

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter lays the groundwork for analyzing the intricate relationship between identity crisis and rhetorical devices in Theodora Sarah Abigail's *In The Hands of a Mischievous God* (2017). The discussion begins with the theoretical concept of identity, leading to its framing within multicultural and linguistic contexts. It then focuses on the narrative of the object along with its rhetorical dimensions as medium of identity expression. Later, it articulates the research problem and questions, then outlines the objectives, significance and followed by a discussion of relevant prior studies to highlight the research gap.

1.1 Research Background

Identity has long been understood as an overarching and multifaceted concept, central to the growth and maturation of individuals. Erikson (1968) avers that identity does not remain static, it is an evolving process of individuals which is cultivated by psychosocial interaction, cultural surroundings, and linguistic influences. This complexity becomes especially visible in hybrid cultural contexts, where self-construction involves a process of negotiating multiple, and sometimes conflicting, systems of meaning. From personal roles to broader categories such as nationality, gender, and faith, identity informs how individuals situate themselves in the world. It is not merely personal, but also social and symbolic, shaping how people belong, how they are perceived and narrate their experiences. As Hall (1996) argues, identity is constructed within discourse, making it inseparable from structures of language and representation.

This very journey of self-discovery and personal growth is often accompanied by what Erikson termed as "identity crisis," denoting a developmental period characterized by profound exploration and self-questioning. It is during such moments that individuals confront tensions between their internal values and the roles society expects them to perform. This turning point in life compels individuals to reassess and redefine their self-concept, often marked by a deep inner conflict involving uncertainties about

identity, personal desires, and societal expectations. These crisis are complex periods of psychological re-evaluation, during which one's sense of self may either become more cohesive or increasingly fragmented.

The phase of identity crisis is most commonly associated with adolescence (approximately ages 12 to 18), a developmental stage marked by heightened introspection and role experimentation. As individuals begin to question their values, aspirations, and social roles, they may find themselves caught in liminal space, uncertain of who they are or where they belong. To expand on Erikson's foundation, Marcia (1980) introduced four identity statuses that reflect the different patterns individuals may follow in navigating this crisis; diffusion, marked by the absence of both exploration and commitment; foreclosure, where commitments are made without personal questioning, often inherited from external authority; moratorium, involving active exploration without resolution; and achievement, where a stable identity is formed after a process of reflection and decision-making. These statuses help illuminate how identity can fluctuate between clarity and confusion, particularly in multicultural or transitory contexts where belonging is less clearly defined. Rather than a singular psychological hurdle, identity crisis often functions as a recurring tension point, one that influences not just personal development but the capacity to form a stable sense of self across life's transition.

This ongoing crisis of self is compounded for people who grow up in cross-cultural environments, often referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). The term "third culture kid" was coined by Pollock and Van Reken (2001) to refer to children who spend a significant portion of their formative years living outside of their parents' culture. These individuals are often faced with the constant need to balance the values, expectations, and languages of multiple cultures. The lack of a stable cultural anchor, coupled with the pressure to adapt to a diverse environment, often results in a persistent sense of unbelonging. For many TCKs, identity formation is an ongoing process rather than a resolved phase, extending well beyond adolescence and permeating every transition in life. In this sense, the identity crisis of TCKs is not simply a developmental

arrest, but a recurring process that resonates powerfully in narratives of uprooting and hybridity, such as that of Theodora Sarah Abigail.

Language serves as more than just a communication tool and mode of expression, it is closely intertwined with identity formation. An instrument through which people shape, reveal, and frequently wrestle with their sense of self. When creating a personal narrative, language bears the responsibility of internal tensions and social realities. According to academics like Ochs (1993) and Benwell and Stokoe (2006), identity is never explicitly articulated. It is carried out through discourse, which is influenced by decisions about emphasis, tone, and framing. This insight raises the idea that language actively constructs experience rather than just reflecting it. In *In the Hands of a Mischievous God* (2017), Theodora Sarah Abigail employs a range of rhetorical textures such as metaphor, reflective narration, fragmented structure and repetition to capture the contradictions in her identity. Through these expressive forms, her essays offer more than stories. They bring the reader into the unfolding process of self-definition.

The book was published by Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia together with two other essay collections, *I Am My Own Home* by Isyana Artharini and *Familiar Messes* by Gratiagusti Rompas. These works were released under a thematic series on the multidimensional life of young women in contemporary Indonesia. While each book presents unique experiences of womanhood, Abigail's writing stands apart in its emotional complexity and cultural dissonance. Through the voice of "Ebi," she explores her identity within shifting cultural, spiritual and personal boundaries. Her storytelling does not follow a straightforward narrative. Instead, it meanders, pauses and returns, much like the state of selfhood she writes from. This atmosphere of disorientation and reflection is not accidental. It is deeply rhetorical and becomes a powerful site through which identity is questioned and slowly assembled.

