



Research article

Identity versus Identity Crisis: An Analysis of Erikson's Epigenetic Principle in Isabel Allende's *Daughter of Fortune*

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Abstract

Identity and identity crisis are crucial aspects of a person's mental and physical well-being. Identity is what sets an individual apart from others in society. An identity crisis can cause a person to experience confusion and uncertainty at various stages of their life. Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development is based on the 'Epigenetic principle,' which suggests that our environment and culture influence how we progress through the planned stages of personality development. Erikson's eight stages describe how people develop emotionally and socially throughout their lifespan. In Isabel Allende's novel, *Daughter of Fortune*, the protagonist Eliza Sommers undergoes an identity crisis. The paper focuses on this concept of identity and identity crisis and the mystery and troubled identity surrounding Eliza Sommers.

Keywords: Identity, Identity Crisis, Epigenetic Principle, Mystery, Erikson's Theory.



[Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions](#)

Isabel Allende is well-known for her contributions to Latin American Literature. She has written multiple novels and proven herself with these exceptional pieces. The protagonists of Allende are fearless and self-reliant. Throughout her writing career, she has tackled both social and political issues that have plagued society. Isabel Allende is one of the prominent Chilean writers whose work is based on real-life experiences. Having gained international fame and recognition in Latin American literature, she has authored several novels and proved her mettle with her outstanding works. Every novel reflects Allende's own life experiences. Most of her novels have a female protagonist, and the entire story revolves around her. Allende's protagonists are bold and independent. She has addressed almost all the social and political issues that have hampered society during her writing career. Allende wants to change, inform, and entertain society with her works. This statement is evident through the following lines: "I suppose that writing is an attempt to understand life's confusion, to make the world more bearable, and, if possible, to change it," she explained" (Axelrod- Contrada, 2011, p. 31). Allende grew up in her maternal grandparents' house, where she developed her imagination skills. Her grandmother's stories created a deep impression in Allende's mind. This helped her become an influential writer during her later years

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of life. There is a strong connection between Allende's personal experiences and her writings. She has used her writing as a weapon against a patriarchal-dominated society.

Daughter of Fortune is a deftly constructed narrative that creatively joins disparate characters and ties up loose ends. The novel has gained extensive readership for its narration. Cox (2011) in her book on Isabel Allende states, "Allende commented that *Daughter of Fortune* is not a book about the quest for true love but rather about finding freedom" (p. 116). Eliza Sommers is the predominant female character in the novel. She takes a voyage to California in search of her lover but at last, she finds her self-identity and freedom. The situation is explained through the following lines:

Her female characters rebuke the traditional confines of patrimony and often challenge the roles that are imposed on them by their society. However, in *Daughter of Fortune*, Sophia A. McClennen states for Review of Contemporary Fiction, Allende has gone one step further: '... the protagonist recognizes that her identity does not depend entirely on the man she loves. (Galens, 2003)

Through the epigenetic principle, the researcher has given an insight to the readers on how the Protagonist, Eliza unfolds her personality and identity crisis in predetermined stages.

The Psychosocial Theory was established by Erikson, who has modified Freud's Theory. The theory focuses on social and environmental factors, and it is based on the epigenetic principle. Through his principle, he states that the environment and surroundings create an impact and influence the individual during his progress through different stages. A person's behaviour and his environment cause certain changes in his personality. Progress in each stage is determined by success. In each stage, there are associated developmental tasks. Each stage involves a crisis. Erikson has given a realistic picture of personality development in the eight stages of life. Each of Erikson's eight stages involves conflict for the individual (Erikson, 2023, chap. 3, p. 92). The conflict ought to be successfully resolved. This aids in the person's development into a wholesome and responsible adult. The person becomes competent after successfully completing each step. And failure leads to inadequacy in his development. A child's development is portrayed by Meenakshisundaram (2010) in *Psychology of Learning and Human Development* as:

At every stage of development, the child faces a new crisis i.e., at particular stage of development, an issue needs to be resolved. The way in which the 'crisis' of each stage is resolved has a major bearing on the development of one's personality which in turn is reflected as the positive and negative aspects of one's behaviour. (p. 93)

Erikson's eight stages can be compared with Shakespeare's Poem "All the World's a Stage". Among the eight stages of Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, the researcher has focussed on the first six stages in the paper.

