



Please cite this paper as follows:

Minaei Sadr, F., Sanei, D., & Sadati, S. Sh. (2025). From Isolation to Identity: An Expanded Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of *A Slipping-Down Life*. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 13 (54), 177-188. <https://doi.org/10.71962/jfl-2025-1209386>

Research Paper

From Isolation to Identity: An Expanded Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of *A Slipping-Down Life*

Farzaneh Minaei Sadr¹, Dianoosh Sanei^{2*}, Seyyed Shahabeddin Sadati³

¹Department of English Language and Literature, ST.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

f.minaeisadr@iau.ac.ir

²Department of English Language, ShQ. C., Islamic Azad University, Shahr-e Qods, Iran

dianoosh.sanei@iau.ac.ir

³Department of English Literature & Translation, Ro.C., Islamic Azad University, Roudehen, Iran

sh.sadati@iau.ac.ir

Received: April 13, 2024

Revised: May 19, 2024

Accepted: June 25, 2024

Abstract

This study offers a full symbolic interactionist examination of Anne Tyler's 1970 novel *A Slipping-Down Life*, probing how identity is dynamically constructed, performed, destabilized, and reclaimed through symbolic gestures, emotional labor, and struggles for social recognition—centered on the protagonist Evie Decker, whose unconventional journey from passive spectator to embodied agent serves as a rich case study in the sociology of the self; guided by seven interwoven lines of inquiry, the analysis investigates identity as performance (in Goffmanian terms), the internalization and subversion of gendered expectations, the semiotics of music and strategic silence as nonverbal communication, and the complex entanglements of trauma, affective experience, and resistant subjectivity in processes of self-negotiation; theoretically grounded in the foundational frameworks of George Herbert Mead (the “I” and “Me,” role-taking), Herbert Blumer (interpretive interactionism), Charles Cooley (the looking-glass self), and Erving Goffman (dramaturgy and impression management), and extended through contemporary integrations—including Kenneth Burke's dramatism, Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke's identity theory, Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, and feminist reconceptualizations by Judith Butler (performativity, citationality) and Carol Gilligan (ethics of care, voice)—the study situates Evie's arc within a multilayered sociopsychological matrix that transcends literary analysis alone; Evie's radical acts—most notably her self-scarification of “BRAUTIGAN” on her forehead in homage to the rock star Drumstrings Casey, her prolonged silences as resistance to patriarchal interpellation, and her reimagining of maternity outside normative scripts—unfold not as isolated pathologies but as symbol-laden, socially situated responses to chronic misrecognition and structural marginality; her transformation reveals identity not as fixed essence but as an emergent, networked, and deeply emotional process, shaped dialectically through interaction, interpretive reflexivity, and the body's inscription into discourse; notably, Evie's voice—when it emerges—is calibrated not for compliance but for recalibration: she speaks *through* silence, *with* scars, and *alongside* music, turning aesthetic appropriation into agentic reclamation; the study demonstrates how Tyler's narrative, with its psychological realism and sociological acuity, functions as a “living laboratory” of identity work, where private feeling and public meaning converge in everyday rituals, failures, and small rebellions; by tracing Evie's navigation of familial obligation, romantic idealization, vocational uncertainty, and maternal ambivalence, the analysis exposes how gender operates as both constraint and site of tactical improvisation—particularly in scenes where Evie rewrites domesticity not through rejection but through re-signification; further, the novel's treatment of trauma avoids clinical abstraction, instead showing how affective residues (shame, longing, numbness) become embodied dispositions that shape interactional styles and self-narratives; drawing synergistically on narrative psychology (e.g., McAdams' life-story model), feminist standpoint theory, and cultural sociology (e.g., Alexander's strong program), the research affirms literature—especially socio-literary realism—as a vital, underutilized archive for empirical and theoretical insight into identity formation; Tyler's text, with its finely



rendered inner monologues, dialogic tensions, and symbolic density, enables a form of *sociological close reading* that reveals how macro-structures (gender norms, class expectations, discursive regimes) are lived, contested, and remade at the micro-level of gesture, pause, and utterance; thus, the study argues for the methodological value of interdisciplinary bricolage—where literary analysis, when rigorously interfaced with sociological theory, yields not just interpretation but *explanation*—and reaffirms C. Wright Mills' call for a "sociological imagination" that connects personal troubles to public issues, here realized through the intimate, scarred, and ultimately resilient selfhood of Evie Decker.