Among the three collections published under the self-portrait theme, *In the Hands of a Mischievous God* distinguishes itself through its richly embedded contextual and historical layers. Written by Theodora Sarah Abigail,

who refers to herself as Ebi throughout the book, the essays draw on her experience as the daughter of Indonesian parents who migrated to the United States during the 1998 crisis. While she never explicitly identifies as a Third Culture Kid (TCK), her essays reflect the emotional nuances of someone raised between cultures, navigating a landscape shaped by dislocation, inherited memory, and hybrid identity. These complexities give rise to a voice that feels both restricted and expanded, shaped by the tension of inhabiting multiple worlds at once.

Many of the essays in the collection voice Abigail's search for a stable sense of self and belonging. In "Parangtritis," she reflects on her strained relationship with Indonesian cultural identity, expressing doubt about whether she can truly call herself Indonesian. Her writing captures the dissonance between her personal experience and the expectations tied to national and cultural belonging. This tension is further complicated by the patriarchal and hierarchical structures she observes in her environment, which intensify her internal conflict about which version of herself she is expected to perform in different social contexts.

Abigail's personal struggles as a woman are poignantly explored in the essay "Immaculata," where she conveys a sense of constraint imposed by gendered social expectations. She writes about feeling enclosed by behavioral codes that are enforced simply because she is a girl. As a young mother and someone navigating a life shaped by cultural multiplicity, she wrestles with societal judgment, internalized guilt, and the fear of seeming selfish or inadequate. These intersecting pressures reveal not just her renunciation of certain gendered roles but also her effort to define herself beyond them.

It is a study of what's been taken, left behind, and transformed. Abigail's essays trace a journey of self-identity formation that unfolds through cultural memory, emotional tension, and personal reckoning, captured through essays she began writing as a teenager. This collection contains nine essays, framed with a prologue and an afterword, each of which reveals a raw and unflinching honesty in recounting her ongoing journey toward self-realization, self-

recognition, and self-definition. These narrative s are not simply reflections of her life but deliberate acts of assembling meaning in the face of fragmentation. In essence, every page wrestles with questions of identity; what is carried forward, what is left behind, and what must be rewritten.

Constructing the self through narrative helps individuals make sense of who they are, especially when their realities are shaped by transition, marginalization, or cultural negotiation. Murray (1989) associates this narrative self-making with culture, suggesting that stories provide the values, symbols, and beliefs that shape what a person is and can be. Similarly, McAdams (1996) emphasizes that life stories serve as internalized and evolving narratives that people use to give meaning to their experiences. Personal narrative essays, especially those with autobiographical quality, serve as acts of reflection, narrating the private and often painful experiences that might otherwise remain hidden. For individuals shaped by marginalization or social displacement, writing becomes a means of reclaiming space and asserting voice. Even when circulated quietly or read only by a few, these essays carry deep meaning, giving form to feelings often silenced.

Literature, especially in the form of personal narratives, often mirrors life not only in its content but also in its form. Reality and perspectives are often expressed using figurative and deviation as sometimes the ills of life are so intense that literal language becomes inadequate to express them. This is equal with what Corbett (1991) defines rhetorical devices as “any artful deviation from the ordinary speaking or writing,” emphasizing their role in lending depth and nuance to expression. In works centered on the self, rhetorical strategies are more than stylistic flourishes, they act as tools for navigating and performing identity. Understanding how these devices operate within personal essays like Abigail’s becomes essential to revealing the emotional and ideological layers that structure her experience.

In Indonesian literature, the personal narrative essay occupies a space of quiet persistence. It is not the center of literary recognition, nor is it absent. It lingers at the edge, waiting to be read differently. Fiction and poetry have long

carried the burden of national voice, entrusted with shaping identity and reflecting history. Essays, especially those written in English, have often been set aside, regarded with uncertainty, or seen as too private, too marginal, or too removed from tradition. Yet their presence is undeniable. Writers like Theodora Sarah Abigail, Gratiagusti Rompas, and Isyana Artharini have not only published in this form, but done so with clarity, fluency, and feeling, creating spaces where selfhood is not explained but experienced. As the *Jakarta Globe* observes, works in English by Indonesian writers are often denied entry into the canon, not because of what they say, but because of the language they use to say it.

This tension is not unique to Indonesia. Across Southeast Asia, English-language personal writing is still finding its shape, but globally, the essay has long been a form through which identity, memory, and loss are written with precision and force. Joan Didion shaped the genre with a voice both clinical and intimate. Ocean Vuong continues it with lyricism and fracture. These writers show what is possible when form is allowed to hold contradiction. In this light, the scarcity of critical attention toward Indonesian personal essays, especially those in English, reflects not a failure of the form, but a failure of reception. To read Abigail, to sit with her metaphors and linguistic vulnerability, is to encounter a body of work that insists on its own belonging. Not as a borrowed style, not as a Western imitation, but as an honest, rooted articulation of how identity feels when it lives between languages. And that is literature, whether or not the canon is ready to call it so.

