

## Exploring Social Identity Transformation: A Journey through Delia Owen's *Where the Crawdads Sing*

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**Abstract.** This study examines the social identity transformation of the *Where the Crawdads Sing* main character by using Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposed by Henri Tajfel and Turner. Tajfel and Turner divided SIT into self-categorization, social identification, and social comparison to show how these events alter the identity of Kya (the main character) transformation. This study used a qualitative approach to analyze Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, focusing on character development and social interactions. Secondary sources, such as literary criticisms and reviews, supplement primary data. Data analysis identifies recurring patterns and critical themes of societal identity transformation, including isolation, resilience, exclusion, and integration. This study found that *Where the Crawdads Sing* explores Kya's self-categorization in Barkley Cove, North Carolina. She forms a strong bond with her black friend Jumpin' and the marsh as her in-group, providing comfort and connection to the marsh. The novel contrasts Barkley Cove's out-group social identification with the marshlands, highlighting the importance of acceptance, forgiveness, and embracing one's identity in navigating complex human relationships. The social comparison explores Kya Clark's struggle for acceptance in a small town, contrasting it with the marshlands and highlighting themes of isolation and resilience.

**Keywords:** *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Social Identity Theory, Identity Development

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## INTRODUCTION

Social identity transformation is fundamental to studying psychology and sociology because it helps explain the complex dynamics of human behavior inside social settings. A social group is a collection of two or more individuals who identify themselves as members of the same social category, either generally or privately. (Hogg and Abrams, 2001). This study examines the social identity transformation of the main character, Kya Clark, using Henri Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT). The result is a complex tapestry that provides an insightful look at this phenomenon of social identity transformation.

Delia Owens' best-selling book *Where the Crawdads Sing* delves into loneliness, maturation, and the confluence of human connections and the natural world. According to Gustama and Lolowang (2021), the plot centers on Kya Clark, the "Marsh Girl," who grows up among North Carolina's marshes after her family abandons her. The story shifts between two timelines: one that takes place in the 1950s and early 1960s and follows Kya as she makes her way into adulthood, and another that takes place later in time and involves a murder inquiry. The book has received accolades for its atmospheric setting, powerful, independent female protagonist, and lyrical style.

According to Swastika's (2021) latest research titled *Kya's Individuation Process in Delia Owens' Where the Crawdads Sing*, Kya Clark—the main character, individuates throughout the book. Kya's portrayal, actions, and experiences match Jung's psychoanalytic theory of individuation. The individuation indicates that her connection to nature shapes who she is, and her loneliness shows how social and family abandonment can influence a person's sense of self. These ties reveal how complex social connections and love are in shaping identity. *Where the Crawdads Sing* idealizes self-acceptance and integration. Kya discovers herself in the story. She must combine her great connection to nature with her yearning to belong to others to be her best. She would have to heal the wounds of being alone and rejected to accept her individuality without shame or fear.

Literature often incorporates elements of social identity theory into its characters, forming groups based on various factors. Literature is created by the human soul, drawing upon prior experiences as references. Conversely, literature sustains the human soul (Dastmard et al., 2012). Characters grapple with identity conflict and self-discovery, navigating societal expectations and prejudice based on group affiliation. This mutually beneficial relationship between literature and social identity theory allows for deeper insights into the real-world workings of social identity theory. From this, social identity theory enriches literary analysis by helping us understand characters' motivations, conflicts, and transformations within the context of their social groups, adding another layer of meaning to the literary works.

To conduct a thorough analysis of psychology, people must approach it systematically. Social identity is related to group memberships, where members of the same group tend to imitate norms, behaviors, and perspectives. They also influence each other, although the shared characteristics may differ from those of different groups or communities. Members assume that the characteristics of individuals in the same group are the same, leading to self-categorization. When a person self-categorizes as a member of a particular group, they describe themselves using similar phrases used by those in the same group, as they share the same

characteristics. Literature is an academic discipline that analyzes and interprets written artistic works. The connection between identity, a psychological component, and literature is inseparable (Riecher et al., 2010). Psychology enables individuals to comprehend human behavior and effectively recognize it. Literature provides individuals with insights into life and moral principles through written expression. Both psychology and literature focus on studying the human condition and life (Stets and Burke, 2000).

