

## Sociopragmatics of Identity Crisis in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

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### Abstract

This paper studies the identity crisis in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). While Danticat's works have been studied with much focus on their literary depiction of identity issues, little has been done on the role of language in depicting the identity crises her characters face. Therefore, this study examines how Danticat's characters negotiate their identities and social positions in her debut novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). Eleven excerpts are extracted from the text for a detailed and rigorous textual analysis, and a sociopragmatic approach is adopted with a combination of Harre's positioning and Mey's pragmatic act theories as its frameworks. This shows how characters use words and discourses to negotiate their positions and identities in sociopragmatic interactions. The findings partly reveal that the identity crises faced by the characters in the novel are induced by their migratory experiences and cultural challenges, with the resultant effects of disillusionment, loneliness, loss of personhood, trauma, depression, and low self-esteem.

**Keywords:** *Identity Crisis, Sociopragmatics, Positioning, Migration, Pragmatic Act.*

### INTRODUCTION

Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian American novelist and short story writer. Her debut novel, *Breath Eyes, Memory*, (1994), our primary text for this study, focuses on national identity, violation of black women's bodies, victimization, trauma, and violence. It dwells on migration and identity crises, exploring the relationship between the protagonist, Sophie Caco, and her mother Martine. Sophie, who was brought up by her aunt Tante Atie in Croix-des-Rosets, Haiti, migrates to New York to be united with her mother. There in New York, she experiences identity crises when she gets to discover her past. Tante, Martine, and Martine's mother also suffer their share of identity crises. The deep family secrets about Sophie's life are spellbinding. The Haitian tradition of testing a girl to ascertain her virginity, which is passed down to women by women, is traumatizing. Sophie decides to break free from this ordeal and misery by putting an end to it. The socio-cultural practices in Haiti reveal the injustice meted out to women, who are somewhat helpless and are subjected to harsh and obnoxious traditional practices. Therefore, this study addresses the question of pattern(s) of identity issues which the characters manifest and the sociopragmatic features that aid the espousal of identity crises vis-à-vis the characters' position-taking in the selected text.

The relationship between Sophie and her mother is initially awkward. Sophie, who is a product of rape, reminds the mother of that ugly incident, and her identity is in shambles as her self-worth is lost. However, Martine manages to win Sophie's love, and they try to have a healthy mother-daughter relationship. Sophie finds love, and she tries to live through motherhood.

Martine gets pregnant for her lover, but her pregnancy reminds her of the rape many years ago. This finally breaks her, as she is unable to scale through the entire process. She loses her mind and finally takes her life. To a large extent, this study enhances a better understanding of migration and identity crises from the sociopragmatic perspective of language use and it is significant in the area of diasporic discourse in the humanities in terms of intercultural communication in Danticat's *Breath Eyes Memory* in particular and in diasporic literature in general.

### Identity Crisis

"In contemporary discourses, the lives of migrants are often marginalised and silenced. For this reason, bringing the theme of migrants' identities to the foreground in literary research appears to be increasingly important" (Dudek, 2022, p. 82). In diasporic literature, the identity of migrants in their host countries and their attendant conflict have become major areas of interest that have attracted the attention of scholars and academics. Creative writers have devoted their time and creativity to documenting migration and its consequences for the identity of migrant characters in their works. Among writers of migration narratives is Edwidge Danticat, a Caribbean-Haitian.

Identity refers to an aspect of a person's self-concept that derives from their knowledge of their membership in a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. An individual's identity can be politically, economically, religiously, culturally, and socially configured. Possessing traits that are peculiar to a particular group identifies one as a member of that group. Social identity is a very significant aspect of social life that cannot be trivialised or relegated to the background. Wetherel (2001) conceives the concept as "a set of culturally available performances sanctioned through power relations" (as cited in Dolon & Todoli, 2008). Korostelina (2007) analyses the concept of social identity as a feeling of belonging to a social group, a strong connection with a social category, and an important part of our mind that affects our social perception and behavior. To Weeks (1990, p. 88),

Identity is about belonging - about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. It is the most basic; it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core of your individuality. But it is also about your relationships and your complex involvement with others, and in the modern world, these have become ever more complex and confusing. Each of us lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities that battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, "British" or European, etc. The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings, which often we focus on, bring to the fore, and identify with, depending on a host of factors. At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others.

Weeks' (1990) view above reveals the concept as a complex phenomenon that is not static. As individuals, we keep negotiating and renegotiating our identities, for this is what makes us unique and gives us a sense of belonging. Identity is always being (co-)constructed by individuals of themselves (Omoniyi & White, 2006). The individual is at the centre of defining his personhood, his social belonging, how he sees himself, and the image he portrays outside. Goebel (2010) shares a similar view when he asserts that identity is fluid and something that emerges constantly within a chain of communicative events involving discourses of sameness and difference.