The first stage is *Trust vs. Mistrust* (Hope). It begins from birth to twelve months. At this age, the infant faces the crisis. The infant learns that adults may be trusted at this period. It takes place when the child's basic needs for survival are met. The infant is totally dependent upon the caretaker for the fulfilment of his/her needs. The newborn experiences both security and insecurity depending on how he/she is cared for, protected, and fed. It fosters either a sense of trust or mistrust with the carer and the environment. Few carers continue to ignore the infant's needs,

which makes the newborn fearful, untrusting, and anxious. When a newborn is not given appropriate care in the early years of life, they grow up with the intention of mistrust towards other people.

In the novel the protagonist, Eliza Sommers is an orphan. Based on their interactions with the carer, babies may learn to trust or mistrust them. The early years are crucial for the personality development of a child. Rose takes care of Eliza Sommers, who is an orphan. Eliza's birth looked to be a blessing from God since Rose had been praying for a child. "... In those days I was longing to have a child, and you fell into my arms, sent by God to be brought up in the social principles of the Protestant faith and the English language" (Allende, 2000, p. 4). Eliza grows up in a nurturing and supportive atmosphere thanks to Miss. Rose and Mama Fresia's regular care. So, in the first stage, Eliza feels very safe and protective and feels trustworthy towards the women.

The second stage is *Autonomy vs. Shame* (Will). This stage is called early childhood (Toddler), and it starts from one year to three years. In this stage, the child will attain a sense of trust and security in the environment. This helps in the development of both verbal and physical skills. They begin to explore the environment and experiment with their strength and weaknesses in order to achieve a sense of autonomy and independence. The youngsters make an effort to express their preferences for eating, playing with toys, and donning clothing. As a result of the risk involved in actions like walking, running, and tugging, safety measures are now required. They make an effort to become independent. Children with overly protective or controlling parents begin to doubt their own abilities and may experience feelings of embarrassment in front of other people. The development of guilt and a sense of uncertainty both assist the youngsters in setting their own boundaries and in understanding the difference between good and evil.

In this stage, Rose has made Eliza her play toy. The advent of the child is an annoyance to Rose's elder brother, Jeremy Sommers. He is a man who seeks a fortune as a member of the British Import and Export Company Ltd. Aged twenty Rose, at that time, she had some unfortunate love experiences. In order to make Rose feel happy, Jeremy allows the baby to live in their house. She has spent a lot of time instructing Eliza in singing, dancing, reciting verses, dressing her, and braiding her hair "... but the minute she found another diversion or was felled by a headache, she sent the child to the kitchen with Mama Fresia" (Allende, 2000, p. 11). Thus, Eliza is raised between the sewing room of Rose and the back patios of Mama Fresia, speaking English with the family members and Mapuche and Spanish with Mama Fresia. Here, the child feels a sense of guilt and uncertainty, because Rose treats her like a duchess but sometimes she has left barefoot with an orphan's smock in the back patios.

The third stage is *Initiative vs. Guilt* (Purpose). It starts from three years to six years. In the pre-school years, youngsters strive to engage with their surroundings. They enjoy playing with their pals, which makes tasks easier for them to complete. The young child seeks to inquire about everything. According to how the children are treated, their developmental potential is planned for activities in later life. When the carer discourages the youngsters from performing a certain task, they begin to feel guilty. This causes him to hesitate and fail in life. The issue of initiative versus guilt needs to be resolved with the appropriate care. Allowing the children to try on their own initiative helps them to form the habit of self-evaluating the outcomes. Failure makes the

children feel guilty for having failed to take the initiative at the right time. This helps the children to learn from their failures.

