Article

The Pursuit of Belonging: Exploring Identity and Relationships in *Normal People* Through the Need to Belong Perspective

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Abstract: Sally Rooney's *Normal People* is a significant coming-of-age novel set in contemporary Ireland that intricately explores not only changing social dynamics between Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan but also reflects the multifaceted challenges confronted by contemporary youngsters in Ireland. This study uses textual analysis to explore the deep themes of identity and belonging that run throughout the experiences of the main characters. Moreover, this paper examines the novel through the lens of social psychology, an interdisciplinary field of study, by using Roy F. Baumeister's Need to Belong Theory. The study clarifies Connell's strong desire to fit in with his university peers, emphasising his pursuit of enhanced self-worth and self-perception. The research study highlights the characters' anticipation of social acceptance and validation, which helps in the major transitions in their lives. Ultimately, the research serves as an exploration of individuals' desire to belong to a group within the landscape due to economic disparity and shifting of identities.

Introduction

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* explores the relationship between the protagonists Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan in the social background of contemporary Irish society. This paper explores the novel through the lens of social psychological theory, Need to Belong by Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995). The Need to Belong Theory is a significant concept in social psychology that highlights the intense human

motivation to create and maintain profound interpersonal relationships. The narrative analyses the emotional connection between Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan. The primary characters are classmates Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron. She comes from a wealthy family because her parents are solicitors. Despite coming from a wealthy family, Marianne lacks love and lives in a strict, irritated environment. On the other hand, Connell is from a working-class family; his mother cleans Marianne's white mansion. Connell's desire to belong to a specific social group at university makes him frustrated, and he suffers from internal conflicts, anxieties, and insecurity. The emotional support in their relationship helps them to overcome their insecurities and low self-perception. Connell experiences peer pressure when he prioritises the opinions of his friends and peers over his own emotions and desires. This highlights Baumeister's assertion that social validation and social acceptance can influence individual choices and emotional well-being. On the other hand, the character of Marianne suffers from a sense of isolation and loneliness. Her personality is a reflection of these aspects of her family. She has no friends and has begun to distance herself from her peers. She comes across as a chilly and smiling individual. She is emotionally mistreated and discouraged by her widowed mother. She prefers her toxic son, Alan. Despite this, Marianne takes preference over her toxic son, Alan. He teases Marianne with demeaning and vulgar language, which lowers her self-esteem. Having spent her early years alone, she desired to be surrounded by individuals who appreciate and accept her. Her intellectuality and assertiveness isolate her from her fellow students. So, she desires to comfort herself by being with Connell, who heals her anxieties and insecurities without judging her. The formation of social bonds is the central concept, where Connell and Marianne's bond transforms from being a secretive relationship in high school to a complex relationship in university. The transition in their lives is reflected in their personal lives, where they entered into numerous relationships that reveal their love for each other. Connell and Marianne revive their emotional bond while attending a memorial service for Marianne's father. Their relationship is still challenging as Marianne is in an abusive relationship with Jamie, and Connell dates another student. These incidents demonstrate how external pressures affect their relationship. This transition refers to Baumeister's idea that relationships are not static but rather dynamic entities that can be cherished or perish over time based on emotional support and motivation. This research study highlights the complex human mind and intricate interpersonal relationships that prevail in contemporary society. The study emphasises the individual's desire for belonging and emotional support to cope with external anxieties and complexities.

Literature Review

The archetypal aspects of Persona and Shadow in the main characters of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* are examined in this research paper. The term 'persona' describes the mask that characters present in order to show themselves to the outside world in a different way. Connell's persona is that of a confident, academically accomplished student, which enhances his reputation with his peers. On the other hand, despite her underlying social discomfort, Marianne, who comes from a frustrated family background, presents an image of intelligence and calmness. Characters'

repressed or denied emotions and feelings are examined in the Shadow aspect. At first, Connell's inability to stand up for Marianne when his friends make fun of her represents his shadow and his inner conflicts. Marianne's harsh treatment of her history teacher is also a reflection of her shadow.