Keywords: Identity, Marginality, Symbolic interactionism, Sociological fiction, Social roles

از انزوا تا هویت: تحلیلی گسترش‌یافته از تعامل‌گرایی نمادین در رمان زندگی در سرایشی

این مطالعه به بررسی کامل رمان زندگی در سرایشی اثر آن تایلر از منظر تعامل‌گرایی نمادین می‌پردازد و نشان می‌دهد که هویت چگونه از طریق حرکات نمادین، کار عاطفی و به رسمیت شناخته شدن اجتماعی شکل می‌گیرد، اجرا می‌شود و به چالش کشیده می‌شود. تمرکز اصلی بر شخصیت اصلی رمان، "اوی دیکر"، است و تحقیق بر پایه هفت پرسش کلیدی در زمینه‌ی شکل‌گیری هویت بنا شده است: نقش اجرا در هویت، تأثیر انتظارات جنسیتی، کاربرد موسیقی و سکوت به عنوان ابزار ارتباطی، و پیوندهای میان تروما، احساسات و مقاومت در فرایند چانه‌زنی برای هویت. این مقاله با تکیه بر مدل‌های نظری کلاسیک ارائه‌شده توسط مید، بلومر، گافمن و کولی و همچنین بازنگری‌ها و بسط‌های معاصر توسط چارمز، بورک و استتس و نظریه‌پردازان فمینیست مانند باتلر و گیلیگان، تحول شخصیت اوی را در بسترهای جامعه‌شناختی و روان‌شناختی تحلیل می‌کند. اوی با اقداماتی مانند خراشیدن بدن خود، سکوت آگاهانه، و بازتعریف نقش مادری، در شرایطی از حاشیه‌نشینی و نادیده‌انگاری اجتماعی عمل می‌کند. تجربه‌ی او نشان می‌دهد که هویت فرایندی فعال، شبکه‌ای و عاطفی است که تحت تأثیر شدید نقش‌های جنسیتی و هنجارهای اجتماعی قرار دارد. این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که ادبیات—به‌ویژه آثاری که غنای جامعه‌شناختی دارند، مانند رمان تایلر—زمینه‌ای پربار برای درک شکل‌گیری هویت به‌مثابه فرایندی عاطفی، نمادین و اجرایی فراهم می‌آورند. با بهره‌گیری از روان‌شناسی روایی، نظریه‌ی فمینیستی، و جامعه‌شناسی فرهنگی، این مطالعه مزایای تحلیل میان‌رشته‌ای در بررسی متون ادبی و خیال‌پردازی جامعه‌شناختی را برجسته می‌سازد.

واژگان کلیدی: هویت، تعامل‌گرایی نمادین، داستان جامعه‌شناختی، نقش‌های اجتماعی، حاشیه‌نشینی

Introduction

In order to adequately connect the subtle realm of literary character analysis to the complex framework of sociological theory, this study presents a detailed symbolic interactionist examination of Anne Tyler's award-winning novel, *A Slipping Down Life*, penned in 1970. The main character of the novel, Evie Decker, is a provocative depiction of marginality as a multifaceted character whose identity-construction process develops through the active and interactive synergy of various symbolic meanings available in her social environment. This research essay draws extensively on Herbert Blumer's initial theory of symbolic interactionism, initially expounded in 1969, as it delves into an extremely in-depth examination of how Evie's identity is systematically constructed and continuously negotiated through various interpretive processes with others. Additionally, it explains the significance of acted roles and emotionally charged symbolic interactions that play a vital role in shaping her identity.

Drawing on the pragmatist school of philosophy established by George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer put forward a compelling argument that "the meaning of things for human beings does not have an objective reality existing independently of them, but is something that emerges in the course of social interaction." He went on to add that "people act toward things on the basis of the meanings which the things have for them," stating that such meanings "arise out of the social interaction one has with one's fellows" (Blumer, 1969, pp. 2–5). Here, the concept of the self-changes from being fixed and inherent to something dynamic with a reflexive structure. Evie's transformation from a voiceless, invisible high school student to a woman with a substantially new appearance and a tangible sense of self can be interpreted as a complex series of challenging symbolic undertakings to gain visibility and construct her own sense of self.



This interpretive approach is premised on more recent applications of symbolic interactionism to literary and cultural texts. Critics such as Exner (2016), McLaughlin (2019), and Woolf (2017) attempt to understand how characters draw upon social cues, act, and read responses in ways that affirm and challenge who they are. This analysis takes that scholarship further by situating Evie's autobiographical process within social, symbolic, emotional, and performative contexts.

Different scholars have celebrated Tyler's psychological realism and exploration of domestic and social behaviors, but *A Slipping Down Life* has yet to be analyzed with sociological questions in mind. Although symbolic interactionism is especially well suited for addressing issues of self-concept, role-taking, labeling, and the social creation of meaning (Fine, 1993; Snow, 2001; Charmaz, 2014), few studies have utilized it to understand the character's identity development process. As McCall and Simmons in their 1978 publication, identity can be understood as "the emergent outcome of symbolic interactions in which the individual and others engage one another, define one another, and evaluate one another" (p. 74). What this suggests is that identity is not stable but a dynamic process negotiated through interaction between individuals and others around them. Furthermore, Stryker and Burke in their 2000 publication also draw a connection between identity and internalized role expectations individuals have within themselves. These internalized expectations are developed based on the feedback they receive from significant others in the external environment, indicating the complex connection between self-definition and external verification (p. 286). How Evie's transformation, or her most dramatic self-change in her act of carving Drumstrings Casey's name in her forehead, is not simply an individual or psychological action, but it is an action, a communal one, which must be recognized, and which has everything to do with creating a spectacle that disrupts norms. Goffman's "presentation of self" theory, developed in 1959, is one such useful framework for describing this process. In it, we can consider individuals as continually "performing" a certain identity, rehearsing expressive actions knowingly intended to meet expectations or tailored perceptions of others in their surroundings.