In deeply personal writing, language is not merely a vehicle for expression; it becomes a space where the self is shaped, questioned, and reimagined. Rhetorical devices, especially those involving figuration and syntactic variation, allow the writer to trace inner tensions without having to resolve them. In essays like Abigail's, such strategies do more than embellish, but they carry the weight of affect, memory, and contradiction. Through metaphor, irony, or disrupted rhythm, language becomes elastic enough to hold

uncertainty. This elasticity is essential not only to how the narrative unfolds but to how identity reveals itself: not as a fixed truth, but as a process of articulation.

In *In the Hands of a Mischievous God*, Abigail's rhetorical decisions are inseparable from the emotional and cultural dissonance she explores. Her prose navigates ambivalence, faith, gendered identity, and cultural dislocation with stylistic choices that reflect fragmentation, duality, and ambiguity. The metaphors, rhythmic sentences, and shifting tonal registers act as more than literary devices; they trace a speaker who is struggling to define herself within overlapping cultural and personal histories. In this sense, the text becomes a rhetorical landscape where Abigail not only tells her story but constructs her own interpretive framework. This affirms Bruner's (2004) idea that narratives do not merely reflect identity but actively shape how it is understood by self and others.

Despite increasing attention to personal narratives and identity formation, few studies have investigated the rhetorical dimensions of such essays in an Indonesian-Anglophone context. While Leonardi (2018) has examined self-performance through rhetoric in digital spaces like Facebook, and while rhetorical theory is widely explored by scholars such as Tindale (2004) and Kelen (2007), studies that bridge rhetorical devices and identity construction in personal literary essays remain scarce. Abigail's work, which is rooted in cross-cultural displacement, religious reflection, and gender introspection, offers a unique opportunity to examine how voice and vulnerability are shaped by language. As Hyvärinen (2010) notes, narratives function as performances of identity in shifting social frames, making rhetorical analysis especially apt for texts where identity is continuously refigured.

This study aims to identify and analyze the rhetorical devices used in Abigail's essays, and to explore how those devices reflect and construct the speaker's experience of identity crisis. Drawing upon Erikson's psychosocial theory, Marcia's identity status model, and Corbett's rhetorical classification of schemes and tropes, this research applies critical discourse analysis to reveal the implicit negotiations embedded in Abigail's language. These theoretical

tools allow for a multidimensional reading, where rhetorical structure and identity work are not separate concerns, but two sides of the same narrative act. As Lejeune (1989) contends, personal essays operate within an autobiographical pact that blurs the line between writer and persona. In this blurred space, rhetoric becomes not just a form, but a force capable of making visible the crisis and construction of the self.

1.2. Statement of Problem

This study seeks to explore how rhetorical devices function in shaping the identity of the speaker in Theodora Sarah Abigail's *In the Hands of a Mischievous God*, a collection of personal essays that navigate issues of belonging, cultural dislocation, and self-definition. The inquiry centers on the forms and functions of rhetorical features in the text, particularly in how they participate in constructing the speaker's voice and reflecting inner conflict. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. What forms of rhetorical devices appear in Abigail's *In the Hands of a Mischievous God*?
2. How do these rhetorical devices contribute to the representation of the speaker's identity?

1.3. Research Objective

In line with the questions above, this study aims to:

1. Identify and categorize the rhetorical devices found in Abigail's collection of personal essays.
2. Analyze how these rhetorical elements contribute to the construction and representation of the speaker's identity within the text.

1.4. Research Significance

1.4.1. Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to literary and identity studies by examining how rhetorical devices are not merely aesthetic elements but are also instrumental in narrating the self. Drawing on theories that view identity as performative and

narrative-bound (Hall, 1996; McAdams, 1996), this research offers an interdisciplinary lens that combines rhetoric, narrative structure, and identity formation. It highlights the capacity of personal essays to encode psychological and social complexities through linguistic patterns and figures of speech.

1.4.2. Practical Significance

Practically, this research provides readers with an interpretive framework to better understand how identity, especially in the context of cultural hybridity and marginality, can be expressed and explored through narrative. It also encourages the reading of rhetorical devices as tools for meaning-making beyond their decorative function. For future researchers, this study offers insights and references that can be expanded upon, particularly in the analysis of Anglophone Southeast Asian writings and personal essays dealing with identity crises and diasporic narratives.

1.5. Conceptual Framework

This study operates at the intersection of identity theory and rhetorical analysis to explore how rhetorical devices reflect and construct the speaker's identity in Theodora Sarah Abigail's *In the Hands of a Mischievous God*. The framework rests upon two major conceptual foundations: the psychosocial theory of identity development and the classical rhetorical theory concerning expressive language use.

