

Identity crisis in adolescence: The case of *Leftovers*

¹Tania Yulia Noor Zalsabillah*, ¹Nailil Muna, ¹Riana Permatasari, ¹Didik Murwantono

¹English Literature Department, Faculty of Languages, Literature and Culture, Sultan Agung Islamic University

*Corresponding Author

Email: taniazalsabillah14@std.unissula.ac.id

Abstract

This study analyzes the novel Leftovers with a focus on the factors that influence the identity crisis in adolescents as experienced by the character Ardith using the fifth stages Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory. The data in this study were obtained through dialogues and monologues from the novel. This study is a qualitative study with qualitative data collection and descriptive reporting. The study reveals that there are internal and external factors that can influence adolescents to experience an identity crisis, as reflected in the novel Leftovers. The results of this study indicate that there are several factors contributing to Ardith's identity crisis, namely: physical & cognitive changes, family, peer group, and traumatic events.

Keywords: Identity; Identity vs Role Confusion; Adolescence; Identity Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Identity formation is a process that occurs throughout life and is never truly complete. During childhood and adolescence, a person grows physically, mentally matures, and encounters various social experiences. These periods are particularly important and become as the key moments in the development of identity. If someone is able to pass through adolescence and the process of identity formation well, they are likely to discover their identity. However, if someone has not figured out their identity, it implies they are going through an identity crisis (Erikson, 1950, p. 91-96).

Psychosocial Development Theory

Erik Erikson explains there are eight stages of psychosocial development from infancy to late adulthood. At each stage, individuals face a conflict between two opposing personality-forming states. According to Erikson, individuals who successfully complete each stage will have a healthy personality and strong characteristics that can be used to complete the next stage. On the other hand, an individual's failure to complete a stage can reduce the individual's ability to complete the next stage so that the individual has an unhealthy personality and sense of self.

Stage 1: Trust Vs Mistrust

This stage begins at birth and continues until approximately 12 months of age. At this stage, babies learn to trust that the world is a safe place for them if their needs are met by a consistent and loving caregiver. If not, babies may develop a sense of distrust of others and the world around them (Erikson, 1950, p. 247).

Stage 2: Autonomy Vs Shame and Doubt

This stage occurs between the ages of 12 months to approximately 3 years. At this stage, children begin to develop a sense of autonomy and self-control as they learn to perform basic tasks such as walking and using the toilet. Adult support in a child's exploration and independence will result in a

sense of autonomy or control over themselves, while excessive criticism or tight control can create feelings of shame and self-doubt in the children (Erikson, 1950, p. 251).

Stage 3: Initiative Vs Guilt

This stage occurs between the ages of 3 to 5 years old. Children at this stage begin to take initiative in play and other activities. They develop a sense of initiative and self-confidence to act, take risks, and initiate activities independently. If children are often scolded or punished for what they do, they might feel guilty for wanting to try things on their own (Erikson, 1950, p. 255).

Stage 4: Industry vs Inferiority

This stage occurs between the ages of 6 - 12 years old. Children at this stage begin to focus on achievements and skills in school and other activities. They develop a sense of competence and confidence in their abilities when they succeed. Failure or lack of encouragement can lead to feelings of inferiority and inadequacy (Erikson, 1950, p. 258).

Stage 5: Identity vs Role Confusion

The identity vs. role confusion stage is the fifth of Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development, highlighting the importance of adolescence in shaping an individual's self-identity and life direction. According to Erikson, what is dangerous at this stage is role confusion in adolescents (Erikson, 1950, p. 262).

Stage 6: Intimacy vs Isolation

This stage is experienced by young adults, namely aged 18 - 35 years. At this stage, individuals seek deep and intimate relationships with others. Success in this stage leads to warm and loving relationships, while failure can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness (Erikson, 1950, p. 263).

Stage 7: Generativity vs Stagnation

At this stage, individuals in middle adulthood, namely ages 36 - 65 years old, seek to contribute to society and help guide the next generation through work, childcare, or community activities. Success in this stage results in a sense of productivity and satisfaction, whereas failure can lead to feelings of stagnation and lack of purpose (Erikson, 1950, p. 266).

