her questions were forthright and

often embracing. All the animals were food, no pets. It took a long time before she thought of coins as legal tender instead of ammunition (201).

In postcolonial studies, hybridity refers to the crossing of cultures and races. Homi K Bhabha is an important theorist in speaking of hybrid cultures. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduced the concept of the third space, which is understood as the intermediate location of people who live between countries, cultures, or homelands. He says, “we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1).

In this novel, Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd and Johanna face cultural hybridity firsthand. Johanna, a white girl captivated by the Kiowa, attains a cross-cultural identity that is shaped by both worlds. Similarly, Captain Kidd, as a travel news reader, personifies shifting identity in Post-Civil War Texas. Johanna's and Captain Kidd's journey explores and navigates the tension. Johanna returns to living in white society, still carrying the Kiowa tradition that she once used to follow. Likewise, Captain Kidd reconciles his role and begins to live with his family. These changes in their lives can be compared to the concept of hybridity by Bhabha, which states that identity is not fixed but negotiated through various encounters.

At the end of this novel, Captain Kidd's daughters and their family return to San Antonio and take possession of the Bentacourt house. Captain Kidd, along with Johanna, begins to live with them. Captain Kidd leads a joyful life with his family and restarts his printing press. Johanna tries her best to live a life as an English woman. Later, she falls in love with a young shepherd, marries him and leads a happy life.

This study offers an insightful examination of humans' search for identity and belonging. Through the experience of Johanna and Kidd, this study signifies that news of the world provides a pioneering vision of self-assertion and identity crisis.

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