The first conceptual lens draws from Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, which defines identity as a sense of internal coherence and social continuity. Erikson emphasized adolescence as a critical stage in which individuals confront identity crises which include periods of questioning, exploration, and decision-making. Marcia's (1980) refinement of this model introduced four identity statuses (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement), which describe how identity is shaped through the processes of exploration and commitment. This framework is particularly useful in understanding the speaker's shifting self-narratives in Abigail's essays, many

of which reflect prolonged tensions related to cultural belonging, womanhood, and personal autonomy.

These tensions are further illuminated through rhetorical choices. This study employs Edward P. J. Corbett's (1991) classification of rhetorical devices into *schemes* and *tropes* to identify the structural and semantic patterns in Abigail's writing. Schemes refer to deviations in syntax or arrangement, such as parallelism and repetition, while tropes deal with figurative meanings, including metaphor, irony, and hyperbole. These devices do not merely embellish the narrative but serve as discursive tools through which the speaker negotiates identity.

The convergence of these theories supports the central argument of this study: rhetorical expression is not a neutral medium but a deeply performative act that reveals the self in flux. In the context of personal narrative, especially one written by an Indonesian woman with transnational experiences and linguistic duality, rhetorical devices become a critical site for self-exploration. The language of the essay is not only what carries the story but also what constitutes the self being narrated.

Thus, by integrating psychosocial identity theory and rhetorical analysis, this research builds a framework for examining how personal writing can encode psychological complexity and cultural ambiguity. It considers how rhetorical strategies give form to internal contradictions and how the essayist's voice, fractured, searching, and assertive, emerges through textual structures.

1.6. Previous Studies

In mapping the scholarly landscape of identity and rhetorical expression, this study is informed by several prior works that explore identity crisis, narrative construction, and rhetorical strategies, albeit in different contexts. These studies provide a conceptual backdrop for understanding the possibilities and limitations of identity representation through language, and their divergences help to clarify the unique focus of this research.

One relevant study is an undergraduate thesis by Nurlatifah from UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, titled *Identity Crisis in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God*. The thesis investigates the cultural identity dissonance experienced by a Nigerian tribe through a postcolonial lens, employing Ashcroft's framework to examine how place and migration contribute to identity fragmentation. While useful in framing identity crisis within sociocultural contexts, the study focuses primarily on collective identity formation and differs from the present research which is concerned with personal identity as performed through rhetorical form.

A second study by Sally Karmi, *The Stranger in the Mirror*, examines female identity crisis and dissociation in Kafa Al-Zubi's novel *X* using psychoanalytic and postcolonial analysis. Karmi identifies how patriarchal and religious structures restrict the protagonist's identity formation, leading to fragmentation and internal conflict. Although both studies highlight sociocultural pressures, the current research diverges in genre and scope by analyzing a non-fictional, self-narrated work rather than a novelistic construct.

In exploring rhetorical construction more directly, a thesis by Zulvy Alivia Hanim focuses on rhetorical devices in Glenn Beck's speech at CPAC 2016. The research identifies metaphor, euphemism, repetition, and pronoun use as persuasive strategies within political oratory. While methodologically aligned through rhetorical analysis, this study is rooted in political discourse and emphasizes audience effect, whereas the present research focuses on introspective language and identity expression.

Marianne Leonardi's thesis *Narrative as Self-Performance: The Rhetorical Construction of Identities on Facebook Profiles* provides a closer point of comparison. Drawing from Goffman and Burke, Leonardi analyzes how individuals curate their identities through online narratives. Her emphasis on rhetorical cues and identity performance resonates with this thesis's approach, though the objects of analysis differ significantly. Leonardi's subjects construct identity within algorithmic and social expectations, while this study explores how a personal essayist negotiates identity in the textual space of memoir.

Additionally, a particularly insightful study titled *Identity Crisis Due to the 9/11 Terrorist Attack* compares how characters in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Disgraced* grapple with fractured cultural identities in post-9/11 America. Though rooted in fiction, the study draws on Erikson and Baumeister to frame identity crisis as a rupture between conflicting identity components, heightened by external trauma and marginalization. The author examines literary tools such as symbolism, narrative perspective, and ambiguity, all of which resonate with the rhetorical features explored in this study. This thesis is especially relevant as it connects real-world geopolitical events with internalized identity conflict, offering parallels to the diasporic tension and cultural estrangement present in Abigail's essays.

Taken together, these studies reflect a growing academic interest in identity as a layered and constructed phenomenon. Yet none have critically examined *In the Hands of a Mischievous God* through the dual lens of rhetorical devices and psychosocial identity theory. This study therefore contributes to filling that gap by analyzing how rhetorical strategies in personal essays act as both mirror and mechanism of identity formation, particularly for individuals inhabiting hybrid cultural spaces.

