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THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN PATRICK MODIANO'S LA PLACE DE L'ETOILE: A STUDY

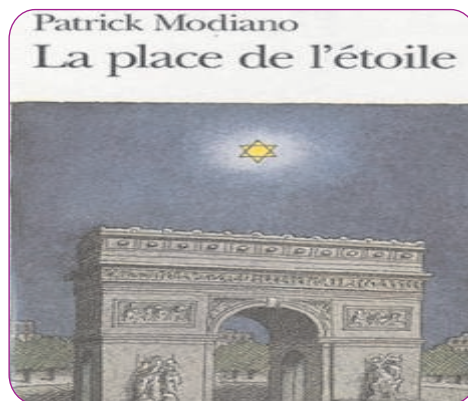
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ABSTRACT: -

The notion 'quest for identity' may lead the individuals to follow many avenues: while some individuals might affirm their 'inherent' affiliations and traditions, others may remain within their community of origin and strive to change its ways, or choose to leave their social group



and opt for membership in a new one. Identity is a multi-dimensional term which is concerned with the self esteem of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or sex or a nation: real or imaginary. 'Who am I?' is a foundation of our modern imaginary that connotes something of the order of 'myself',

'my singularity', 'my identity' (individual identity, collective identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, national identity, social identity, fictional identity) and this conjures up a host of other synonymous terms or near equivalent terms used to appease our modern angst. The issue of identity finds its articulation in a number of ways in the works of literary artists. Patrick Modiano is a contemporary novelist in France whose entire literary projects are devoted to pursuing identity. The paper addresses the quest for identity in Post Occupation France as reflected in Modiano's *La Place de l'Etoile*. Modiano explores a cultural heritage of the Jewish people in the novel under study. The quest for identity in the novel takes the form of a search for a national past. The holocaust period is a signifier in understanding his quest for Jewish identity in the novel in question.

KEYWORDS: quest, identity, personal, national, community.

INTRODUCTION:

The notion 'quest for identity' may lead the individuals to follow many avenues: while some individuals might affirm their 'inherent' affiliations and traditions, others may remain within their community of origin and strive to change its ways, or choose to leave their social group and opt for membership in a new one. Identity is a multi-dimensional term which is concerned with the self esteem of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or sex or a nation: real or imaginary. 'Who am I?' is a foundation of our modern imaginary that connotes something of the order of 'myself', 'my singularity', 'my identity' (individual identity, collective identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, national identity, social identity, fictional identity) and this conjures up a host of other synonymous terms or near equivalent terms used to appease our modern angst. Today people are obsessed with what fundamental beliefs and characteristics (physical, religious, historical, political, social etc) they share with a select group and what degree of personal and political engagement results from our perception of these similarities.

The quest for identity exhibits a basic human need, the need to structure one's personal identity in relation

to others ,to identify oneself with what lies outside the self ,to find roots and establish connections to the past as well as to the future .This is a search motivated by uncertainty. Doubts concerning the definition of personal identity emerge only when the walls of the closed, primordial community crack and individuals find themselves confronted with the external world .This confrontation shatters the old, self-evident sense of identity, evokes confusions and frustrates the individual sense of belonging .The quest for identity is a quest imbued with a hope to find a home , a group to identify with, and often a cause to fight for. It is marked by self reflection, by the readiness of individuals to make radical changes in the way they perceive themselves as well as in their relations with others .The quest for identity is a common thread in Modiano's entire literary project and this article makes an effort to show how the novelist attempts to search for his Jewish identity in French cultural context. identity quest is developed by the narrator/Modiano in La Place de l'E

Modiano's novel attempts very boldly to delve deep into the memory of holocaust in the process of identity quest .His literary journey starts with the debut that bears upon the presence of themes and characters drawn from the Jewish world. Father figure occupies a very significant place in his early Jewish novels while they are practically absent from the latter novels in which character egoistically conducts the search for memory and identity through personal recollections. It must be admitted that Modiano writes novels to satisfy his emotional needs and it directs him continue the quest for personal identity. His troubled youth and tumultuous relationship with parents always force him to constantly question who he is and where he belongs. Father (not in the biological sense always) figures prominently in most of his novels. His father Albert Modiano (1912-77, born in Paris) is of Italian Jewish origin. On his paternal side he was descended from a Sephardic family of Thessaloniki, Greece .His mother, Louisa Colpeyn is a Belgian (Flemish) actress. Modiano's parents met in occupied Paris during World War II and begun their relationship but shortly after Patrick's birth they separated .During the war years his father did business in the black market .Albert Modiano never clearly spoke of the period to his son before his death in 1977.Modiano's childhood took place in a unique atmosphere. He was initially brought up by his maternal grandparents who taught him Flemish as the first language. The absence of his father and frequently of his mother, on tour brought him closer to his two years younger brother Rudy who suddenly died of a disease at the age of 9.Modiano himself describes his own and his family story: "During the German Occupation, my father remained in Paris thanks to false identity papers. In 1942 he meets there a young actress who had just arrived from Belgium, Luisa Colpeyn. They marry in November 1944 after the Liberation .I was born in 1945 and my brother, Rudy ,in 1947.I lost my brother in 1957." His family members belonged to Sephardic Jews settled in Thessaloniki in 1492 after expulsion from Spain by Alhambra Decree. His father is of Italian Jewish origin and on his paternal side he was descended from a Sephardic family.