Del Rio's study analyses how the novel represents class and gender in the millennial era, with a particular focus on *Normal People* by Sally Rooney in the context of recessionary Ireland. It examines the experiences of the younger generation in Ireland following Postmodernism, emphasising their sense of uncertainty and displacement. The relationship between personal identities and the political and economic systems that influence them is carefully examined in the story. The study also highlights important social issues that affect class relations and material power, such as Dublin's high cost of living and housing problems. By examining these topics, the study shows how Rooney's writing reflects the difficulties of managing relationships with others in the context of economic challenges and social expectations.

Merve Sarikaya Sen's paper explores the concept of paradoxical normality in the attitudes and actions of characters in *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. In particular, examines the relationships that are relevant to the emphasis on how Marianne emphasises the individual's healthy relationship with Connell despite her desire for an abusive and anxious partner. Because of trauma, she uses silence as a coping mechanism and focuses on her emotionally unavailable family as a motivation to find peace. She prefers to hold onto the traumatic memories from her previous relationships rather than seeking a healthy relationship with Connell, ultimately embracing the wounds that prevent her from getting a meaningful connection with him. According to the review of previous studies, there are not many studies in the field of social psychological research that have been published. Research on the lives of modern Irish people and the use of social psychology theories to highlight emotional motivation, relationship deprivation, and self-perception among people was rare.

Research Methodology

This research study applied qualitative research methods, focusing on the character's desire for belonging, motivation, and social validation. The qualitative approach explores the description, narrative, and textual details. The data was taken from Sally Rooney's Normal People. This study explores the novel through the lens of the Need to Belong Theory by Roy Baumeister. This is a social psychological theory that emphasises the psychological need of an individual to belong to a particular social group. Fundamental Motivation in the Need to Belong theory refers to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships and to the inherent human drive to be created. This theory considers belongings as a significant psychological need for the well-being of an individual in life.

Characterisation and Identity Formation:

Marianne's academic advice on Connell's life reveals her social bond with him. He has planned to apply for law in Galway. However, she has rightly pointed out that he has no interest in the law. So, he enrols himself in the English subject. She has seen

him reading communist ideologies and novels in school and also at home. Their relationship advances their academic and professional objectives. They can establish their own identities within the social group thanks to this. His choice of English helps him recognise his value, which enables him to perform well in presentations and group discussions. "He has put down Law in Galway, but now he thinks that he might change it, because, as Marianne has pointed out, he has no interest in Law." (Rooney 27) Marianne wants him to choose something that interests him. He has excellent knowledge of literature. "You should study English, says Marianne. Do you think I should, or are you joking? I think you should. It is the only subject you enjoy in school, and you spend all your free time reading." (Rooney 27)

Marianne wants him to enhance his self-perception. He has confronted psychological anxieties in the initial stages of social interactions and presentations in the seminar. Connell joins Marianne's circle of friends to avoid low self-esteem or feelings of insecurity and to get along with others.

Emotional Consequences of Belongings

Marriane experiences low self-perception because of her family. She feels like an unworthy person whom her family and friends do not love. She has inner conflicts and a frustrated childhood, which reflect in her entire personality. She has never received love and care in her family circle, which has made her appear cold towards others.

> "I do not know why I cannot make people love me. I think there was something wrong with me when I was born. Lots of people love you, Marianne. Okay? Your family and friends love you." (Rooney152)

Marianne's feeling of being unworthy in her life was changed by the arrival of Connell, who was available for her to share her emotional aspects. She felt safe and calm. Able around Connell's sore over, Connell's emotional connection makes her secure and empowered, and she develops positive self-perception. Moreover, there is a significant transformation in the character of Marian's University life. Her attachment to him helps to create a sense of belonging and comfort. They share their vulnerability towards each other. Furthermore, he heals the inner conflicts and childhood traumas in Marianne's mind, rejuvenating her, and continues to be her emotional support in her life. In addition, they have corrected each other and defended each other in public. They are each other's support system. They know their value and support each other before their friends and peers.