Stage 8: Ego Integrity vs Despair

In this stage, the late adults reflect on their lives and strive to achieve a sense of integrity and satisfaction about what they have achieved. Success produces a sense of wisdom and fulfillment, while failure can lead to regret and despair (Erikson, 1950, p. 268).

Identity crisis is a core part of Erik Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development theory, Identity vs Role Confusion. Erikson (1968, p. 91) explains that the psychological aspect of adolescence involves an "identity crisis," in which individuals reassess and reinterpret their childhood selves while beginning to shape the adult they aspire to become (as cited in Altschul et al., 2006, p. 1155). At this stage, individuals not only reflect on their past experiences, but also imagine and experiment with possible future identities. This process often involves questioning the values, beliefs, and roles learned during childhood, as well as exploring new perspectives and opportunities that align with one's goals. The "crisis" that Erikson refers to is not always negative; it represents a period of exploration and transition to form a stable sense of identity in adulthood.

Individuals need to go through certain stages of identity crisis before they can fully acquire and comprehend their identity. During adolescence, identity crises are not only obstacles, but also serve as important experiences that shape a person's personal growth. When adolescents are faced with challenges that force them to question who they are and what they believe in, they begin to draw on their emotional, cognitive, and social resources to move toward a clearer understanding of themselves. The crisis is now recognized as a necessary turning point, a critical moment when development must go in one direction or another by mobilizing resources for further growth, recovery, and differentiation (Erikson, 1968, p. 16).

Identity crisis is an event in human development that usually occurs when an individual begins to question his or her identity and role in life. Identity crisis primarily happens in adolescence since it is the time of planning for adulthood (Erikson, 1968, p. 17). Adolescence is a transition period between childhood and adulthood which involves various changes such as biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes which generally begin in the age range of 10 to 20 years (Santr洛克, 2016, p. 16). Biological changes involve growing physically, changes in hormones, and reaching sexual maturity. In terms of thinking, adolescents start to think in more complex and logical ways, develop a sense of who they are, and start to think about what is right and wrong in society. At the same time, socially and emotionally, they try to figure out who they are, spend more time with friends than family, and start to become interested in relationships. All these changes influence how adolescents see themselves and how they connect with the world around them. They also might be more eager to experiment with different activities to understand and define themselves better. Therefore, adolescents who are experiencing an identity crisis often face social challenges, particularly in their family and community. Some adolescents may experience a lot of turmoil at around 16 to 20 years of age, but others may have a relatively organized transition from adolescence to adulthood (Rubins, 1968, p. 37).

In the fifth stage of development according to Erikson, identity formation is highly dependent on the presence of supportive parents and a supportive social environment (Sobh, 2020, p. 22). This emphasizes that during adolescence, individuals are highly dependent on emotional support, guidance, and acceptance from both their families and the wider community. Supportive parents can provide stability, reinforce positive values, and offer a safe space for self-expression, while a supportive social environment—such as friends, teachers, and community members—can validate adolescents' experiences and aspirations. Without such support, adolescents may face greater challenges in exploring different roles, making important life decisions, and developing a strong sense of identity.

According to Erikson, in the midst of rapid changes in their lives, adolescents are going through a lot of changes in their lives and are trying to figure out who they are. They frequently have to deal with issues that were present in their childhood again. It is possible for them to view those around them, including their parents, teachers or friends who are trying to assist them in some way. They do this as a way to check where their personal limits are (Erikson, 1950, p. 262). Adolescents often test these boundaries as part of their identity exploration, which can manifest in risky behaviors. This process is influenced by their social environment, cultural background, and personal experiences. When they face conflicting expectations from different social groups, they may experience confusion or uncertainty about their values and goals. These conflicts can strengthen identity crises, leading them to re-examine their beliefs, ideals, and relationships in order to form a complete identity. To overcome this crisis, adolescents need to be able to find value and understand themselves better. This ability according to Erikson is called fidelity, which is defined as "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems" (Erikson, 1994, p. 125). Fidelity is a sign of the stability of an adolescent's identity, so Erikson considers this to be the end of the identity crisis in adolescents. However, not all adolescents make it through the identity search stage successfully. Some of them actually experience role confusion, which is a lack of clarity in understanding who they are and what role they want to take on. This condition can be influenced by various interrelated factors.