Over the past half century, there has been a growing concern with and attention to the issue of Jewish identity .The fundamental questions regarding what it means to be a Jew has been of primary concern since Biblical times. Philosophical writings by Jewish intellectuals, creative works by Jewish writers and filmmakers have been explicitly addressing the issues of Jewish religion, communal, cultural and national identity. The political history of France from 1940-44 had been a dark period as a result of the German(Nazy) Invasion ,the rule of a Collaborationist Government and the actions of many French people. France remade its national history with a distinctive collective memory for safeguarding her national identity.Charles de Gaulle set up the framework for a war myth (Gaullist myth) that dominated the Post war France .Clearly speaking, it is more an effort to retell the past based on present needs rather than confront the past that would come with the truth .The mythical 'history' that de Gaulle wrote for France created a culture of cover ups in all areas of society. There is no surprise that the general lack of protests from the Jewish community can easily be attributed to the intense trauma that they used to experience during the war. For both France and the French Jewish community living in denial in the immediate post war years is easier than facing the truth .The issue of identity has concerned Jews in France since the French Revolution when they were granted equal rights as French citizens .The key events such as Dreyfus Affair, the 1967 Six Day War, and the Holocaust have forced French Jews to define their identity. In 1960s in post war France there is a gradual awakening of the Jewish memory of Holocaust and the Occupation and this coincides with the publication of Modiano's debut La Place de l'Étoile(1968). Modiano belongs to the group of post Holocaust generation of writers who evoked (but not experienced physically) Jewish memory of

the Holocaust and it perhaps is his superb contribution to the awakening of both the French and the Jewish French consciousness after a long period of silence. Born in Paris suburb of Boulogne Billancourt in 1945, though he is deprived of a personal memory of Holocaust, he revisits this darkest period in history in a quest for roots and identity. The Holocaust period is a signifier in understanding the quest for Jewish identity in Modiano's *La Place de l'Etoile* (1968).

La Place de l'Etoile is the story of a young Jew. The novel presents its narrator travelling around German-occupied France and then all the way to Israel in a sardonic search for community with which he could still identify. The protagonist in the novel is Raphaël Schlemilovitch whose very name is uncouth for a real Frenchman and who evokes every possible Jew (the martyr and the king, the Nazi and the clown, Einstein and Shylock, Jesus, Judas, and Groucho Marx). The hero lives in fantasy through a thousand lives and identities. It is the study of Jewish identity by giving the narrator, Raphael Schlemilovitch many different personalities, traditional and stereotypical but all of which contribute to an understanding of the Jew. From the very beginning of the novel the narrator is estranged from mainstream society i.e. French and this sort of alienation caused by his Jewishness leads him to continue a search for identity that puts him in confrontation with the past. The novel is an exploration of a cultural heritage of the Jewish people. Schlemilovitch's quest for identity takes the form of a search for a national past also. This past is both personal and national. Modiano develops the meaning of his Jewish condition through this novel. The novelist has sketched the Jewish problem in bold lines and *La Place de l'Etoile* masterfully treats one of the thorniest collective identities i.e. Jewish identity. In 1969, a year after the publication of *LPDLE* Modiano declares in an interview: "LPDLE is the Jewish problem and nothing else. *La Ronde de nuit* is not only Vichy France. As I was writing, I used the atmosphere of Occupied Paris, but at the same time, I did not want to locate my narrative in time. In both books, it remains a quest for identity: a Jewish identity in the first, and in the second, it is rather an instinctive flight from any identification." (Patrick Modiano, "Entretien avec Montalbetti," *Le Magazine littéraire*, November 1969)

Relooking at the presence of Jews in France down the ages can contribute a good deal to locate the position of Jewish identity in 20th century France. Jews have lived in France from the Roman period and their fate is very closely tied to the various kings and leaders and in the midst of physical hardships and anti-Semitism, their life flourished. During the period they mainly consisted of isolated individuals, rather than an established community. Attempts were also made to convert the Jews to Christianity. In the 6th century, a Jewish community thrived in Paris. Anti-Jewish sentiment was not common in this early period. The 8th century witnessed the active involvement of the Jews in various fields: commerce, medicine, agriculture. In the Middle Ages the First Crusade (1096-99) had no immediate effect on the Jews of France and after the Second Crusade (1147-1149), a long period of persecutions began: offering of frequent Anti-Semitic sermons by French clergymen, special tax levied on Jews. Jews were burned on the stake also. King Augustus held a belief that Jews killed Christians and he held an ingrained hatred towards them. The situation of the Jewish people started deteriorating. Anti-Jewish measures were also adopted during the reign of Louis IX. In the mid 15th century, large numbers of Jewish immigrants arrived in France and assimilated into French society. It is for the first time since 1934 when they were allowed to legally live in the kingdom of France. After the French Revolution, citizenship was granted to the Jews in France irrespective of their earlier descents but they lost their group privileges. Napoleon introduced a Jewish communal structure sanctioned by the State and the consistorial system introduced by him made Judaism a recognized religion under Government control. During the 19th century the involvement of the Jews in different avenues of French society developed. An upsurge of anti-Semitism began in 1800s. France faced an increase of Jewish immigrants in the early 1900s due to its professed republican values. During the Holocaust anti-Jewish measures were passed and Jewish identity in France came to be questioned by the Nazi Final Solution Project. The Post Holocaust era is a haven for post war refugees. Anti-Semitism has been present throughout France's post-war history. The post-war France has engaged in re-examining France's role in the Holocaust and the Vichy regime's involvement in the deportation and murder of Jews in France.