Eliza clings to Mama Fresia and follows her everywhere during her daily chores. At times, she goes with her crazy questions. She learns about Indian legends and myths, signs of animals, and cooking from Mama Fresia. Just by closing her eyes, she can identify the herbs, spices, and ingredients just the way she memorises the poems. "Miss Rose presented her at her musical evenings, and took her out in the coach to go shopping, or to visit the ships at the dock, or to stop at the finest pastry shop for hot chocolate, but she could just as easily spend days at a time writing in her mysterious notebooks or reading a novel without a thought for her protégée" (Allende, 2000, p. 11). Miss. Rose avoids Eliza if she is sick but immediately when she remembers Eliza, she would run to look for her and dress her up like a toy and takes her out for a ride. This attitude of Rose discourages Eliza and she feels guilty that she is an orphan.

The fourth stage is *Industry vs. Inferiority* (Competence). It starts from seven years to twelve years. The youngsters make an effort to go to school and gain a variety of abilities there. The school makes a lot of effort to put pressure on the kids to work hard. Some parents demand their kids to assist them with domestic duties or professional obligations. The burden of competing in both academic and social settings is currently too much for the young person. The children get complimented and admired for their accomplishments when they perform very well in school or any other social setting. The youngsters are inspired to work hard and be successful. Few kids struggle in school or with their social interactions. They start to feel self-conscious and have an inferiority complex. When it comes to assisting the child, both the instructor and the setting are crucial. A child's academic success or failure is determined here.

Social interaction is a vital part of this stage. Rose overburdens Eliza in the task of educating her. This is evident through the following words: "She devoted herself to giving Eliza the broadest possible education, not overlooking the skills appropriate for a young lady" (Allende, 2000, p. 11). One day Eliza throws a tantrum because she does not want to practice the piano. Miss. Rose grabs her by the arm and drags her twelve blocks downhill to the convent. On the adobe of the wall, it is written as: "Foundling Home" (p. 11). Rose insists to Eliza that she should be thankful to herself and her brother for taking her under their wing or else she will be left abandoned like these children. Eliza remains speechless and she learns to play without either talent or grace, but through dint of strict discipline. Here, the child is given over burden to compete both academically and socially. So, Eliza has started to have an inferiority complex.

The fifth stage is *Identity vs. Role Confusion* (Fidelity). It starts from twelve years to eighteen years. Puberty is where this stage begins. The young people look for their own unique identities. They experience changes in their body that are both physical and mental. The obligations of society seem to be a difficult job for them to play. If a person is successful in their early years, they will attempt to create a sense of identity. Failure in the earlier stages results in identity crisis and role confusion. During this period, the role of parents and teachers is crucial. Majority of the people frequently lack confidence in their future while choosing their career and profession. They must be given individual responsibilities and trusted with behaviour.

The adolescent stage starts out with a lot of uncertainty and confusion. Eliza's definitive metamorphosis occurs in this stage.

The emotional balance is once again disturbed in adolescence. An individual once again experiences the violent and intensive current of emotional experiences. With regard to emotional experiences, this is the period of intensive storm and stress. At no stage this emotional energy is as strong and dangerous as in adolescence. It is very difficult for an adolescent to exercise control over his emotions. (Mangal, 2018, p. 97)

Eliza has touched her body in private places which she has never explored. Eliza spends her time studying, helping the maids with their daily chores and remaining ingenious in her exposure to the outside world. When she comes of age at thirteen, Rose instructs her that she is no more a child and must attend a school to learn good manners and conduct. Jeremy is very much frustrated at the thought of an orphan child attending Madame Colbert's school for girls. But Rose compels Jeremy to accept for the girl's education. This is evident through the following lines: "From the angular little bug she had been in childhood she was transformed into a girl with soft curves and a delicate face. Under the tutelage of Ms. Rose, she spent the unpleasant years of her puberty balancing a book on her head and studying piano . . ." (Allende, 2000, p. 71). Eliza strives to look for a feeling of self and a personal identity.

At the age of fifteen, she becomes a skilled and mature lady and Rose is in search for a suitable aristocratic nobleman as Eliza's suitor. Simultaneously, Eliza has become well-versed in both cooking and playing piano. Rose chooses a young Navy officer as Eliza's partner who is from a rich family background. "The idea Struck like a dagger to her heart—it took her breath away—because the last thing in this world she wanted was a marriage arranged behind her back"(78). But ironically, Rose's vigorous effort goes wrong when the young man prefers Rose to Eliza. Meanwhile, Eliza has already fallen in love with Joaquin Andieta, whose work is to load and unload the goods into the Sommers' house. "Eliza Sommers saw Joaquin Andieta for the first time one Friday in the May of 1848 when he came to the house overseeing a cart pulled by several mules and loaded to the top with crates belonging to the British Import and Export Company, Limited" (Allende, 2000, p. 68).