In general, the factors that influence identity crises in adolescents can be divided into internal and external factors. Internal factors include physical changes such as puberty and hormonal development, as well as cognitive and emotional maturity that influence how adolescents view themselves and how they interpret the world around them. Meanwhile, external factors include family relationships, peer influence, societal demands, and traumatic events. According to Zaviera, trauma refers to the psychological impact of past events, especially those that are negative, painful, or distressful. Such events often trigger specific emotional responses in a person, which then influence

their behavior and reactions to similar situations in the future (as cited in Khofizh & Murtiningrum, 2025, p. 2). This means that traumatic experiences in the past not only leave emotional scars, but can also shape a person's mindset and defense mechanisms. This unbalance or conflict between these internal and external factors can lead to more uncertainty, pushing adolescents to go through a deeper period of self-discovery. If these two factors are in sync, the identity formation process can proceed more smoothly; however, if there is conflict, there is a risk of a prolonged or more intense identity crisis.

Leftovers, is a novel by Laura Wiess which tells about the lives of two teenage girls named Blair and Ardith. Blair and Ardith are two best friends who come from families with different backgrounds. Ardith is a teenage girl who was born not into a family, but into a chaos disguised as a home. Ardith never really felt like she had a home. Although she physically lives with her family, the house is more like a controlled free zone, where wild parties often take place without restriction. Her mother was too busy being a "slash mom" dressing up too flashy, being too friendly to her brother's male friends. Her father, an old man who likes to brag about past glories, uses the narrow hallway as a place to flirt with visiting young girls. In the middle of the chaotic household, Ardith grew up with insecurities, shaped by bitter experiences and haunting fears. She locks her room inside and out, hides her desire to become a podiatrist, and tries to protect her body from attracting the attention of those who should protect her. But it was only enough to survive, not to live. The chaos does not stop at home though, as the younger sister of the "party kid," Ardith is seen as an individual with the reputation of a broken home. In the eyes of the boys, Ardith's body is just an object to be teased and touched. While in the eyes of the other girls, she is "the weird girl" for being too introverted and too different. Even when she keeps her distance, wears loose clothing, and restricts herself, the stares and indecent comments keep coming her way. Instead of getting support from her social circle, Ardith gets left out and is never really recognized. Ardith, who already felt the need to change her situation, slowly began to rebel against the wrong values in her family and the people who intimidate her at school. She is angry, but not out of hatred, but because she knew what was happening is wrong, and no one ever cared to fix it. From reporting a wild party held at her house to the police, to fighting back against the bullying she was getting at school, to reporting the crime her older brother committed against her friend. This study examines the factors that can influence adolescents experiencing identity crises using Erik Erikson's theory to analyze the dialogues and monologues in the novel *Leftovers*.

METHOD

The type of research which is used in this study is qualitative research methodology. "Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena. That is to say, it aims to help us to understand the social world in which we live and why things are the way they are" (Hanock et al., 2009, p. 7). From this statement it can be said that qualitative research can be used to help us understand the social world in which we live and why certain circumstances or things happen as we observe them. The qualitative research process includes data collection, analysis, interpretation, and report writing. Therefore, qualitative research is an appropriate research method to analyze literary texts, including researching conflicts in *Leftovers*. Qualitative methods not only focus on what happened, but also try to explain why and how a phenomenon occurs. Thus, qualitative research aims to provide richer and more contextual insight into the complexity of social life. The research design in this study can be described as an arrangement condition to collect and analyze data taken from the novel *Leftovers* written by Laura Wiess.