From the foregoing, it is safe to state that identity has to do with the individual's perception of their personhood and their projection of themselves to others, and identity can be said to be in crisis when the individual begins to question their personhood or place in the world. It is a period of uncertainty about who the individual truly is.

Language plays a key role in the categorization process of identity in the sense that membership categories are constructed and negotiated through language. Words, pronoun selection, storytelling, and direct speech are ways through which identity can be selected and negotiated in discourse.

### **Sociopragmatics**

Socio-pragmatics is the sociological aspect of language use. It is concerned with how social situations and norms affect language use. Sociopragmatics is an aspect of sociolinguistic competence that borders on the appropriate use of language politely to pass across messages while taking into cognizance the social and cultural conventions guiding such usage in a particular speech community (Sani, 2020). Sociopragmatics is traceable to the works of Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983). Leech (1983, p. 10) defines the concepts as a "sociological interface of pragmatics, referring to the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action". He further asserts that sociopragmatics is concerned with local conditions of language use. Sani (2020, p. 367) further presents the discipline as any aspect of the social context that is specific to the pragmatic meanings of a particular language use.

Pragmatics works in synergy with sociolinguistics, as both disciplines are influenced by extralinguistic factors. Thus, Sani (2020) notes that it is a point of convergence for the study of both pragmatics and sociolinguistics, which helps the language learner understand the realisation of language use in social life and equips learners with linguistic competence; that is, it helps them realise what variety of language is and how usage differences are realised in different contexts.

According to Beeching & Woodfield (2015), sociopragmatics focuses primarily on the social rules of speaking, that is, those expectations about the interactional discourse that are held as appropriate and normal behaviour by members of a speech community. The focus of sociopragmatics is on the relationship between linguistic action and social structure; it is concerned with how socio-contextual factors influence language as social action. These are complex and highly variable across individuals and also across larger populations. In analysing patterns of language use, we analyse patterns of social relationships, either directly or indirectly.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Edwidge Danticat ranks as one of the most discussed Caribbean-Haitian writers. Braziel & Clitandre (2021) affirm that her prolific body of work has established her as one of the most important voices in 21st-century literary culture as she has, throughout her oeuvre, tackled important contemporary themes including racism, imperialism, anti-immigrant politics, and sexual violence. Mardorossian (2021, p. 365) states that Edwidge Danticat "belongs to a new generation of Caribbean writers for whom the theories of hybridity and creolization articulated by their predecessors are no longer concepts to expound and defend but rather the default position from which she can articulate her own dynamic worldview".

In discussing the concept of identity and nationalism in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Dudek (2022) adopts Steven Vertovec's theory of transnationalism and Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative identity to enable him to interpret intergenerational identity changes, certain methods of cultural reproduction, and the cultural cross-connectedness of family and household in the context of personal identity understood as formed through narratives. Following the narrative order of the novel, Loichot (2021) partly presents Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as an integral agent of contemporary American identity, not only as immigrant exceptionalism within the United States. Gonthier's (2020) thesis examines the concepts of trauma, hybridity, and creolization in Edwidge Danticat's fiction. The thesis sees *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in particular as a coming-of-age narrative that becomes an exploration of cultural displacement, political violence, and intergenerational sexual abuse.

Eerinen (2016) examines the concept of trauma for black Haitian women in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* with the sole aim of studying how these traumas together form the trauma of womanhood that affects all the Caco women. To Watkins (2016), the myths embedded in Haiti's historical narratives are rewritten in Danticat's *Breath Eyes, and Memory* so that Haitian women are unsilenced. Like Francis (2004), he sees fiction as a platform for Haitian women writers to present their counternarrative to nationalist discourse, paternalism, and imperialism. Mehni's (2011) is an analysis of the problematic mother-daughter relationship between Sophie Caco and her mother, Martine. The study adopts Kristeva's Abjection Theory of psychoanalysis as an approach to investigating the roots of the problematic relationship between mother and daughter. From the feminist perspective, Alexander (2011) argues that despite the appellation "mother of the nation", women are perceived and treated as second-class citizens with insights from Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. He argues that the discourse of nationalism that serves to define women constructs them in the private, domestic sphere, while it designs the public, political arena to accommodate men and their nationalist pursuits. He states further that in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, women adopt certain stereotypical roles as it demonstrates how women's bodies are dehumanised as they become subjects to militaristic scrutiny by the nationalist regime presided over by men.

