

**A developmental odyssey:
An assessment on Tana French's fictional character Frank Mackey
with reference to Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development**

Janani Periasamy Ramesh and Preetha Chandrahasan*

Abstract: The development of the psyche is greatly important for an individual and society as it embraces the emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes in them throughout their lifetime. It is the psychological development that helps an individual to attain self-realization and enhance a better well-being in society. Erikson's theory outlines the crucial tasks and conflicts an individual faces and suggests solutions to resolve them in a way that promotes tranquil mental health. This study on the character Frank Mackey from the novel *Faithful Place* by Tana French examines the quandary and its remedy from childhood to adulthood through the stages of the psychosocial developmental theory by Erik Erikson.

Keywords: psychological, social, development, behaviour, crime

Introduction

The word psychosocial designates the connection between the psychological needs of an individual and the needs of society. Adolf Meyers' idea is the initiation of psychosocial valuation which emphasizes that the mental illness of an individual depends on their behaviour in the environment. But, Erik Erikson in his *Childhood and Society* describes the stages of psychosocial development under eight phases from childhood to old age. In his assumption, the psychological and social crisis in every phase of life has positive or negative outcomes on the personality of an individual, signifying that personality develops throughout the lifetime. According to Erikson, "Each successive stage and crisis has a special relation to one of the basic elements of society, and this is for the simple reason that the human life cycle and man's institutions have evolved together"

* Janani Periasamy Ramesh; Preetha Chandrahasan
Department of English, Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem,
Tamilnadu, India

(Erikson 1950, 250). If the person favourably achieves the phase's virtue, then each stage is completed. If the quality of the earlier phases is not acquired or is obtained negatively, the person has a reduced likelihood of moving on to the next phase of psychological development. Kendra Cherry (2024), a psychosocial rehabilitation specialist says that Erikson's theory is based on the "epigenetic principle... suggests that people grow in a sequence that occurs over time and in the context of a larger community". .

America is credited with giving rise to the genre of crime fiction, which has drawn many writers to the literary world. Tana French is one such writer, joining the crew of female crime writers like Patricia Cornwell and Kathy Reichs in recent years. Tana French, an American-Irish writer and theatrical actress, is very popular for her winning series, *The Dublin Murder Squad*. The British newspaper, *The Independent*, gives a critical acclamation on Tana French, stating, "who very quietly has become a huge international name among crime fiction readers" (McWeeney 2012). Tana French has won the most prestigious Edgar, Barry, Macavity, and Anthony awards for her debut novel, *In the Woods*, a remarkable bestseller in America.

The Dublin Murder Squad is a series with six novels entirely based on crime and in-depth psychosocial issues. The amalgamation of crime, hard-boiled fiction and police procedural is visible in all the novels of the series. The writer has entertained the readers with suspense and mystery by linking the incidents and characters of the previous novel to the next. The six books in the Dublin Murder Squad series tell interwoven tales of murders that occur both inside and outside of Dublin. *Faithful Place* is the third instalment of the series, occurring as a sequel to *The Likeness*. Frank Mackey, the protagonist of the novel, has planned to elope with his girlfriend Rosie Daly to England when he was nineteen years old. He was disappointed when Rosie retrieved her decision on her elopement and he decided to escape from his dysfunctional parents leaving his family, house and his small town behind. A score of years later, Frank Mackey becomes a prominent detective in Murder Squad leading a simple life for his daughter and his ex-wife Olivia. The plot of the story picks up when Mackey is informed about the suitcase that has been found in the faithful place from where Mackey once planned to elope with Rosie. Witnesses confirm that the suitcase belonged to Rosie, whom the Dalys and Mackeys believed to be alive. Later, the police on the case

discover a carcass under the floor of the faithful place which Frank approves to be Rosie Daly.

A brief overview of Erikson's eight stages of development is essential before delving into the analysis of the character. These phases, which span from early childhood to late adulthood, outline the crucial responsibilities and challenges people face on their path to self-realisation. In addition, Tana French's novels also delve into the characters' psychological development and personality evolution. Erik Erikson's theory provides a framework through which the characters struggle with intimacy, trust, loneliness, and other concerns. This paper focuses on the core themes and conflicts inherent in Erikson's theory, such as trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, identity vs. role confusion, and so on, without rigidly adhering to age-related divisions.