The employ of literature, also, is situated within broader sociological discussions of the "social self" that use literature, and its content — including easily generalized personality characteristics — to support the argument that fictional characters are reflections of the social world and the symbolically mediated presentations and representations of the self in the social world (Callero, 2003; Koivisto & Laine, 2017). Literature, as Hutto and Gallagher (2017) argue, plays the role of "narrative practice" by which characters and people can make meaning of themselves within symbolic orders. Miall and Kuiken (2002) explain that literature may act as an emotional and sociological laboratory, showing how identity is emotionally and socially co-authored.

Also, Tyler's exploration of marginality and visibility directly concerns issues central to the scholarship on the social locations of marginalized individuals. Howard (2006) and Schwalbe et al. (2000) suggest that identity in those on the social periphery is often structured around the experiences of managing stigmatization, striving for recognition, and engaging in acts of resistance to social invisibility. Evie's choice to sacrifice herself, to become spectacle of herself, represents a form of symbolic resistance, an attempt to emotionally and physically mark her social being in a society that renders her existence invisible.

By drawing on the fertile concepts that have been developed and described by symbolic interactionist theorists, and by scrutinizing the novel *A Slipping Down Life* closely through the prism of this particular branch of sociology, this study reveals that various types of people are constructed and understood on the basis of the subtle interplay between emotion and ritualized behavior that they perform. Furthermore, such constructed identities are set in contention against one another in a world that is governed by relative meanings, and these happen within specific



social contexts. Thus, in conversation with Blumer (1969), Stryker (1980), and Goffman (1959), as well as more recent and interdisciplinary theorists (such as Charmaz, 2014; Hutto and Gallagher, 2017; Koivisto & Laine, 2017), this essay participates in the building up of a literary sociology. It's an illustration of how it is possible to read literature for what it might say about the symbolic construction of self. It is particularly helpful to individuals who have found themselves living in conditions of alienation, experiencing psychological distress, and grappling with a desperate desire for affirmation and validation in their lives.

Review of Literature

Current interdisciplinarity and research targeting the theoretical construct of identity in general are contributing towards a much more dynamic, multi-dimensional, symbolic, and socially grounded conception of how identities are formed and imagined. Most at the center of these provocative debates is the symbolic interactionism theory, which posits that identity is not a thing that lies within us fixedly, rigidly, or inherently; rather, it is something that is actively built and developed through our social lives, the shared co-construction of meaning among individuals, and the performances of identity that are played out through all manner of social signs and symbols in our interactions with others. This theory provides an insightful and helpful lens through which to analyze and make sense of Anne Tyler's novel, *A Slipping Down Life*. In this novel, the protagonist, Evie Decker, actively navigates and negotiates the complicated intersections of marginality, visibility, and emotional agency through a series of social symbolic actions that she undertakes throughout the novel. In the following section, the study attempts to bring together some of the key works in sociology and feminist theory, as well as those from literary studies, to situate identity as fluid, contextual, and emergent.

Herbert Blumer, the founder of symbolic interactionism, presumes the following basic assumptions, that: "(1) 'Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings which the things have for them' (2) such meanings are derived from social interaction, and (3) meanings are open to interpretation" (Blumer 1969). In the novel *A Slipping-Down Life*, Evie's drastic act of carving Drumstrings Casey's name on her forehead may initially be a pathological act when taken in the abstract. However, if we place this act within the analytical model presented by Blumer, we can interpret it as a forceful act of symbolic negotiation. It is an act not only to claim her stake in a world that has largely overlooked her, but to forcibly claim the attention that she has been denied for so long in a social world that has rendered her invisible. The physical act of ascending the tree, along with the significant moments when she refuses to speak, works significantly to forge a type of self-reconstitution that resists and addresses fixed social codes, written gender roles, and strongly ingrained emotional imperatives.

This view is extended by Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which begins to understand identity formation as performance. For Goffman, social interaction is its theater, and people are performers using social dramas to control the way they appear to others. "Performance," he explains, "is everything that a participant contributes in a single presence to those around him to affect them in any way" (p. 26). Evie's selectively imposed isolations as well as her on-a-whim self-presentation and romantic adulation of Drumstrings are performances for him, performances that are based on what Evie interprets as how he looks at her, or doesn't look at her. Drumstrings, on the other hand, create and develop a musical persona that is the exact antonym of his emotional vulnerability. The co-presence of the two characters is helpful to illustrate the notion that symbolic interaction occurs not merely through the agency of verbal talk but also through a



variety of other means like gestures, performance art, and the strategic positioning of narrative elements within the overall storytelling process.