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory is applied to study the novel from the perspective of social identity transformation. *Where the Crawdads Sing* explores themes of isolation, identity, and societal dynamics, using social identity theory to analyze relationships between characters. Kya, an outsider, faces prejudice and discrimination due to her poverty and unconventional lifestyle. The novel explores the complexities, including social identity, belonging, and acceptance, highlighting human nature and societal prejudices. According to this idea, people divide themselves and other people into social groups, and the social identities attached to these groups impact how people behave (Sets and Burke, 2000). As she ages, she starts to doubt her social identity and place in society. The story also examines the tension between people's need for social interaction and their wish to coexist peacefully with the environment.

Identity is a people or group's unique personality or conduct (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The social identity theory, introduced by Tajfel (1981, 1982a), explains specific self-facets related to a particular social conduct in a given temporal context. Tajfel defines a person's social identity as the aspects of their self-concept that relate to their social groupings or categories. A person's understanding of their social group affiliation and its relevance and emotional value form their identity (Tajfel, 1981, 1982a). The social group identifications a person uses to identify themselves establish their social identity, according to Turner (1982). The way that different characters define social identity also varies. According to Hogg and Dominic Abrams (1998), a social group is a collection of two or more individuals who identify themselves as members of the same social category, either generally or privately. The basis of identification is shared characteristics or beliefs (Turner, 1982, p. 15). There are three stages of social identity transformation: self-identification, social identification, and social comparison. The theory primarily aims to understand intergroup relations, group dynamics, and the impact of group membership on individual behavior and self-concept (McLeod, 2023).

The first stage is self-categorization. Self-categorization is the process by which an individual acknowledges or categorizes himself as a member of a specific group or community (Rani, 2018). It is the first stage of establishing one's identity and relationship to the group one belongs to. This individual does not even bother to look at the other group they do not belong to.

The second stage is social identification. When people recognize the attitudes and behaviors of other group members, they frequently act similarly. Social connections between neighbors increase the likelihood of mutual influence (Rani, 2020). This stage usually consists of two groups, in-group and out-group. According to Main (2023), in SIT terminology, the group a person feels a sense of identification or belonging to is known as the in-group. On the other hand, an out-group is any group that a person perceives as being distinct from their in-group. Hence, it is normal for

people who belong to the same group or community to model themselves after one another, leading to comparable actions and ways of thinking.

The third stage is social comparison. Comparison is a valuable self-evaluation tool that does not require external conditions to measure oneself against others on specific attributes (Song, 2021). Social comparisons may pit them against each other or their organizations. Thus, they can identify the best group. Besides establishing which group is unique, each will try to be the best. People can change others' behavior to improve themselves. Everyone in the group may take comparable steps to bond. Thus, the out-group will see more benefits from the in-group.

The application of Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory provides a rich canvas for examining the evolution of social identity. By looking at Kya's path, we can investigate the themes of discrimination, resiliency, and isolation and how they affect her character development. Reading the novel's riveting study of isolation, coming-of-age, and the interplay of nature and human connections makes understanding how people manage their social identities and the effects these identities have on their lives easier.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study exercised a qualitative approach. Litosseliti (2010, p. 52) asserts that qualitative research examines a subject's patterns, structure, and substance. The primary data source for this study was Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*. The first publication of the book was on August 14, 2018. The study will employ a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for investigating intricate literary topics and comprehending the intricacy of character development and social interactions inside a narrative. The primary data source utilized for this research is the textual content of the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Supplementary information was from secondary sources, such as literary criticisms, scholarly articles, and reviews that analyze the novel's themes, character development, and societal settings. Analyze the text thoroughly and methodically to discover specific sections that depict Kya's transition in terms of her social identity. After that, select pertinent quotations and passages that emphasize Kya's social identity development, her interactions with other characters, and noteworthy events that shape her identity. Various forms of data function as secondary sources to complement primary data. To obtain data for the study and assist with initial data analysis, the researcher collects secondary data from various sources such as journals, papers, reviews, and other references (Rahmawati et al., 2013).