This study took four steps to collect data, namely: 1) reading the novel, 2) identifying the data, 3) classifying the data, and 4) reducing the data. The first step was reading the novel, in this case, *Leftovers*. This stage aimed to obtain the elements necessary for analysis, namely understanding the plot and content of the novel, determining the appropriate topic, analyzing the relationship between

the topic and data in the form of sentences, dialogues, or terms in the novel, and concluding the results of the analysis. After reading the book several times, data identification related to the topic was carried out. The data identified at this stage were important pieces of information relevant to the research topic, including dialogues, monologues, and related sentences. Furthermore, the author underlined quotes and noted the pages from the novel to facilitate data identification and provide further explanation in identifying relevant evidence. The next step was data classification, at this stage the data had been classified based on the problem formulation, in this case the factors contributes identity crisis of Ardit. The last step was data reduction, the process of removing data that did not have a correlation to answering the problem. It needed to be stored in the most efficient form by using relevant techniques so that the study could be presented properly.

The data for this journal were obtained from primary and secondary sources. The primary source as the main source was taken from the object itself, the *Leftovers* novel. The data contained in this book were in the form of sentences, dialog, and terms related to the research topic. While the secondary sources as supporting data were taken from international journals, essays, articles, websites, and books related to the topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Factors Contributes to Identity Crisis in Ardit

In the fifth of the eight stages of psychosocial development, Erikson focused on the developmental stage of an adolescent called identity vs role confusion. According to Erikson, what is dangerous at this stage is role confusion in adolescents (Erikson, 1950, p. 262). This condition can be influenced by various factors. In accordance with Erikson's theory, the novel *Leftovers* found that Ardit experiences an identity crisis that is influenced by various factors, both internal and external. Internally, she experienced difficulties with self-perception and emotional uncertainty during adolescence. Externally, a lack of support and negative social influences weakened her self-confidence. Together, these factors exacerbated role confusion and discouraged the formation of a stable identity.

The Internal Factors Contributes to Identity Crisis in Ardit

Physical & Cognitive Changes

Erikson in his book mentions that the growing and developing youths, faced with this physiological revolution within them, and with tangible adult tasks ahead of them are primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills with the occupational models of the day (Erikson, 1968, p. 235). Based on Erikson's theory, the quotation below reflected the internal factors that influence to identity crisis in Ardit.

“That’s when you start realizing your “firsts” aren’t going to be the way you dreamed they would, and that you’re feeling lost and stupid, inching your way around a whole new world. **Each day brings a different worry like hairy armpits, periods, and BO, and wondering if you really are only worth your cup size. You start keeping your opinions to yourself because they might be it, but it seems safer to blend in than stand out.** And yet you want to be noticed, but only by being the-same-but-different, and nothing about that confuses you. The reactions to your new body do, though; you strut and show for guys in your school, but shudder when an old man leers, because you don’t know how to twitch his crawling gaze off your skin.” (Wiess, 2008, p. 8).

The quotation above shows the situation when Ardit enters her teenage years where she experiences various changes from physical and hormonal. The phrase “You start keeping your opinions to yourself because they might be it, but it seems safer to blend in than stand out.” Shows that Ardit feels anxious about the views of others on her. Ardit wants to be able to express herself, but sometimes she does not feel safe to show it. This is in line with Erikson's opinion on how a human's biological changes when entering adolescence have an impact on their psychological and

social. Adolescents become very concerned with what others see in them compared to what they feel about themselves. Some of them can also struggle to express their identity due to social pressures, so they are stuck between being themselves and pretending to be accepted.

The External Factors Contributes to Identity Crisis in Ardith

Family

The role of parents as role models depends on the quality of the relationship, the consistency of the values taught, and their ability to be positive examples for their children. The values held by parents can also influence adolescents' perceptions of how their families treat them. If they are treated badly by their families, their self-confidence and carelessness will decrease, questioning what to do with their lives, and affecting their minds, souls, and characters in social life. In the novel *Leftovers*, family is one of the factors influencing the identity crisis experienced by the main character, Ardith. As quoted in *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* Erikson argued that some parents have a high awareness of social class as well as a desire to maintain their position. In order to maintain the image of being rich, classy and happy, they do not hesitate to ignore honest feelings and rational thought. They even force their children to pretend to enjoy social roles that suit the norms they have set (Erikson, 1968, p. 176-177). Based on Erikson's theory, the quotation below reflected the family factors that influence to identity crisis in Ardith.