The concept of identity performance is especially significant when viewed alongside feminist critiques of emotional labor, and the fraught way in which identities are constructed and performed within social environments. In her insightful critique, Cecilia Donohue draws an intriguing comparison between Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and Tyler's novel, concluding that "young women are coerced into creating identities in spaces that require and warp emotional exchange" (2020, p. 47). This observation point works to underscore the expectations and pressures bearing down upon young women, and how their identities are constructed through fraught emotional exchanges in various environments. Donohue does not specifically refer to symbolic interactionism, but her study is in line with the attention to relational processes and the external validation of identity that is highlighted in symbolic interactionist scholarship. In addition to her individual preferences, the emotionally siphoning worlds in which she lives value male stories, as she also reflects in *Drumstrings*'s apathy and the gendered expectations for romantic endeavor or mothering.

The way in which identity is related is more specifically explored in *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), who claim that women create their identities through narrative and dialogue with others. They explain that "the self is not an isolated self, but a self in relation" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 34). The concept acts as a fertile interpretive instrument whereby one can examine and decipher Evie's relationship with language, her relation with music, and her relations with other individuals. These elements become the essential instruments whereby her self-awareness is constructed and maintained throughout time. Her story also serves as a moving reminder to the reader, reminding us that identity is not an essential or fixed fact but a construct built by the relational gaze of individuals around her. This identity is continually asserted or denied through the symbolic interactions with others in her social environment.

Attitudes in this direction are confirmed by non-symbolic interactionist authors, whose research provides a complementary perspective. Sadeghi, Mohammad, and Yarahmadi (2020), discussing Deleuze and Guattari's poststructuralist philosophy and applying it to their reading of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, assert that identity is "a dynamic state produced under the social power" (p. 84). Identity for these individuals is also something very fluid and dependent on social context, again supporting Blumer's (1969) contention that identity is malleable through interpretation. Likewise, Rahimipour (2021) underlines the way that the "other's gaze," particularly under conditions of colonialism and race, inscribes meaning on the self. This thematic connection also strikes very close to Evie's personal experience. In particular, it implies that the novel *Someone Knows My Name* by Lawrence Hill emphasizes the theme of being named and identified by others before she is able to form her own identity and define herself on her own terms.

Nodeh's (2019) Marxist interpretation of the novel *V.* can also be structurally read, akin to in the case of *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul. In this case, the protagonist is engaged in a continuous struggle with economic and social forces of marginalization that seek to diminish his being and possibilities. Nodeh (2019) develops the idea of there being an "active symbolic subordination of the character" by the dominant system at play, one which systematically undermines the character's autonomy and sense of self. In the course of this complex process, the character's agency and identity are either violently stripped from him or, alternatively, he is positioned where he is bereft of an identity since it fails to fit into the prevailing global discourse. This idea is actualized in the case of Mr. Biswas; similarly, Evie's fraught struggle to define her own identity occurs within a social framework that significantly hinders her ability to accomplish this essential task. But she symbolically resists by self-inscription and withdrawal.



Stryker's identity theory exists to build and formulate the underlying principles of symbolic interactionism, contending that individuals possess a multiple number of identities that are not so much distinct as organized into a hierarchical structure. Acting out one's identity is a complex task relying on specific circumstances and contextual factors, which dictate which of the individual's various identities will be salient or highlighted in a given context, but allowing room for others to be less salient at the moment (Stryker, 1980). The identities which Evie sets about negotiating include daughter, lover, admirer, and mother; these identities evolve in a chronological fashion as her life progresses, though it should be noted that most of them can overlap and combine with each other in complicated fashion. She demonstrates the idea that identity is not so much one thing or a monadic entity in the sense of a 'thing-in-itself.' Instead, it is a collection of roles variably activated and articulated, under the strong influence of the social context in which they are embedded and the symbolic demands which this context initiates.

In short, this particular collection of works has much evidence supporting a constructed notion of identity. It argues the notion that identity is not essential or internal, but performative. That is, identity is built by a combination of personal agency—whereby individuals actively create their own identities—and responses and reactions from the social world that they are surrounded by. The multifaceted dynamics of symbolic interaction, as they manifest as symbolic power struggles both between differing representations and within the representer's connection to the representations, are richly illustrated in Tyler's novel *A Slipping Down Life*. This will be elaborated on after a short summary of the story presented in the novel. This study integrates these perspectives into a coherent analysis of *A Slipping-Down Life*, interpreting Evie's acts as performative responses to invisibility and symbolic resistance to normativity.

Research Questions

RQ1. How does Evie Decker's identity evolve through symbolic performance and emotional labor?

RQ2. In what ways do gender norms influence the symbolic actions taken by Evie and Drumstrings Casey?