The first encounter had come at the right time: "Two months before, she had turned sixteen and she was ready for love" (Allende, 2000, p. 68). And the inevitable happened: "That autumn morning when she saw Joaquin Andieta in the patio of her home, Eliza thought she had met her destiny: she would be his slave forever" (p. 70). Eliza is decisively captivated with the "devastating passion that would warp her life" (p. 80). Joaquin also experiences the same feelings, when he looks at Eliza's face. On seeing Eliza wasting away her life and having a strong love for Joaquin, Mama Fresia seeks the council of a machi healer who divulges that the girl's determination is a "fixation on love" (p. 84) for which there is no remedy. This shows the determination and willpower of Eliza regarding her love affair.

As Eliza's interest in Joaquin is obvious, Rose plans for a rapid resolution to the matter. Anyhow Rose dreams that Eliza might live out her passion to its fullest. On Eliza's part, she never misses her chance, slipping the young man a letter with directions to meet her. For a sequence of Wednesday nights, the immature lovers meet for a short period on uncertain embraces and discussions. One night they stayed at the Sommer's house. The young couple is highly confidential in their sexual love affair. Eliza falls extremely in love with Joaquin, prompted by the flowery, poetic letters he writes to her. In truth, Joaquin is a man whose passion at all times seems to be

somewhere else, who makes love hastily, and who leaves her discontented. To adapt to this evident inconsistent love of Joaquin, Eliza cautiously idealises her lover until he becomes an "obsession" (Allende, 2000, p. 115). They have been lovers for three months but still the bond of love in Joaquin, unfortunately, is not as strong as that of Eliza. He is, actually, in contrast to Eliza. She goes in search of love but Joaquin's interest in love is waning, and he plans to journey to California the following January in search of gold. "Eliza sensed that her lover was somewhere else, that at times she embraced a ghost" (Allende, 2000, p. 119).

Joaquin strives in all possible ways to earn the money for his voyage. When he has nothing with him, he sneaks guns from the dock and sells them on the black market. With that money, he swiftly acquires a third-class ticket and leaves for California. After six weeks, Eliza becomes aware that she is pregnant, Mama Fresia tries to get rid of the baby in Eliza's womb. Meanwhile, Rose's younger brother Captain John Sommers reaches the port for a visit to his house and quickly observes the changes in Eliza. One night, as Eliza sneaks into the ground to attempt an abortion, John takes Eliza into the library. He suggests that she has to accompany Miss Rose to England where she can be introduced to society and "make a good marriage" (Allende, 2000, p. 137). Compelled to conceal her pregnancy and also to locate Joaquin, she flees from her house with the aid of Mama Fresia. Thus, the above incidents prove that Eliza is looking for her own unique identity and she dislikes Rose and John to interfere in her personal matter. It also shows that the protagonist of Isabel Allende is very strong and self-restraint. Here, Eliza proves her fidelity towards her lover Joaquin. Though Eliza has faced many conflicts in her earlier stages, in this particular stage she has become resilient and goes to the extent of fleeing from her house in search of her lover as well as her self-identity.

The sixth stage is *Intimacy vs. Isolation* (Love). It starts from the twenties through the early forties. In this stage, a person strives to establish a close bond with other people. After developing a sense of self in the adolescent stage, a person is ready to share his life with others. He makes an effort to prove his identification to someone else. He is now prepared to put his love before his friends and family. He is willing to let others into his life. While some of them experience loneliness and isolation, few of them manage healthy relationships with others. The ability to adjust to oneself and the outside world helps a person in dealing with a crisis.

