

## **Existential Crossroads: A Journey across the Masculine Miles in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye***

**Anto Hemanth A**

Post Graduate Student, NET-JRF.

Department of English

Dr. G.R. Damodaran College of Science, Coimbatore

### **Abstract**

How hard is it to seek harmony in a world where changes are constant? The life of a man turns a continual strife in the face of perplexing changes. A male is tormented by the turmoil-rich transition from boyhood to manhood. With his shoulders burdened in the light of his career, relationships, and societal standings, a man becomes a lost sheep in the darkest woods. Unable to escape, he falls victim trapped in the dark vague abyss. When a man fails to overcome what hinders him from standing tall in society, he loses his mind, drowning himself in either overwhelming thoughts or a pit of emptiness. The overwhelming thoughts that are raging make him go mad and wild. The feeling of emptiness pulls him into an existential crisis, blurring his hope. This research paper is an examination of the protagonist Holden Caulfield's dilemmas and struggles with his masculine traits and identity in the transition from his boyhood to adulthood as depicted in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. It further examines the unreliable narration of the protagonist and explores the types of masculinities exhibited by him as the events unfold and analyzes the existential crisis in the light of his struggles in a superficial world as well as in comparison with Shakespeare's Hamlet.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Alienation, Unreliable narration, Superficial, Existential Crisis

Gender is the fundamental social identity constructed based on self-identification through masculine or feminine traits predominantly, determining the nature of the relationships encompassing socio-cultural dynamics. However, it is significant to learn about the prevailing stereotypes that play a crucial role in creating conflicts involving societal pressure and identity crises at the primary level. The conflicts arise out of one's strong intention to defend and inherit conventional systematic principles and are afraid of changes that might cause an imbalance in social dynamics.

The majority of the social population favoring the adherence to conformities adds to the struggles of those attempting to break the traditional norms to overcome the identity crisis and embrace individuality. One of the often discussed and debated subjects is what constitutes masculinity. What does it mean to be a man or be the man? Primarily a typical response would be resonating with the sexual and physiological identity of having born a male. When the question hits those who look from a comparatively broader perspective, the answer would be gendered – when an individual identifies himself as a male in society.

When one does a detailed study analyzing two similar yet different connotations of 'a man' and 'the man', it can be found that being a man refers to an indefinite part of the acknowledged male population, whereas being the man is often interpreted in terms of authoritative or dominant or superior or violent traits. It should be noted that many come up with responses pointing out the ideal traits involving confidence, respect, loyalty, physical and mental strength, and responsibility that all need to be held within one universally regardless of a particular gender. Expecting the ideal traits only from the masculine gender paves the way for the gender inequality and subordination of other genders in society and identity crisis individually.

Following a number of studies empirical in nature, there is no more a single concept of masculinity but a complex concept of masculinity and masculinities. It becomes crucial to learn in detail about the classifications entitled to masculinity and masculinities in terms of social organization. Based on the social hierarchy, the renowned Australian sociologist R.W Connell in her work, *Masculinities* acknowledges the four types of masculinity – Hegemonic, Complicit, Marginalized, and Subordinate masculinities and also discusses the relations among them (Connell, 76).

In brief, hegemonic masculinity refers to the idealization of stereotypical traits and norms involving the dominance of heterosexual males over women and homosexual males; complicit masculinity focuses on the domination of men in social aspects, however with no objective to oppress women; marginalized masculinity labeled ‘failed masculinity’ refers to those who are unable to conform to the societal expectations taking into account their class or race or status; and subordinate masculinities refer to the non-heterosexual males dominated by the hegemonic heterosexual males.

In Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist Holden Caulfield’s masculinity is put on trial in transitioning to superficial adulthood, resulting in existential crises. The plot is constructed in a way that portrays childhood and adulthood as two entirely different worlds. Set in first-person narration from Holden’s personal perception, the narrative is often seen as unreliable. A notable unreliable narrative that holds greater significance in fictional literature is Salman Rushdie’s technique employed in *Midnight’s Children*, the ‘Errata’. Rushdie employs the unreliable narrative through the protagonist Saleem Sinai, characterized by misleading or incorrect statements associated with historical or cultural aspects, while incorporating magical realism adding to the complexity of his unreliability.

In comparison, the unreliability suspected in Holden’s narrative is different from Rushdie’s complex narrative strategy. Holden’s narrative is subjective with his perspectives and judgments being shaped by his personal feelings, instincts, or preconceived notions that might not align with reality which is objective. The other factors are his emotional instability arising out of his unready exposure to a world undesirable for him, misinterpretations, and lack of insights into the complex aspects of adult life.