RQ3. How does the novel represent music, language, and silence as tools for negotiating identity?

RQ4. How do external judgments and internal desires interact to construct identity in marginalized individuals?

RQ5. To what extent does Evie's disfigurement function as a feminist symbolic rebellion?

RQ6. What role does social recognition and misrecognition play in the construction of self?

RQ7. How is symbolic interaction mediated by affect, trauma, and resistance in the novel?

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism

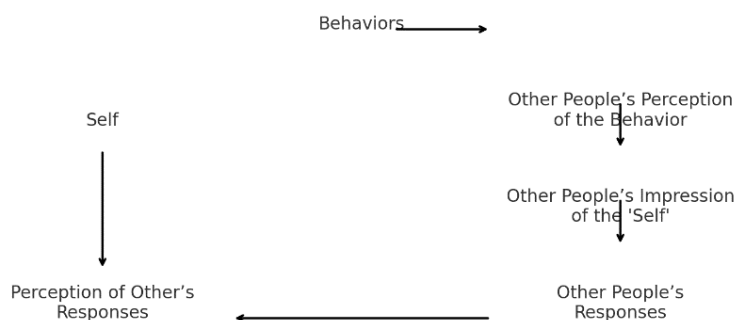
Derived from the foundation concepts developed by George Herbert Mead and subsequently codified by Herbert Blumer, symbolic interactionism is a theory that investigates the processes whereby individuals create meaning and identity through social interaction (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Central to this explanation is the contention that meaning arises from the utilization of symbols—most importantly linguistic symbols—through which individuals are directed in their self-understanding and in their grasp of their location in society.

The self, according to Mead (1934), emerges from interactions with other people and through a process of social and symbolic interactions. The self, he envisioned, is not an object that can be found in static form but as a process continually being created and "begins and forms itself in interpersonal experience." Mead also expanded on the concept of the "I" and the "me,"



stating that the "I" is the unstructured and spontaneous aspect of the self in the present, and the "me" is the socialized self that has been established through past experience. Mead pointed to the dynamic nature of the self by asserting, "The 'I' in memory is present as the representative of the self of one second, one minute, or one day ago." It is a "me" that formed the "I" at some past moment in time (Mead, 1934, p. 174). The self is thus never final; instead, it is fluid and influenced by past selves as well as present self-perceptions.

Figure 1
Cyclical Model of Interactions Between Self and Others



Source: Adapted from Mead (1934)

Within the symbolic interactionist theory, language emerges as the basic and core set of symbols that human beings learn to understand and master, primarily through the sphere of social interaction with others. In these varied interactions and exchanges, the individual learns not just about the complexities and nuances of language but also gains a deeper understanding of their own self. More importantly, these individuals do not merely passively inherit some pre-determined identity; rather, they actively construct and create it. These individuals can choose to internalize, reject, or even distort feedback and perceptions of others about aspects of themselves or their actions, and this feedback can have an influential bearing on the ongoing development of their self-concept. These interpretive meanings play a role that extends beyond their application in merely building their perceptions of themselves; they also are fundamental to organizing their later actions and interactions with others in their social worlds (Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionism thus introduces a significant connection between identity and a complex process of social construction—specifically, the construction of the self that continues in a reflexive orientation to the ongoing communication of meanings that takes place within social worlds. This particular paradigm is especially useful and effective if applied in the case of complex problems arising in the course of defining and describing the identities of various actors involved in specified social conditions. It is equally suitable for understanding characters' identities found in works of fiction, as noted by Blumer in his work of 1969.

From the tale of *A Slipping-Down Life*, the protagonist Evie learns that her identity is strongly constructed and developed by the image and roles defined for her by outside sources. These are driven mainly by the significant others in her life, her father and husband, who play a crucial role in how she identifies herself. All the interactions that Evie experiences with such significant others will result in the ongoing construction of her personal sense of self that can

either be improved or worsened. Symbolic interaction theory hence comes into force and application strongly when one desires to understand and interpret the stance of Evie in a broader social environment and reality. It is more concerned with the intricate process through which individuals are constructed and conditioned by the demands of society and the world surrounding them, ultimately deciding the way they find out about themselves or construct their own identity.

Herbert Blumer, in 1969, suggested that identity should not be viewed as static or fixed but rather as an ongoing and dynamic interpretive process. This process is established and shaped by the meanings people take from their reactions to various interactions and experiences they encounter throughout their lives. An extremely important component of this complicated process is the formation of the self-concept, which can be defined as a person's sense of self. This sense of self is characterized as a product of reflective interactions with others, interactions which ultimately set the stage for the development of a coherent and unified self. Role-taking, or the ability to adopt and understand others' perspectives and opinions in social interaction, is another crucial element in this respect. Strong support for this notion can be derived from Charles Cooley's (1902) "looking-glass self" theory, in which people develop and build their self-concepts based on the reflections they garner about themselves from others, imagining how they believe others perceive and think of them.