Eliza takes a ship for California, with the help of Tao Chi'en, a Chinese healer, who saved her when the drunken sailors at a bar tried to molest her. Though unwilling to assist this young girl in humiliating her family and his former employer, Tao Chi'en finally determines to help her. Tao Chi'en sneaks Eliza into his new employer's ship in a sack, which the quiet Chinese man arranges to be stored in the cargo hold of the ship. This is evident through the following lines: "She used to tell her faithful friend, the sage Tao Chi'en, that her memory was like the hold of the ship where they had come to know one another: vast and sombre, bursting with boxes, barrels, and sacks in which all the events of her life were jammed" (Allende, 2000, p. 3).

Tao Chi'en is the single permitted person allowed in that region so, he has more chances to tend to Eliza's requirements without the terror of discovery. For about two months, Eliza spends her time in darkness, with a cat as her only companion. Here, Eliza struggles to adapt both physically and mentally to the environmental conditions. She realises that she is setting foot into the next phase of her life, "beginning a new story in which she was both protagonist and narrator" (Allende,

2000, p. 152). During the first week of her journey, she becomes seriously ill and she is concealed in the storeroom. Tao Chi'en tries in all possible ways to treat her but he is unable to find out why she is not responding to his treatment. Eventually, Tao Chi'en notices Eliza lying in a pool of blood. When he wakes her up, she confesses that she is pregnant and slips once again into a state of unconsciousness.

For a good part of the night Tao Chi'en sat beside the feverish Eliza. He worked over her weakened body with the limited resources of his bag, his long experience, and a wavering tenderness until she expelled a bloody little mollusk. Tao Chi'en examined it in the lamplight and determined that without the slightest doubt it was a five- or six-week fetus, and was whole. (Allende, 2000, p. 205)

Tao Chi'en, upset by the concealment of her condition firmly decides to leave Eliza to her fate. But he is confronted by the apparition of his dead wife, Lin. The ghost reminds him to recall "the duties of an honourable physician" (Allende, 2000, p. 203). Throughout the night, Tao Chi'en nurses the girl by using efficiently, opium and acupuncture needles to bring to an end the miscarriage. He confesses that Eliza's brave determination, the fragility of her body and her strong love, made him remember his wife Lin. Even after the surgery, Eliza is desperately weak, so Tao Chi'en employs a Chilean whore on the board to assist him and to look after Eliza daily. The Chilean lady becomes fond of the girl, and Tao Chi'en provides opium to Eliza to make the duration pass rapidly. Immediately after getting into San Francisco, Tao Chi'en dresses Eliza like a Chinese boy and she moves off the ship without the attention of others.

San Francisco is a poor town with a disorganised group of tents, rashly built constructions, and filthy streets. As Eliza requests Tao Chien not to desert her, he takes her along with him to the Chinese settlement. They find a dilapidated lodge to stay for the night and then move to the Chilean barrio to search for Joaquin. There Eliza finds out that Joaquin has moved to Sacramento in search of gold. Eliza drives Tao Chi'en to help her to reach "the land of opportunity" (Allende, 2000, p. 232) where too people will need an eminent physician. So, they both book a voyage to Sacramento and reach their destination. In the Chinese region, Tao Chi'en gains attention as a beneficial doctor by treating a man's fractured arm. Acquiring information about Joaquin, that he has already led the way to the mine, Tao Chi'en decides that they both should earn some money to continue their voyage. Tao Chi'en organises a doctor's cabin by posing Eliza as his deaf-mute brother and he starts to establish his business.

As Eliza helps Tao Chi'en by taking care of the sick patients, she discovers herself fascinated by the gentleman. During the night, they both share a bed and relish the closeness with one another and in time "the secret spell of those embraces disappeared entirely and they were again brother and sister" (Allende, 2000, p. 241). Eliza wants Tao Chi'en and herself to be the best couple in the world: "there was no place for a couple like them anywhere in the world" (p. 242). After earning sufficient amount to take a journey into the hills, she quits Tao Chi'en to seek her beloved.

Meanwhile John came to know about Eliza's escape during his visit to Valparaiso. Rose pays a visit to Joaquin's house to know about his whereabouts. She is informed by Joaquin's mother that he has left for California in search of gold. Rose assumes that Eliza also has gone to California to search for Joaquin. Jeremy tells Rose that she has to stop searching for Eliza, because in no way he will allow her to get into their house for she does not belong to their family. Rose, finally, cries

out the fact that Eliza is John's daughter. John and Rose have kept the secret to save the child all these years, without raising up their elder brother's doubts and have been successful up to this time. Thus, the mystery of Eliza's birth and her identity is finally revealed in this stage.