The data analysis involved identifying and examining recurring patterns or themes in qualitative data. The data analysis entailed discovering and examining repeating patterns or themes. Afterward, the key themes associated with transforming societal identity in the literary piece, such as isolation, resilience, exclusion, and integration into society, were analyzed and classified. The next step was paying particular attention to significant events and interactions that shape the protagonist's identity. It was essential to analyze Kya's interactions with others, including Jumpin' and the locals of Barkley Cove, to uncover the social identity of Kya. Ultimately, the last process entailed scrutinizing and deciphering a particular occurrence or data inside its framework or environment and drawing a conclusion.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section contains the results of all the data from Delia Owen's (2018) book *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Then, using Tajfel and Turner's (1981) theory of social identity, several discussions are provided to address the issues raised in the section on assertions.

### ***Self-Categorization in Where the Crawdads Sing***

The self-categorization in this novel is when Ma leaves her family behind in Barkley Cove, North Carolina. Kya's pa shows a compelling and violent person to her ma, so she runs away from home. As quoted below:

*"You told me that fox left her babies."  
"Yeah, but that vixen got 'er leg all torn up. She'd've starved to death if she'd tried to feed herself 'n' her kits. She was better off to leave 'em, heal herself up, then whelp more when she could raise 'em good. Ma ain't starvin', she'll be back." Jodie was not nearly as sure as he sounded, but said it for Kya (2018, p. 8).*

As the story goes on, Kya changes how she thinks about herself. She strongly connects with nature and looks for comfort and company in the marshes and people there. She starts to see herself as an essential part of the environment where she lives, and this becomes a central part of who she is, as quoted below:

*At last, at some unclaimed moment, the head-pain seeped away like water into sand. Still there, but deep. Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother (2018, p. 34).*

People think a lot about themselves and their neighborhood or group during self-categorization. They do not know about other groups or people who live outside their neighborhood (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). She has come to accept that her connection with nature will be the most important thing in her life since she has no one else to lean on. Even though there are no people around, life goes on, which forces Kya to learn what nature has to offer and what she needs to provide for herself.

In *Where the Crawdads Sing* novel, Kya's self-categorization process offers a nuanced and in-depth look at how internal and external factors mold identity. Kya is left to survive in the marshes after her family members depart. According to Rani (2018), self-categorization is the first phase in a person's journey of discovering who they are and how they fit into their group. Kya is abandoned to her own devices in the marsh when her family members leave one by one. Kya's desertion strengthens her sense of independence and ability to rely on herself. Until she becomes independent, she learns to depend on her wits and creativity to get by. This desertion reinforces her independence and self-reliance. She becomes free to survive only by her judgment and resourcefulness. Her contact with other people helps to define Kya's self-categorization, which assists her in accepting who she is and overcoming social limitations. The book teaches about acceptance, forgiving, and remaining true to oneself while delving into the complexity of human relationships.

It highlights how human interaction has the transforming potential for personal development and self-discovery.

Kya achieves a position of influence by establishing a deep connection with the natural world, cultivating meaningful connections with individuals, and demonstrating unwavering determination under challenging circumstances. The marsh is the defining element of Kya's life, providing comfort, nourishment, and creative stimulation. During the self-categorization stage, individuals frequently prioritize their own identity, as well as their community and social group. It is necessary to inform them about alternative social categories and inhabitants of diverse localities (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Owens portrays Kya's profound reliance on her affection for the natural environment and water around her house by depicting the marsh as her surrogate mother after her family abandons her. She develops a deep affection for the marsh, considering it as important as her family. Kya commemorates her birthday with the nearby seagulls, using the sounds of the land and water to lull her into sleep each night. In addition, she acquires the skills necessary to utilize the marsh for her survival, extracting mussels from its shores to obtain funds, seeking refuge within its dense vegetation to evade threats, and engaging in fishing activities within its water channels to sustain herself. Kya ultimately produces her magnum opus by utilizing her affectionate watercolors and meticulous observations of the marsh. Kya is intimately connected to the marsh, embodying its essence, and it mainly shapes her entire existence.