The plot begins with Holden Caulfield in a mental institution or rest home narrating the events that have taken place prior to the previous Christmas. He states: “I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I’ll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy” (Salinger, ch.1).

Prior to his narration of the past, he mentions his brother D.B., who is an established writer, and expresses both his admiration for his writing and disappointment towards his lifestyle in Hollywood. Holden’s mixed feelings towards his brother resonate with the sense

of disillusionment with adulthood. He admires D.B.'s talent, however dislikes how he has changed enhancing a sell-out lifestyle that is superficial.

The significant events in Holden's narration that define his masculinity and depict the struggles constituting his existential crisis are his expulsion from school, encounters in New York, and meeting his sister Phoebe. It is essential to discuss the events in light of the masculinity demonstrated during each event. The expulsion from school marks the beginning of Holden's journey as a non-conformist, portraying him as an ignorant and negligent rebel who shows firm resistance with his refusal to adhere to the fundamental yet rigid expectations of obedience to the school rules and academic success.

In his personal encounter with the elderly History teacher, Mr. Spencer, Holden is advised to play the game of life according to rules which is just the same as what Dr. Thurmer has pressured him against his actions that never prioritize his future. Holden has been merely listening and responding for the sake of Mr. Spencer, mocking and exhibiting sarcasm toward his pieces of advice which according to him are highly typical, unworthy of attention and prioritization. He is thereby stepping into the world of adulthood with wild resistance to hegemonic masculinity.

Holden encounters Stradlater and learns about his date with Jane Gallagher, a familiar girl from his neighborhood. With Stradlater being a typical male who is handsome, self-centered, and an insensitive personality, Holden is concerned about Jane whom he cares about to a certain extent. His concern for Jane frustrates Stradlater resulting in a physical altercation between them. It is evident that Holden's genuine concern is what brings out a sense of protectiveness and emotional vulnerability, reflecting resistance to expected norms of masculinity that involve aggression and dominance. With Stradlater being a representative of 'phoniness', an attractive yet deceiving personality, Holden is portrayed as an odd yet straightforward personality.

Leaving for New York marks the daring solo adventure of Holden, highlighting his attempt to fit into the world of adulthood. The adventure begins with his visit to Ernie's bar in New York, where he is deeply moved by admiring the music played by him. However, he notices that Ernie's artful tunes go unappreciated out of the prevalent social stereotypical discrimination out of obsession with attractive appearances. This observation contrasts the pianist's authenticity and talent with the contaminated phoniness of the adult world. Holden

condemns: "I swear to God, if I were a piano player or an actor or something and all those dopes thought I was terrific, I'd hate it. I wouldn't even want them to clap for me. People always clap for the wrong things." (Salinger, ch.12).

Holden's quest for empathetic and honest companionship in a world so phony or fake shatters his hopes and amplifies his loneliness. He feels disconnected and isolated from the world, drowning in depressing thoughts. He is in great desperation to share the emotional turmoil that is burdening his mind. Out of unhindered desperation and loneliness, he decides to hire a prostitute only to alleviate his burdensome feelings of isolation.

Holden, unlike any typical male is not after sexual or lustful pleasure that is merely physical, he craves a human connection that is mindful. When the prostitute Sunny arrives at his hotel room, he exhibits pity and desire to connect with her, attempting to establish the human connection that he values more than anything. He says: "I felt much more depressed than sexy" (Salinger, ch.13). Holden's denial of sexual activity infuriates Sunny who punches him and takes away more money from his wallet. This event highlights the harsh reality of the unfair, materialistic, hedonistic, and artificial adult world that nowhere aligns with Holden's idealized desire for a fulfilling connection. The bitter and hollow reality weakens Holden to hold within him a marginalized masculinity.

The only event that relieves Holden is his visit to the Museum of National History to meet his younger sister Phoebe. Holden perceives the unchanged museum as a temporary escape from the unreliable and often evolving adult world. He muses on the past, the days of his childhood, provoking a sense of nostalgia that acts as an escapism at the present. He says: "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand [...] Nobody'd be different" (Salinger, ch.16). The ideal aspects of permanence and consistency he finds in the museum is lacking in the outside world of temporariness and phoniness in which he feels lost and sad.