In this theory, Anne Tyler's characters, like Evie, struggle with and must come to terms with competing social roles and evolving expectations. It highlights the tenuous and socially constructed character of identity. This extremely clearly defined idea is also reflected in communication researcher Julia T. Wood's work, which appeared in the year 1994 in an article titled *Spinning the Symbolic Web*. She, in this classic work, proposes a profound understanding by stating, "because to think of communication as symbolic interaction is to think of human beings as meaning-makers, as active agents who construct reality via the use of symbols" (p. 17). Wood also says, "Symbols mediate the experiences, meanings, and social relationships that are so central to human existence," which implies that these symbols play a very significant role in our understanding of our lives and our relationships with other people. In addition, she points out that symbolic interaction is absolutely critical to the complex process by which identity is constructed and shaped over time (p. 17).

At the heart of symbolic interactionism's theoretical model is a fundamental focus on the significant role that symbols play in the ongoing process of identity construction, which can occur on both a group level among groups and an individual level for each person. In his interesting book, Joel Charon (2007) elaborates on this by explaining that symbols serve a purpose far greater than that of mere representational devices; instead, they are essential tools that allow us as human beings to generate meaning within our lives and engage with the broader world around us effectively.

"It is the signifier which takes upon itself the burden of rendering the vast and complicated world tangible to comprehend, interpret, think about, analyze, and even test; it is, in fact, the signifier which actually transforms the world from one that is merely an experience into one that is replete with meaning." That particular symbol serves as the essential mediator between the world and our individual experiences, both what we perceive and what we do. Our definition of symbols places this notion of 'selves' in the role of the knower, which is significant in that it implies not only do we become the knower but also the responder to the world about us. Then, when we have this knowledge of this interactive process, how we go about knowing what we know and how we respond to it are greatly influenced and mediated by those symbols which we encounter (Gergen, 1985, p. 60).

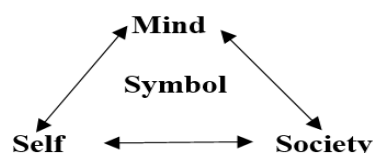
The symbolic interaction perspective pushes the idea that symbols are not static entities; rather, they are constantly changing and are internalized through an ongoing sequence of social and



cultural interactions between individuals. As we have seen in our investigations so far, these symbols are fundamental building blocks not just for the construction of the self but for the process of thought itself—this thought, at its very primitive level, is a symbolic process. Alongside this, this common symbolic language is the requisite medium in and through which, and only through which, humans can meaningfully and successfully interact with one another. In this particular sense, society may be thought of as "an ongoing interaction between individuals" (Blumer, 1969, p. 35), and thus it is not a rigid structure but an ongoing process of interaction. Figure two is a diagrammatic representation of this intricate circular process of identity formation and the construction of social meaning that is achieved through the giving and taking of symbols that are communicated among individuals in the society.

Figure 2

Mind, Self, Society: The Foundation of Symbolic Interactionism



Source: Adapted from Mead (1934)

Discussion

This study has closely examined the complex process of the identity construction of a character named Evie Decker from the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism for a comprehensive understanding. The analysis particularly underscores the significance of performative action, the subtlety of emotional expression, and the complicated dynamics of social negotiation that participates in the formation of her identity. In response to each specific research question raised in this study, the novel distinctly reveals itself as a very detailed case study that illustrates the multi-faceted way in which identity is socially constructed, actively negotiated, and imaginatively reconstructed over time.

RQ1: In what ways does Evie Decker's identity shift and develop through symbolic performance and the performance of emotional labor?

Evie's movement from invisible, voiceless adolescent to socially marked subject is begun by acts of symbolic action—most importantly, Drumstrings' etching of his name on her forehead. This is an act of both emotional labor and performative demand for attention. Her subjectivity does not transform through resolution within herself alone, but through social visible acts that call for response, reconfigure roles, and necessitate recognition from others. Her experience closely follows the conceptual model provided by Goffman's dramaturgical model, which emphasizes the performative aspect of social interactions, as well as that of complex identity emotion cycles theory by Burke and Stets.

RQ2: How specifically do social gender norms and expectations influence and inform the symbolic actions taken by the characters Evie and Drumstrings Casey?

Gender expectations strongly influence both Evie's and Drumstrings' symbolic affiliations. Evie's body is inscribed with resistance against feminine passivity, aligning with Butler's idea of gender performativity. At the same time, Drumstrings enacts masculinity through music and distance but grapples with the demands of societal scripts to be a secure partner. His instability ironically drives Evie toward further self-definition, underscoring how gendered scripts both limit and facilitate identity development.

RQ3: In what ways does the novel portray and present music, language, and silence as effective tools that can be used for the complex process of negotiating and making sense of one's identity?