Connell came into the life of Marianne when she was at her lowest, where she had low self-esteem and self-worth. When he got placed in the MFA in creative writing program, Marianne never felt low or asked Connell to deny his offer because she had found happiness and value in Connell, which would subsequently lead her. Marianne's self-perception changed over the period.

She closes her eyes. He probably will not come back, she thinks. Or he will, differently. What they have now, they can never have back again. However, for her, the pain of loneliness will be nothing to the pain that she used to feel of being unworthy.

She felt her goodness like a gift, and now it belongs to the giver. Meanwhile, his life opens in all directions at once. They have done a lot of good for each other. (Rooney 218) Her transition from teenage to adulthood is tremendous. Marianne wanted her lover to succeed in life and reveals that letting go of one's loved one for their happiness is, again, one way of loving them.

Social Bond Formation

Social bonds refer to the formation of connections with one another, which emotional support, shared experiences, and other factors can influence. This enhances the meaningful relationship that contributes to the mental well-being of an individual. Marianne has always loved and supported Connell before her friends and family. She has defended Connell in his absence. "He is not even smart! One of her male friends exclaimed the other night when Connell was not there. He is smarter than I am, said Marianne. (Rooney 80) She knew his worth and never wanted him to feel low about himself because of his introverted behaviour towards new people in university. She encourages him to upgrade in personality and career, irrespective of his class and financial background. Connell likes Marianne's support and the way she praises his intelligence in front of his friends, which makes him feel loved and respected at the university. "He likes it when Marianne tells her friends—people who are judges and government ministers, people who went to inordinately expensive schools—that she is the smartest person they will ever meet." (Rooney 59). She helps him overcome his inferiority complex in his university life, where she introduces him to her rich friends and colleagues, which helps in enhancing his character: the shared values and career goals, her goals for personal development.

Factors Affecting the Strength of Social Bond

Class Differences

Connell feels himself lower than Marianne financially and has an inferiority complex with insecurity about his class.

> I guess we are from very different backgrounds, class-wise. I do not think about it much, she said. She quickly added, "So, sorry, an ignorant thing to say." Maybe I should think about it more. You do not consider me your working-class friend? She gave a smile that was more like a grimace and said, I am sad. I am sad that we got to know each other because your mother works for my family. (Rooney 147)

Relationships in the small western town are simpler than in a city like Dublin, where people have huge social expectations. It was tough for Connell to adjust to the new life in Dublin. Meanwhile, Marianne loved and cared for Connell and never cared about his social class. All she wanted in their relationship was his mutual love and respect. Connell's inferiority complex makes him hesitant to share his own opinions. He observes his peers, who are expressing themselves in the intellectual seminars. The social status and financial position of his fellow students make him feel like a loser. Connell finds a huge transition because of the outer world.

> Unable to form such straightforward views or express them with any force, Connell initially felt a sense of crushing inferiority to his fellow students, as if he had upgraded himself accidentally to an intellectual level far above his own, where he had to strain to make sense of the most basic premises. (Rooney 63)

Connell tries to overcome his inferiority complex and complex in intellectual debates and forums, which boosts his confidence. Fellow students encouraged him to raise his profile at the university.