Eliza in the male attire of Elias Andieta, Joaquin's brother, joins a troop of Chilean miners on the banks of the American river. For several months, Eliza consistently searches for her lover and also proceeds with other groups—speculators, hunters, salesmen, and mingles with any flock which is safe to her. Eliza thinks that Joaquin is deliberately avoiding her though the news of her search reaches the far corners of the hills. Eliza takes pleasure in the wildlife and the numerous persons she meets, gradually falling "in love with freedom" (Allende, 2000, p. 275). After losing her forty dollars on a bear baiting competition, she decides to earn money by a new means. She finds that writing letters for illiterate miners is a profitable business. And also she earns her living by playing piano for the dancing girls in the travelling brothel.

Simultaneously, Tao Chi'en is leading a lonely life in Sacramento. He becomes friendly with another Chinese physician, who is a partner in his business. Tao Chi'en ponders over how to come out of his solitude in the absence of his wife. Tao Chi'en is unable to forget his joyous life with Lin or even with Eliza. He decides to go back to his native town, so he returns to San Francisco to earn some money for his voyage. In consequence, Tao Chi'en appears before Eliza, who agrees to accompany him back to San Francisco, where Tao has a job to do.

Even though Tao Chi'en and Eliza are very close to each other they have never revealed their intimacy. She has left Chile with the intention of finding Joaquin and surrendering herself to him. She thinks that this is the way to extinguish her thirst to possess him. Her memories about Joaquin have started fading away from her mind gradually. So she renews the sweet passion of solitary love. With the thought that she has a definitive fork in her path, she feels that the direction she has chosen would determine her future. She has started questioning herself a thousand times, why she is after that lover, who has never shown any concern for her. In this stage, Eliza comes out of her Identity Crisis with the intimacy towards Tao Chi'en. She tells Tao:

"I planned to look for Joaquin this summer, but I'm not going. I know now I will not find him."

[He replies:] "It seems that like everyone who came to California we found something different from what we were looking for." (Allende, 2000, p. 394)

And then, Joaquin was killed and his head was preserved in a jar of gin and taken on a tour of California. The head was accompanied by the hand of Three-Finger Jack, his 'sidekick,' in another jar. Eliza and Tao were among the first to see the trophies.

"On a table draped like a catafalque sat the two glass jars ... she gulped a mouthful of air and opened her eyes. She stared at the head for a few seconds and then let herself be led outside.

"Was it him?" asked Tao Chi'en.

"I am free," she replied, holding tightly to Tao's hand. (Allende, 2000, p. 399)

Eliza does not feel isolated in the absence of her lover but instead, she becomes intimate with Tao Chi'en. He is the healer who assists in her recovery from the debilitating, obsessive, delusive love

and the absent lover. These qualities were missing in Joaquin, and he has dissipated his love and lady love for the sake of gold. Her desire to put an end to her search for the lost lover is finally over. Her joy at the confirmation of Joaquin's death knows no bounds. She is free at last to begin a new life with Tao Chi'en. She muses over her relationship with Tao, a tenuous, fragile but hopeful relationship:

She felt the man in her blood ... that she marvelled at the time she had spent by his side without realising. She missed him ... longed for the carefree days when they were good friends... Now there was something unfinished between them, something much more complex and fascinating than their old friendship (Allende, 2000, p. 393).

By exploring and examining Allende's protagonist Eliza Sommers with Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, the research paper renders invaluable perception into the epigenetic principle. The principle enables the protagonist to create an impact and progress through various stages and finally a powerful new woman has emerged. It is evident through the following words, "Eliza comes to love her freedom, strength and newfound boldness" (Cox, 2003, p. 128). To sum up, identity and identity crisis is a complex concept that includes social roles, cultural affinities, and personal characteristics. They improve the understanding of oneself and others, promote a feeling of acceptance and belonging, and improve our ability to function in social and cultural contexts.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest.

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