Erikson's eight stages

The first stage of the psychosocial development theory of Erikson deals with the basic conflict between trust and mistrust within an individual. This conflict arises in the earlier stage of a child from birth to one year, focusing on the response of the primary caregivers. Though Erikson dedicated stage one to infants, he has highlighted its negative consequences in an adult stating,

In psychopathology, the absence of basic trust can best be studied in infantile schizophrenia, while the lifelong underlying weakness of such trust is apparent in adult personalities in whom withdrawal into schizoid and depressive states is habitual. (Erikson 1950, 248)

The protagonist Frank Mackey in Tana French's *Faithful Place* demonstrates a deep internal conflict considering the initial phase of Erik Erikson's psychological development theory, which is trust against mistrust. Success in this stage is in attaining the virtue of hope, which is built in the psyche of the individual when their basic needs like nourishment and affection are met. In contrast, failure is in mistrusting the primary caregivers and society resulting in fear and developing poor psychosocial growth in an individual. Frank's infancy and early childhood are marked by turbulent family dynamics and a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust. Frank familiarizes his father's character at the beginning of the novel stating, "My father once told me that the most important thing every man should know is what he would die for. If you don't know that, he said, what are you worth?"

Nothing. You're not a man at all" (French 2011, 5). These lines exhibit the authoritative nature of Frank's father and growing up in such a dysfunctional family environment, Frank's relationship with his father is strained, characterized by neglect and abuse. Despite his failure in the familial bond, Frank's trust in the relationship when he says, "and I was still waiting for Rosie Daly at the top of Faithful Place." (French 2011, sec. Prologue) is ultimately broken when Rosie abandons him by revoking her decision of elopement. As a result, Frank is unsuccessful in stage one of psychosocial development and gains mistrust in his relationship with his loved ones.

"Muscular maturation sets the stage for experimentation with two simultaneous sets of social modalities: holding on and letting go." (Erikson 1950, 251) Frank Mackey grapples with the second stage of psychosocial development which highlights the conflict between autonomy vs. shame and doubt. Erikson mentions that autonomy or shame is acquired by a person if he holds on or lets go of both. He further states,

Thus, to hold can become a destructive and cruel retaining or restraining, and it can become a pattern of care: to have and to hold. To let go, too, can turn into an inimical letting loose of destructive forces, or it can become a relaxed "to let pass" and "to let be" (Erikson 1950, 251)

Frank's early experiences in Faithful Place, marked by a tumultuous family life and a sense of abandonment by his father, contribute to his struggle with autonomy and self-assurance. His upbringing in a dysfunctional family environment, coupled with unresolved trauma from his past, fuels feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Frank Mackey struggles to decide on either holding on or letting go of his family and his beloved. Holding on to his situation might lead him to face shame and doubt due to his disagreements with his dysfunctional family and he would have been humiliated by the parents of Rosie Daly for her absence. "This stage, therefore, becomes decisive for the ratio of love and hate, cooperation and willfulness, freedom of self-expression and its suppression." (Erikson 1950, 254) So, Frank Mackey decides to let go of his household and personal relationship and transforms into a successful detective among the Murder Squad to achieve autonomy within himself and in society which is visible when he says, "I would die for, in no particular order, my city, my job, and my kid." (French 2011, 5)

The third stage of Erikson's theory on psychosocial development deals with the conflict between initiative and guilt. The individual at this stage of development, as Erikson says, will be,

... more himself, more loving, relaxed and brighter in his judgment, more activated and activating. He is in free possession of a surplus of energy which permits him to forget failures quickly and to approach what seems desirable (even if it also seems uncertain and even dangerous) with undiminished and more accurate direction. (Erikson 1950, 255)

Paralleling the words of Erikson with the character Frank Mackey, he is 'more himself' after leaving his dysfunctional family and starts to create his identity as a detective in the Murder Squad. Frank is 'more loving' right from the beginning of the story, but his love is short-lived. His first love for Rosie Daly seems to be pure and true which initiates Frank to leave everything behind just to lead a peaceful life with her in England. He says the following which proves their mutual faithfulness, stating, "Secretly, I still get proud of the ways Rosie and I loved each other. We had no one else to learn from – none of our parents were shining examples of relationship success – so we learned this from each other" (French 2011). Frank assumes that his future has been destroyed when Rosie does not turn up. He gets a second chance at love when he marries Olivia, but sooner he gets divorced due to a misunderstanding with her. Frank spent his entire love on his daughter Holly whom he wishes to die for. Frank becomes 'more activated and activating' in his profession. He handles two major cases of the Murder Squad, the first being the murder case of Alexandra Maddison which is the story of the previous novel *The Likeness* and the second case is the murder case of Rosie Daly. These incidents indicate that Frank Mackey is out of guilt and takes initiative in his professional and personal life.