“You keep your dream of becoming a podiatrist to yourself because the one time you mentioned it, **your mother said, “Why?” and your father smirked and said, “I should have been a gynecologist,” and your brother laughed and said, “Great, a freak with a foot fetish.”** Your older sister is a financial advisor and never comes home to visit. You wish you could never come home to visit, too, but the only place to go is Blair’s and she’s been too 41 distracted by moving and some kind of private misery to offer you sanctuary.” (Wiess, 2008, p. 33).

The quotation above shows when Ardith tells her family member that she wants to be a podiatrist, but her family underestimates and even mocks her dreams and desires. So she felt she had to bury that dream because she didn't get support from her family. The phrase “your mother said, “Why?” and your father smirked and said, “I should have been a gynecologist,” and your brother laughed and said, “Great, a freak with a foot fetish.”, as a form reaction or response given by her family to Ardith shows the family's inability or unwillingness to accept life choices that are different from their expectations. Ardith's family seems to reject her aspirations that are considered different from the social class standards they have. This lack of support from the family caused Ardith to experience alienation, emotional dissatisfaction and a desire to leave home like her older sister as a response to her identity crisis.

Peer Group

For adolescents, having relationships with peers is one of the most important things in their lives. Sometimes adolescents can spend more time with their peers than their family. Through peers, adolescents can learn and gain the values of life outside the home. In addition, they can also gain recognition and acceptance from their peers. According to Erikson, adolescents can also be very clannish, and cruel in excluding all those who are 'different', in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and talents, and often in small aspects such as dress and gestures that are used as signs of membership in a group (Erikson, 1950, p. 236). Those who are not accepted into a group will have feelings of loneliness and experience social pressure. The pressure they experience to conform to be accepted in a particular group can cause social anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and identity confusion in adolescents. Based on Erikson's theory, the quotation below reflected the peer group can be one of the factors that influence to identity crisis in Ardith.

“Blair gives you the bottle and her clothes. She spreads her towel on the grass, sits, and holds up her arms for her stuff. You hand it over and spread your towel beside hers. The night is cool, so you hug your knees. You hear the metallic crackle as Blair fumbles with the cap and watch her pale throat arch as she tilts the bottle and drinks. “Ack,” she says, scowling and rubbing her nose. “Sour bubbles. You should have warned me.” “It wouldn’t have stopped you,” you say, accepting the bottle. “Well, no,” she

says. "But then at least you could have said, I told you so." **You pass the wine back and forth until it's empty and there's a dark sort of determination about the way you're drinking.**" (Wiess, 2008, p. 26).

The quotation above shows a moment when Ardith and her best friend Blair were hanging out in the swimming pool. They share clothes, drinks, and create their own emotional space. The act of giving each other wine and the phrase "You pass the wine back and forth until it's empty and there's a dark sort of determination about the way you're drinking" signifies a form of togetherness as well as an escape from emotional distress or suffering. In this case, Ardith and her friend experienced a kind of social exclusion where they felt they did not fit in with the rest of the group of friends, thus creating a safe space for themselves.

Another quotation that also shows that peer group around Ardith has influenced the identity crisis of her is when she was given an identity label that did not match who she is by her friends at school.

"Well, except for my family, but I figured I could always move away like my sister did and just pretend they didn't exist. Now I can't even do that. For a lot of reasons, but also because Blair's new slut label was rubbing off on me, too. **In one morning I went from being a very private nobody, to gay, to a slut's best friend.** And if I hadn't agreed to go out with Gary, I still would have been called a lezzie ho. I hated it. All of it. The labeling, the attention, the games." (Wiess, 2008, p. 134).

The quotation above shows that Ardith experienced pressure from her schoolmates. She feels like she is losing control over how others perceive her. The phrase "In one morning I went from being a very private nobody, to gay, to a slut's best friend." came about not because of actual actions, but because of stereotypes and gossip in the neighborhood. In this case, the labels Ardith got were a form of her friends' refusal to be friends with her who were considered different. As Erikson mentioned, adolescents can form groups according to their standards and do not hesitate to exclude anyone who does not fit them. So those who do not fit in, like Ardith can experience psychological distress and role confusion in their social life.