Towards the end of the plot, Holden meets his sister Phoebe who is an embodiment of innocence and a reminder to stay authentic irrespective of the fake world around. Holden shares with Phoebe his metaphorical vision of being a 'catcher in the rye', whose role is to protect children from falling off the cliff. The children signify the purity and innocence of childhood, while the cliff denotes the harsh realities and corruption of adulthood. He admires Phoebe riding the carousel with pure joy which makes him strongly realize the significant

need to preserve the invaluable trait of innocence in every child. In this particular scene, it is evident that Holden exhibits protective masculinity, prioritizing authenticity and safeguarding the traits of innocence and purity.

At the beginning of the plot, Holden acts resistant to hegemonic masculinity, being a rebel against conventionalism. As the events unfold, he turns to exhibit in him the traits of marginalized masculinity in the light of the phony world of adulthood and showcases protective masculinity in his encounter with Phoebe. However, it should be noted that in certain events, Holden exhibits marginal masculinity with elements of complicity as he uses derogatory words toward women, indicating partial conformity with traditional or hegemonic masculinity. It is fair to conclude that Holden's behavior is not confined to a particular type of masculinity.

Throughout the plot, Holden suffers from agonizing alienation with his inability to connect, his desperation to notice how the real goes unappreciated in a society that is fake and discriminative, his longing for a genuine human connection in the superficial world of adulthood, embracing nostalgia as escapism along with his non-conformist attitude with exhibiting different masculine traits. These factors contribute to his existential crisis, making him feel inferior, empty, and purposeless. It should be noted that the novel ends Holden in a mental institution, where he is treated by a psychoanalyst or a therapist. It is evident that his existential crisis arose out of his struggles has deteriorated his mental stability. The ending of the novel is ambiguous with no definite resolution, leaving readers a sense of uncertainty about Holden's fate.

In comparison between Salinger's Holden Caulfield and Shakespeare's Hamlet, it is evident that there are a number of factors that are similar, contributing to the inefficiency of both protagonists. Hamlet, the prince of Denmark seeks to avenge his father's death by killing the murderer, his uncle Claudius. However, his revenge is delayed by his consideration of moral values. The moral dilemmas contribute to his indecisiveness that disturbs his mind to a great extent, making him ponder ceaselessly on life and death, the whole concept of existence.

Similarly, Holden Caulfield in his transitional journey toward adulthood is hindered by the complexities of human actions and relationships in the light of society that are selfish and immoral. The world of adulthood that contrasts with the world of childhood disables

Holden's progress in life, eventually destroying his mental stability. It is significant to notice that after having been hindered by respective circumstances, both Hamlet and Holden question human existence and purpose in a world that has disappointed them to the greatest extent, breaking their spirits of hope.

Both these characters give up at a certain point out of complete hopelessness and despair. Hamlet says: "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Ham. 2.1.5-6). Holden states: "That's the whole trouble. You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (Salinger, ch.25). It is fair to say that Holden Caulfield and Hamlet share a common thread of existential crisis, following their experiences of alienation and isolation in their respective realities of bitterness.

To conclude, the journey of Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is presented in such a way offering an examination of the concepts of masculinity, unreliable narration, alienation, isolation, and existential crisis. The concept of unreliable narration is discussed in comparison with the narration of the protagonist Saleem Sinai in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Through Holden's struggles and sufferings in a superficial world, the alteration of his masculinity from resistance to conformity and from rebellion to protection is observed. It is further analyzed how the intense struggles and sufferings due to Holden's inability to adapt and survive in a phony or fake world of adulthood contribute to his existential crisis eventually leading to his mental instability. Towards the end, the concept of existential crisis is discussed in detail drawing a comparison between Holden Caulfield and Shakespeare's Hamlet.

### Works Cited

- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Second Edition, University of California Press, 2005.
- Council of Europe. "Masculinities." *Gender Matters*,  
[www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/masculinities](http://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/masculinities)
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. Vintage Books, 2013.
- Salinger, J.D. "The Catcher in the Rye". *Alliance Cindy & Bill Simon Technology Academy*, 2013,  
[www.simontechnology.org/ourpages/auto/2013/1/23/53406450/Catcher%20in%20the%20Rye%20Text.pdf](http://www.simontechnology.org/ourpages/auto/2013/1/23/53406450/Catcher%20in%20the%20Rye%20Text.pdf)
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Fingerprint Classics, 2022.
- Tamang, Manahari. *Use of Unreliable Narrator in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*. 2017. Tribhuvan University. M.A thesis.