"Thus the inner stage seems all set for 'entrance into life,' except that life must first be school life, whether the school is field or jungle or classroom." (Erikson 1950, 258) The fourth stage of psychosocial development deals with the conflict between industry and inferiority. This stage can be compared to the development of Frank Mackey in the Murder Squad. "In this stage, children start to compare themselves with their peers to gauge their abilities and worth." (Macleod 2024) Frank Mackey compares himself with his peers Rob Ryan, Cassie Maddox, Scorcher Kennedy and others in the Murder Squad team. In the novel, *The Likeness*, Frank along with Cassie Maddox executes a

secret undercover operation to find the assassin of a murder case which earns him many laurels and accolades for its success. Frank achieves the virtue of competence in this stage of psychosocial development through his triumph as one of the finest detectives in Murder Squad.

The fifth stage of Erikson's theory deals with the compelling exploration of identity versus role confusion, which Frank Mackey grapples with. Frank's career as a detective provides him with a sense of purpose and identity. However, even within his professional sphere, Frank faces challenges that force him to confront his own values and beliefs. His romantic relationships further complicate his sense of self, as he struggles with intimacy and vulnerability in the context of his past experiences. Regardless of age, Frank wrestles with questions of identity and purpose, seeking to reconcile the various aspects of his past and present self. Erikson says, "The strength acquired at any stage is tested by the necessity to transcend it in such a way that the individual can take chances in the next stage with what was most vulnerably precious in the previous one" (Erikson 1950, 263). Frank triumphs in stage five by acquiring identity in his career which gives him strength to face the remaining stages of psychosocial development.

In the sixth stage, psychosocial development takes place when there is a crisis between intimacy and isolation. Erikson says,

The counterpart of intimacy is instantiation: the readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own, and whose 'territory' seems to encroach on the extent of one's intimate relations (Erikson 1950, 264)

As the statement illustrates, in relationships, intimacy and distance are two sides of the same coin. Frank's romantic relationship with Rosie and Olivia is characterized by a complex interplay of intimacy and distance throughout the novel. The past connection between Frank and Rosie is marked by deep intimacy, rooted in shared experiences, mutual understanding, and a profound emotional bond. This intimacy is contrasted with an intense feeling of distance and separation that emerges over time. Rosie's mysterious disappearance and the years of silence that follow create a palpable distance between them, both physically and emotionally. The concept of distantiation is highlighted by the obstacles that prevent Frank and Rosie from entirely bridging the gap between them. In the meantime, Frank's relationship with Olivia represents a more mature and complex form of intimacy,

characterized by mutual respect and emotional vulnerability. Unlike his relationship with Rosie, which is steeped in nostalgia and longing, Frank's connection with Olivia is grounded in the present and reflects his growth and development as a character. Their marital relationship ends in divorce as soon as Olivia establishes her relationship with Dermot. Frank is forced to isolate himself from his romantic entanglement after both of his partners move away from his life. These incidents wherein Frank experiences intimacy and isolation together unveil that he has neither succeeded nor failed at this stage.

“Generativity, then, is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson 1950, 267) says Erikson about the seventh stage of psychosocial development encompassing the conflict between generativity and stagnation. The aspect of generativity is witnessed in Frank when he says, “I would die for... my kid” (French 2011, 5). After his divorce from Olivia, Frank had the opportunity to care for Holly during the weekend. As Holly’s father, Frank undertakes the role of guiding and nurturing her as she navigates the difficulties of adolescence and young adulthood. Frank says, “Holly, who knows well that she isn’t allowed to go online in private till she’s twenty-one” (French 2011, 11) discloses the proper upbringing of a daughter by her father. Frank struggles to provide Holly with love, support and guidance, offering her wisdom and perspective gained from his own life experiences. His role as a mentor and protector reflects his commitment to guiding the next generation and imparting valuable lessons. Besides his unsuccessful relationship with his partners, Frank’s success as a good father carries the day at the end.

Ego integrity versus despair is the eighth and last stage in the psychosocial development theory. The words of Erikson on this stage state, “It is the ego’s accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning. It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego - not the self – as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for” (Erikson 1950, 268). Frank experiences integrity when he decides to elope with Rosie and suddenly, he is pushed to despair when she does not turn up. He again encounters integrity while marrying Olivia but, shortly Frank attains despair when it ends in divorce. With this instability, Frank reaches a destination where he witnesses a sense of accomplishment in uncovering the murderer of Rosie and also in acquiring fulfilment both in his personal and professional life.

Conclusion

Frank's character undergoes a process of transformation and growth, ultimately finding a sense of firmness and acceptance. By confronting his past, embracing his vulnerabilities, and forging his path, Frank embodies the universal quest for meaning and fulfilment that defines Erikson's eight stages of development. Through his struggles and triumphs, Frank emerges as a complex and nuanced character, embodying the timeless themes of human existence and the enduring search for purpose and identity.

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