Traumatic Events

According to Erikson, trauma experienced in childhood or adolescence tends to be common, especially if it involves serious physical injury during the Oedipal stage (ages 3-6 years) or early puberty (Erikson, 1968, p. 179). Some of these experiences can interfere with the process of identity development in a person, especially adolescents. This becomes a kind of "psychological scar" that limits their ability to face developmental challenges later on, such as the transition to adulthood. Based on Erikson's theory, the quotation below reflected the traumatic events that influence to identity crisis in Ardith.

"You pee for what seems like forever, **pad into your bedroom, and lock the door**, listening to your brother stalk the hall and curse you for being a stupid bitch who doesn't have the sense to drink at home. He body slams the door and **you slip the screwdriver out from under your pillow, just in case.** You sneak away early the next morning, stepping over your brother slumped sleeping outside your door and weaving through the overage rejects sacked out in your TV room." (Wiess, 2008, p. 38).

The quotation above shows the situation in Ardith house that is full of verbal violence and potential physical threats. This can be shown by the phrase "pad into your bedroom, and lock the door" and "you slip the screwdriver out from under your pillow, just in case" as a means of self-defense after receiving threats from her older brother, showing that she lived in unsafe conditions even in her own home. This quote shows how Ardith experienced trauma that may have been rooted in her life since before she hit puberty. Ardith's psychological trauma can certainly disrupt her identity formation process. The phrase "sneak away early the next morning," shows that she does not feel

like she has a safe place in her own family and it is a condition that goes against the basic needs of adolescents to feel loved, accepted, and protected.

CONCLUSION

Leftovers is a novel written by Laura Wiess and published in 2008. The novel tells the story of a teenage girl who is searching for her identity. This novel highlights the factors that influence the adolescent identity crisis experienced by Ardith, the main character. Ardith was going through an identity crisis that was influenced by several internal and external factors. The internal factors experienced by Ardith come from physical and psychological changes in himself. In addition, there are three of the three factors that are fulfilled that influence the identity crisis experienced by Ardith. First, when Ardith's family did not support her dream of becoming a podiatrist and mocked her instead. Second, Ardith's social life, where she and her curious friends tried adult activities such as drinking alcohol and smoking, and Ardith was excluded and labeled as a lesbian by her schoolmates. Third, the traumatic experience Ardith endured at the hands of her own older brother, which led her to always lock her door when sleeping and keep a screwdriver under her pillow as a form of self-defense.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Our deepest gratitude is addressed to our advisor for this paper for the invaluable guidance, continuous support, and constructive feedback throughout the process of writing this final project.

REFERENCES

Altschul, I., Oyserman, D., & Bybee, D. (2006). Racial-Ethnic Identity in Mid-Adolescence: Content and Change as Predictors of Academic Achievement. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1155–1169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00926.x>

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Erikson, E. H. (1994). *Insight and Responsibility*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Hancock, B., Ockleford, E., & Windridge, K. (2009). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research The NIHR Research Design Service for Yorkshire & the Humber*. <https://dl.icdst.org/pdfs/files3/315d0c3a18c9426593c9f5019506a335.pdf>

Khofizh, Muhammad Rifki, and Afina Murtiningrum. "ANALYSIS THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE ON CHARACTER ANAKIN SKYWALKER IN STAR WARS: ROTS (2005)." *Jurnal Pendidikan Kreativitas Pembelajaran* 7.2 (2025).

Rubins, J. L. (1968). The problem of the acute identity crisis in adolescence. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 28(1-2), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01873619>

Santrock, J. W. (2016). *Adolescence* (16th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Sobh, Z. M. (2020). *Identity Among Adolescent Arab-Americans in Dearborn, Michigan: An Eriksonian Perspective*. Deepblue.lib.umich.edu. <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/156396>

Wiess, L. (2008). *Leftovers*. Simon and Schuster.