Music serves a more profound role, working as an intensely symbolic force that constitutes connection and transformation. Initially, it is a vehicle through which Evie is able to express and project her inner self onto the figure of Drumstrings. As the narrative progresses, music then provides a site where the relational processes between characters can unfold and shift in complicated ways. Language, particularly in the form of naming, operates on a variety of levels, both working literally and as a fertile metaphorical device; Evie's self-scarification becomes a vital communicative act that breaks outside of the boundaries of verbal language. Silence, in this case, then takes on a newfound meaning; rather than serving as a signifier for emptiness or absence, it is reformulated as a vital method of communication and resistance. This is a concept that substantiates the insightful work of Wood and Gilligan in addressing the significance of nonverbal expressions of female agency and how they are manifested within relationally based forms of action.

RQ4: How do the judgments made by outside sources and the wants that come from within themselves interact with one another to form and build the identities of those who are part of marginalized groups?

Evie's identity is formed by a complicated dialectic that exists between her own self-definition and others' perception of her. The concept of Cooley's "looking-glass self" becomes quite evident through her own passivity, then later her assertive self-definition as she struggles through life. The external judgments she receives—whether from her peers, her relatives, or even the powerful Drumstrings—act as mirrors that reflect back to her the way she defines her own identity. Her everyday interaction with others enables her to make such adjustments, then reassert who she truly is. Furthermore, her internal desires and aspirations incessantly press against the boundaries placed upon her by society, clearly illustrating that identity construction within a condition of marginality entails a constant and dynamic tension between claiming recognition and resisting external definitions.

RQ5: To what extent is Evie's disfigurement symbolic rebellion in the feminist context?

The signature on Evie's forehead, beyond being a shock value, is a bold declaration of feminist resistance that lays claim to the female body and the profound symbolic meaning it carries. By inscribing a name onto her own body willingly, Evie wisely turns naming on its head—the traditionally patriarchal direction in which naming tends to go—and she knowingly reclaims the authority to give and fill with meaning that testifies to who she is. Feminist scholars, including some of the major names like Bordo and Donohue, would argue that this particular act contributes towards subverting the overall objectification of the female body. It also contributes towards unmasking the emotional labor which has been rendered invisible in the lives of women over the years, making explicit the often-overlooked efforts of the women in their daily lives

RQ6: In what ways are social recognition and misrecognition important in the ongoing process of constructing one's sense of self?

Social acknowledgment is a prod to Evie's development. Failure to be recognized as a child is something that partially estranges her, and failure to be recognized as a wounded survivor makes her both hyper-visible and miscognized. These moments underscore the importance of symbolic acknowledgment to the formation of selfhood. Misrecognition in particular requires Evie to continuously reinterpret herself, which is a process consistent with the view of identity as emergent and negotiated through feedback mechanisms.

RQ7: How is the process of symbolic interaction structured and conditioned by the factors of affect, trauma, and resistance in the case of the novel?



Evie's narrative is heavily saturated with a profound emotional intensity that is fraught with loneliness, longing, and frustration. These prevailing emotions are not merely internalized; instead, they are externalized through symbolic actions, which Evie employs as her primary mode of explaining the trauma that she carries within her. Her actions can be explained as a form of affective resistance, in line with the sentiments articulated by Scott and Charmaz regarding the intricacies of identity experienced by individuals who belong to stigmatized groups. Far from being incapacitated by the overwhelming pressure of her emotional pain, Evie demonstrates incredible prowess in transforming her trauma into a means of personal agency. This transformation signifies that the process of symbolic interaction is anything but a neutral event; instead, it is heavily charged with emotion and carries immense political repercussions. In total, *A Slipping-Down Life* effectively illustrates how an individual comes to be and persist in being defined and shaped by an intricate interplay of forces between symbolic action, social location, gender roles, and the often-unnoticed emotional labor attached to them. Evie's transformation is a valuable reflection not only of her own personal transformation and experience but also of a larger sociological narrative that questions and examines what it means to be seen and known by others, how one resists the norms of society, and how one might reconstitute oneself in a world that has been formed by numerous competing symbols and meanings.

Conclusion

This study has closely examined the nuances of Anne Tyler's novel, *A Slipping-Down Life*, through the lens of extended symbolic interactionism. Through this analytical model, we have uncovered the complex processes by which identity is formed, contested, and renegotiated, illustrating the broad reach of social performance, emotional labor, and symbolic resistance. The transformative experience of Evie Decker, from a state of silence and invisibility to that of symbolic presence, is used to illustrate that identity is not an abstraction; rather, it is a fluid, dialogic process that is continually constituted by a complex combination of external judgments, internal aspirations, and an inherent desire for recognition. Each of the questions for study served to foreground a precise and unique dimension of the complex process of identity formation under examination. Evie's becoming is strongly driven by a series of symbolic performances that are firmly rooted in her struggles to secure acknowledgment and recognition in a world that continuously renders her invisible and forgotten. Her self-scarifications, in addition, can further be interpreted as a deeply gendered and powerful act of resistance, literally reshaping her body as an empowering source of resistance and redefinition. Moreover, the deployment of music, silence, and other nonverbal actions become significant and central communicative instruments that operate importantly in her identity work, powerfully illustrating the inherent limitations and constraints of normative language for voices that have been marginalized and silenced in society.