### ***In-Group Social Identification in Where the Crawdads Sing***

The social identification is when Kya was with Jumpin', who was always loyal to her. Even though Jumpin' is black, he also feels left out of White society. Their bond comes from the fact that they both feel like outsiders. Outlined below:

*In another time and place, an old black man and a young white woman might have hugged. But not there, not then (2018, p. 222).*

Based on this quote, Jumpin' and Kya become father and daughter figures, even though Barkley Cove experiences racism every day. According to the Social Psychology Principle (2012), social categorizing is the way we naturally put people into social groups in our minds. Kya and Jumpin' respect, trust, and understand each other, which strengthens their friendship. He helps her deal with the difficulties of living alone in the marsh, and their friendship gives her a sense of connection that she does not get from other people in the town.

*She'd given love a chance; now, she wanted simply to fill the empty spaces. Ease the loneliness while walling off her heart (2018, p. 161).*

As Kya moves through her life, she learns that her friendship with Jumpin' provides comfort from her isolation. However, a significant portion of the energy she may have invested in her interactions with other people through researching and living inside the marsh. At this point, the marsh serves as a substitute for the family that she was abandoned by. She develops a closer relationship with it than any other person and experiences a stronger sense of connection to the natural world than to the human community she lives nearby.

Within the framework of Social Identity Theory (SIT), an individual's "in-group" refers to the group they associate themselves with, while their "out-group" refers to the group they do not identify with (McLeod, 2023). According to the hypothesis, individuals possess an intrinsic bias towards their group, leading them to experience enhanced self-esteem while displaying apathy or hostility towards other groups. Kya engages in conversations about social identification with fellow marsh residents and the mysterious "Marsh Girl" as she confronts the difficulties in her existence. Jumpin' and Kya form a paternal relationship despite the racial segregation and prejudice in Barkley Cove. Social categorization, as described by the Social Psychology Principle (2012), refers to the automatic assignment of persons to social groups in our cognitive processes. They have mutual feelings of alienation. The bond between Kya and Jumpin shows their shared admiration, reliance, and comprehension of each other. She discovers a unique bond with him that she does not experience with other townspeople, and he assists her in conquering the difficulties of solitary life in the marsh.

### ***Out-Group Social Identification in Where the Crawdads Sing***

Barkley Cove's social identification as an out-group shows their religious beliefs and gossip about outsiders, which enhances their sense of group identity. Their distrust of Kya's solitary existence in the marsh, which contradicts their societal conventions, clearly indicates their acquiescence.

*Waiting for the verdict of her murder trial brought a loneliness of a different order. The question of whether she lived or died did not surface on her mind but sank beneath the greater fear of years alone without her marsh. No gulls, no sea in a starless place (2018, p.346).*

Kya is depressed to an even greater degree as a result of this part of human life; the only things that bring her positive emotions are the cat that lives in the courtroom and the restricted view of the marsh that she has from her window. She does not experience feelings of loneliness because other people leave her; instead, Kya is lonely because she has to live in an environment that is not natural and because her family leaves her.

By forming relationships with a person and the unknown natural world, Kya feels a profound sense of acceptance and belonging that surpasses traditional norms. Within her local community, she acquired an alternative set of principles. The marsh and Barkley Cove are distinct entities. Various groups exhibit particular behaviors and hold diverse values (Stets and Burke, 2000, pp. 224–237). While navigating the intricacies of relationships, Kya discovers that genuine acceptance and a sense of belonging can only be attained by remaining authentic and establishing sincere connections with individuals who perceive her actual essence. Through her encounters, Kya realizes that accepting and embodying one's authentic self while challenging societal conventions are fundamental to attaining pleasure.

### ***Social Comparison in Where the Crawdads Sing***

The social comparison situation occurs when Kya Clark feels unsafe and alone because everyone in her small town always watches and criticizes other people. By

applying the social comparison theory, the story looks at how cultural expectations and the fight to be accepted affect people, as quoted below:

*But they backed down the steps and ran into the trees again, hooting and hollering with relief that they had survived the Marsh Girl, the Wolf Child, the girl who couldn't spell dog (2018, p. 91).*

This quotation shows that people in Barkley Cove (out-group) mistreat her, pointing out how different she is and how she is a stranger. According to Ilmi (2017), the group might compare themselves or their groups to others as part of the social comparison process. That way, they can choose which group is better. When Kya is not in her group, the people in her out-group judge her harshly, which makes her feel even more like an outsider; her name turns her into a stereotype and takes away her uniqueness even though she is still in the same territory as the people in Barkley Cove. On the other hand, the marsh offers comfort and acceptance, which is different from Barkley Cove's refusal.