Modiano's literary journey engages him from an early frenetic search for a suitable collective identity to a resigned and sober egotistic quest with the touch of romantic melancholia and it is reflective of the conflicts felt by the Jews in France today. *La Place de l'Etoile* conjures up a hallucinatory memory of France's hatred of the

foreignness of a Jew. Schlemilovitch, the narrator is forced to identify himself with the various definitions of the Jew by French anti-Semitism in the opening pages of the text: "The fashionable journals and the tabloids insist on lavishing me with praise. I am a charming and original young heir. Jewish? Like Jesus Christ and Albert Einstein.....Yea, I dream of bankrupting the entire French peasantry and of jewifying the Cantal region.(PP 48-49)The novel sarcastically, poignantly, parodically, chaotically recalls a number of prewar authors whose works help shape Jewish literary and cultural identity in France. The narrator feels proud of his own belongingness to the rich literary and cultural tradition in the following words: "I felt like telling the headmaster that, alas, I was a Jew. Hence :always top of the class.... The Headmaster was dumbfounded. Was he really ignorant of the keenness, the intelligence of Jews? Had he really forgotten the great writers we had given France :Montaigne, Racine, Saint-Simon, Sartre, Hendry Bordeaux, Rene Bazin, Proust, Louis-Ferdinand Celine..."(P.36)

Modiano's quest for identity helps us to understand the Jewish condition mirrored in the novel. A French Jew has two identities (two memories and histories). He may be or wish to be French but he is also a Jew. He is torn between the two. Raphael is interrogated in Israel regarding the reclaiming of his identity. He is perfectly welcome as a Frenchman in Israel, until he declares to the Israeli authorities, "I'm not entirely French, Admiral, I am a French JEW. A French JEW."(P.93). As soon as this declaration is made, he is subject to abuse and ill treatment there. This situation is symbolic of the modern Jewish identity. In modern Jewish heritage no community can owe its self identification to its coherent vision of the past. In Raphael's quest for identity multiple and contradictory pasts appear before him. In the novel, the very issue of Jewishness consists of a little bit of this and little bit of that. The novel raises the ambivalence: if to be a Frenchman has the affiliation with anti-Semitic state program as happened in recent history of France, how can a Jew be French? On the other hand, how can he not be French, if his cultural memory is full of French heroes from Clovis to Joan of Arc. The narrator of the novel is entrapped in such a situation and Modiano's search for Jewishness fails to reach a definite resolution.

The quest for identity in the novel posits the novelist to confront with the problematic of identity relevant to the today's Jewish community. Father-son conflict hinted at the novel is supposed to be a trick played on Jewish consciousness by a history that puts the Jew in a part they cannot play easily. 'Father' (not in the biological sense) figures in Modiano's early Jewish novels but they are practically absent in his later works. The older people within Jewish community try to perpetuate their heritage the way their own fathers and grand fathers had done before but their heirs try to turn Jewish history from persecution to normalcy. Father-son conflict is present in the novel under study yet there are some moments in the novel when narrator says: "There was nothing to distinguish between us. Isn't that right, my podgy papa? How could I kill you? I love you."(P.32)It clearly indicates that the narrator carries Jewishness in the construction of his identity at present.

Modiano's *La Place de l'Etoile* is fueled by a need on the part of the writer to belong and to find an identity in a country that participated and supported the murder of Jews. The novel can be read as a recovery of a presence that of Jewish life in France, of French Jews. In post war France and elsewhere, one can find many pegs on which to hang one's Jewish identity: the consciousness of a shared history; a sense of Jewish community as having survived all manners of disasters, notably the Holocaust; a solidarity with the State of Israel; minority status in relation to Christianity; the political and cultural prophetic tradition of social justice; solidarity based upon shared language; traditional Jewish religious identity. Jewish identity is based on multi-identity structure. *LPDLE* exemplifies that self is informed by a collective identity, defined in turn by a shared tradition, memory and history. In *La Place de l'Etoile*, the quest for Jewish identity is insoluble because of the conflict between present and past that hinders the Jewish consciousness from reaching a coherence required for the construction of an identity. It deserves special mention here that after his three early novels under Occupation trilogy, Modiano limits his quest to a safer version of the self that does not raise the stakes too high. His first literary project explores the self representation of a collective identity rather than a singular identity.

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