Impact of Peer Pressure

Connell feels privileged to be associated with Rachel, who is regarded as the most popular girl in school. This desire stems from his insecurities about his social standing. "In April, Connell told her he was taking Rachel Moran to the Debs. Marianne was sitting on the side of his bed at the time, acting very cold and humorous, which made him awkward" (Rooney 58). By dating Rachel, a famous girl in school, he believes he can seek social validation and fit in better with his peers, despite his working-class background. He wants to belong to the social group and wants the attention of his peers. He knew that revealing his relationship with Marianne would lower his status in the school, where Marianne was considered a loner. She does not fit into the social and beauty standards of society. It leads to Marianne's ostracisation from others. Some peers considered her 'the ugliest girl in the school.' Marianne wants Connell to be her comfort person, who listens to her problems in her life. She does not expect anything from him except an emotional connection. His decision to ask Rachel to the debs reveals his struggle with identity and belonging. It reveals how social dynamics can influence personal relationships, leading to choices that disregard emotional consequences for those involved. He wants to elevate his social status by showcasing Rachel as his partner in Debs.

Isolation and Alienation in the Lives of Connell and Marianne

Connell has experienced a strange sense of isolation and loneliness in his school life; He finds it appealing to everyone in the school.

> I just do not have many people with whom I click, he says. You know, I struggle with that. Do you think that is a new problem, or is it something familiar to you? It is familiar, I suppose. I would say in school, I sometimes had that feeling of isolation or whatever. However, people liked me and everything. Here, I feel like people do not like me that much. (Rooney 179)

However, he does not need to express himself to get attention because of his popularity. On the other hand, hatred in the university, where people do not like him. He struggles to fit into the social group, which has significant social and financial disparities.

Consequences of Satiation and Substitution

Satiation is a reduced motivation to seek new relationships once an individual has enough meaningful social connections. Connell and Marianne have an intense relationship that satisfies that desire to belong to certain social bonds. Over the bonds

of time, Connell understands their physical and emotional intimacy, which hints at his own need, which makes him feel contented. This makes him seek additional relationships or friendships in his life. They are both comfortable and pleasant. Marianne's motivation and advice to Connell make him focus on academics and career goals.

Substituting the ability to replace lost social bonds with new ones. This concept is crucial when examining how Connell and Marianne cope with changes in their relationship and social dynamics. Marianne and Connell have parted ways after their school education in Sligo. They have entered into a new phase of life, where they, in their emotional emptiness, have tried to replace their partner with others. Marianne has a vast number of friends who would fit in with her social standards. Connell tries to substitute Marianne with Helen at university and finds her to be super for him. However, he did not sense the deep emotional connection and belonging towards her, which made him feel low. On the other hand, Marianne has fallen for a few men, but they were not emotionally available to her and treated her body as property and abused her. There was a lack of love and social bonds in her new relationships and friendships. There was no transparency in their relationship, which made her lose interest in it. The novel explores the concepts of satiation, substitution, and signification, which signify personal growth in the lives of Marianne and Connell.

Relationship Deprivation and Its Emotional Consequences

Relationship deprivation refers to the lack of satisfying relationships, which can lead to various emotional and psychological consequences. Marianne's Isolation from the social group is seen throughout her high school years; she experiences significant relationship deprivation due to her social isolation. Her peers ostracise her, leading to feelings of loneliness. Antisocial psychology. This is vividly portrayed in her interactions at school, where she is bullied and excluded from relationships. She experienced a profound sense of alienation from her classmates. Marianne confronted prominent relationship deprivation because of her social isolation. She was bullied and body shamed by frustrated Marianne, who experiences alienation in anxiety, but she does not care about her. She was body-shamed and bullied by others. On the other hand, Connell hides their emotional connection by prioritising, which feels like relationship deprivation. She experiences loneliness and worthlessness in both her school life and personal life.

Conclusion

The research paper encapsulates Rooney's portrayal of human emotion and their desire for belonging in character. The social-psychological aspects of human nature are focused on in the research study. The individual's desire for motivation, emotional support, self-perception, and peer pressure were the prominent features in understanding the psyche of the human mind. The formation of the social bond is the relationship of Connell and Marianne using Baumeister's framework that highlights the complexities of belonging: the complex social formation and psychological consequences of the interactions. The concept of belonging serves as the central theme

in the research study, which focuses on the characters' desire to fit into the social group in order to elevate their status in terms of academic and career goals.

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