*Kya never had her troop of close friends nor the connections Jodie described, for she never had her own family. She knew the years of isolation had altered her behavior until she was different from others, but it was not her fault she'd been alone. Most of what she knew, she'd learned from the wild. Nature had nurtured, tutored, and protected her when no one else would (2018, p. 366).*

She knows she has found a kind of family in nature, even though being alone hurts her because she is different from everyone else. Tajfel (1979) suggests that comparing groups has beneficial and adverse effects. Benefits vary based on how people compare. Positively comparing groups can lead to high status and benefits. Comparing groups might lead to a low reputation. The group comparison reveals three social comparison principles, including (1) individuals seeking positive social identity, (2) positive identity relies heavily on favorable comparisons, and (3) unsatisfactory social identity leads to leaving the group and joining others. It shows she feels a real connection with nature rather than others in Barkley Cove. It makes her different from other people and gives her the kind of unique viewpoint that helped her write her books to remain alive and even do well in seemingly impossible situations.

In terms of social comparison, in her novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens makes a brilliant comparison between two social situations that could not be more different from one another: the marshlands where Kya Clark spends her childhood and the little town of Barkley Cove, whose cultural conventions and expectations affect the lives of its residents. The social comparison highlights these two contexts' stark differences and underlying similarities. It also emphasizes the themes of isolation, belonging, and resilience. Mcleod (2023) asserts that once individuals have categorized themselves into a group and established a connection with it, they compare their group to other groups. The term "in-group" refers to the tendency of individuals to favor their group more than other groups. It is essential to acquire this knowledge regarding bias because when two groups perceive themselves as competitors, they engage in conflict to ensure their members maintain their self-worth.



Barkley Cove and the Marsh convey ideals of acceptance and belonging that directly oppose one another. During the social comparison stage, it is more likely for individuals or groups to develop a bias toward members of the out-group (Tajfel et al., 1971). It is because the in-group is in the minority. For Kya, the marsh transforms into a place where she can feel like she belongs without worrying about rejection or judgment, establishing a solid connection with the marsh's sceneries and the people there. On the other hand, in Barkley Cove, belonging is highly conditional and is determined by factors such as bloodline, social position, and devotion to traditional traditions. Kya's struggle to find acceptance in Barkley Cove exemplifies the challenges of integrating into a culture that places a higher importance on conformity than individuality.

The novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens offers a deep examination of how social identity can change over time, as seen through the experiences of its main character, Kya Clark. Kya's transformation from an abandoned child to an independent lady exemplifies the intricate aspects of social identity, influenced by the intersections of innate characteristics, societal factors, and individual initiative. Her state of being isolated and marginalized influences her identity. Left to her own devices in the marshlands, her family abandoned her during her early years. The isolation from the rest of society signifies the first stage of her process of developing her sense of self. The community of Barkley Cove excludes her, branding her as the "Marsh Girl," a moniker that carries significant social stigma and bias. This societal exclusion compounds her isolation, compelling her to retreat further into the natural realm, where she discovers comfort and a feeling of acceptance.

Unlike human society, the natural environment plays a supportive role in Kya's life. The marsh serves as both a sanctuary and a teacher for her. Owens eloquently portrays Kya's profound connection with the natural world, emphasizing how the environment shapes her sense of self. Kya's understanding of the marsh and its creatures allows her to survive and forms an essential part of how she sees herself. Her profound knowledge and understanding of the natural world eventually garnered her admiration and acclaim, leading to a significant shift in her social status from being known as the "Marsh Girl" to being recognized as a distinguished naturalist.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* explores the complex process of social identity change, emphasizing the themes of isolation, determination, and integration into society. The work urges readers to contemplate the malleability of one's identity and the diverse factors contributing to our perception of ourselves and others, using Kya Clark's life as a lens. Through his rich plot and meticulous character development, Owens explores the complexity of social identity and the possibility of transformation, even in the face of extreme suffering.

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