Also, the intricate dynamic of social recognition and misrecognition reveals that identity is not merely a stable possession that remains constant through time, but is instead envisioned as a dynamic negotiation that is never at rest—one that is strongly affected by complicated factors such as affect, trauma, and resilience. Evie's deliberate actions are a means of resisting and counteracting strict gender roles and normative scripts that society is prone to impose on her, thereby repositioning her not just as a passive subject that submits to these roles, but as an active agent that is deeply invested in her own becoming. Ultimately, this in-depth analysis stands as strong evidence of the argument that literary fictions, such as *A Slipping-Down Life*, constitute extremely rich terrain for examining and exploring the subtle complexities inherent to the process of identity formation. Within the parameters of symbolic interactionist theory, and extended and enhanced by both narrative and feminist schema, Evie's story transcends the boundaries of the individual/personal anecdote—to emerge instead as a valuable sociological case study examining the performance of self, particularly at sites of visibility and power on the margins. Her last declaration of her own self is less a conclusion or a moment of stopping, but rather a profoundly significant and symbolically rich re-entering of the social world, one that she achieves entirely on her own terms and conditions.

References

- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice-Hall.
- Blumer, H. (1980). Mead and Blumer: The convergent methodological perspectives of social behaviorism and symbolic interactionism. *American Sociological Review*, 45(3), 409–419.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009). *Identity theory*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195388279.001.0001>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.



- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. Scribner's.
- Denzin, N. K. (2001). *Interpretive interactionism* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Donohue, A. (2020). Gendered emotional labor and narrative identity: The case of Evie Decker. *Journal of Feminist Fiction Studies*, 12(2), 45–67.
- Fine, G. A. (2012). *Tiny publics: A theory of group action and culture*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Goffman, E. (1956). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1985.tb00902.x>
- Hutto, D. D., & Gallagher, S. (2022). Narrative self and cognitive science: Rethinking the relationship. *Cognitive Narrative Journal*, 8(1), 1–23.
- Jordan, S. (2020). Gendered performances and bodily inscriptions. *Feminist Media Quarterly*, 14(1), 77–95.
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Minaei, [Initials]. (2025). *From isolation to identity: An expanded symbolic interactionist analysis of A Slipping-Down Life* [Manuscript submitted for publication]
- Nodeh, M. (2019). Intersectionality and symbolic interaction: Identity under power. *Cultural Sociology*, 13(4), 487–505.
- Sadeghi, A., Rahimi, B., & Kalantar, Z. (2020). Identity negotiation under hegemonic structures. *Critical Sociology*, 46(5), 731–748. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920519848797>
- Scott, S. (2015). Emotional resistance and social performance. *Symbolic Interaction*, 38(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/SYMB.228>
- Snow, D. A. (2021). Identity change in social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 47, 497–515. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073020-115206>
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A structural version*. Benjamin/Cummings.
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284–297. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695840>
- Butler, J. (1998). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. In *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Wood, J. T. (1994). *Gendered communication in context: The annual review of communication*. Annual Reviews.

Biodata

Farzaneh Minaei Sadr, Ph.D. candidate at the Department of English Language and Literature, S.T.C. Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran, holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language Translation from IAU, South Tehran Branch, and a Master's degree in English Language Translation from IAU, Central Tehran Branch. Her academic interests include teaching English language and literature, translation studies, and psycho-sociological interdisciplinary approaches to literary analysis. She is actively engaged in research and academic writing and has a strong interest in pursuing teaching and scholarly work in higher education institutions. Email: f.minaeisadr@iau.ac.ir

Dianoosh Sanei, an assistant professor of English Language and Literature at Islamic Azad University, share qods Branch, holds a Ph.D. in English Literature Studies from the central branch of IAU. She has published articles in reputable journals and presented papers at national and international conferences. She has extensive experience in teaching English Literature and supervising Ph.D dissertations and Master's theses. Her research interests include Literary Criticism, World Literature, and Translation studies.

Email: d.sanei@godsiau.ac.ir

Seyyed Shahabeddin Sadati was born in 1983. He is an Assistant Professor of English language and literature at Islamic Azad University, Roudheh Branch, holds a Ph.D. in English literature from literature at Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch. So far, he has authored and translated 15 books and has written more than 50 articles in English and Farsi languages. Dr. Sadati has also presented his articles in 20 national and international conferences and has supervised more than 75 Master's and Doctoral dissertations in the fields of English literature and translation studies. He has been appointed twice as the best researcher in his own teaching university.

Email: sh.sadati@riau.ac.ir



© 2025 by the authors. Licensee International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research, Najafabad Iran, Iran. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY NC 4.0 license). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