Chaulagain (2006) explores the diaspora and identity crises of the Caribbean during the post-colonial era. The study shows how the diasporic personality of the Caribbean community faces identity crises and sheds light on how the diaspora sensibility revolves between spiritual and temporal locations. It portrays Sophie struggling in her host country, America, where she lacks the proper language (English) for communication. Thus, she feels a sense of nostalgia, isolation, and displacement. The above review has foregrounded aspects of the major concerns in the writings of Edwidge Danticat in general and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in particular. In all, the questions of diaspora, trauma, displacement, hybridity, and identity issues are among her major concerns. Also obvious is the fact that most of the studies are skewed toward literary criticism, with little or nothing from a linguistic perspective. Thus, this study attempts to contribute to the discourse of Haitian and Caribbean literature from a linguistic perspective in general and from a socio-pragmatic angle in particular.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories are adopted for this study: positioning theory and pragmatic act theory. Positioning Theory was developed about three decades ago by Davies and Harré (1990) as an analytic lens and explanatory theory to show how learning and the development of identity evolve through discourse.

Its origins rest with the discursive turn in the social sciences in general and in psychology in particular (Green et al., 2020). It is a framework for analysing the negotiation of identity in discourse or interaction. Moghaddam and Harre (2010, p. 2) state that positioning theory deals with "how people use words and discourse of all types to locate themselves and others

Positioning theory is a discursive process that enables people to negotiate their own and others' identities in interaction by representing themselves as "characters" in jointly produced narratives. It examines and explores the distribution of rights and duties to speak and behave in certain ways among the participants of face-to-face interaction or intra-group relations (Harre, 2012; Hirvonen, 2016; Wise, 2019).

Positioning theory offers a triad of principles consisting of positions, storylines, and act interpretations as an analytic framework (Davies & Harré 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; MacVee et al., 2018; Kay-Aydar, 2019). Position refers to the presentation of oneself in communicative events. It consists of practices in the form of habitual ways of speaking and interacting (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Positions are dynamic and evolving clusters of norms and expectations that people in particular developing storylines perform (or reject) in varied and unique ways (Green et al., 2020). Positioning is of two types: interactive positioning, where people position each other, and reflexive positioning, where people position themselves (Moghaddam & Harre, 2010; Kayi-Ayida. 2019). Slocum and Van Langenhove (2003, p. 225) define storylines as "the contexts of acts and positions". They consist of "the ongoing repertoires that are already shared culturally, or they can be invented as participants interact" (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2015, p. 188). Actors in storylines can discursively and interactionally position themselves and/or others and be positioned by others. Acts refer to the social meaning of actions attributed to particular actors in developing storylines that shape who can say or do what, in what ways, to and with whom, when and where, and under what conditions, drawing on what material and social resources (Green et al., 2020). When people take up new positions, certain acts and actions emerge, and a new storyline develops while the sequence of statements and displays of personhood creates a new storyline (Kayi-Ayida, 2019). Positioning theory has metamorphosed into an important analytical tool in interactional sociolinguistics that enables participants to (re)negotiate their identities and those of others.

The pragmatic act theory was propounded by Jacob Mey in 2001. A pragmatic act is a speech act in a situated context. Mey (2001) maintains that the "context of the acting carries more weight than the spoken act itself". The pragmatic act arose out of the inadequacies of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, the criticism being that speech action is not action-based. It is a theory that illustrates the variation in the social meaning of linguistic forms with regard to context. We perform a pragmatic act when we communicate implicitly (Mey, 2001; Odebunmi, 2006). According to Mey (2001), it is possible to set up others, co-opt them, influence them through our conversations, and deny claims, etc., without our lexical choices betraying our intent or stating it explicitly.

The "common scene" is of paramount importance, as the speech act must be situated. Mey (2001, p. 218) likens this scene to a scene in which actors can perform within the limits of their roles and the actions of their play. The common scene transcends the possibility of thinking and cognizing to the very possibility of acting on the cognitive scene. Consequently, the emphasis is on the characterization of a general situational prototype and not on conditions and rules for specific speech acts. Mey terms this a "pragmeme". In other words, the instantiated, individual pragmatic acts, the ipras or practs refer to a particular pragmeme as its realisation (Mey 2001, p. 221).

The mutual exclusiveness of the practs is noteworthy. Mey argues that no two practs are identical and that every pract is at the same time an allopract, i.e., different realisations of a particular instantiation of a particular pragmeme. He further submits that there is no definite way of determining the exact form of an allopract. It is noteworthy that grammatical correctness is not given primacy when studying practs, rather, attention should be on the understanding that participants have of the situation at hand.

The interconnections between these two theories make them appropriate for this study. Positioning theory overlaps with several discursive approaches. "Given its strong analytic focus on story lines, narratives, and discourses, positioning theory is considered an approach to discourse analysis" (Kayi-Ayida, 2019, p. 28), a linguistic area where pragmatics is domiciled in terms of the study of language in use. Positioning and discourse are also connected, given that a major part of positioning acts are accomplished by linguistic actions.

Discourse in positioning theory is understood as ways of being in the world. Individuals use the language to act, behave, and speak as a way to take on positions others will recognise (Rex & Schiller, 2009, as cited in Kayi-Ayida, 2019). Cameron (2001, p. 13) also establishes this link as he states that positioning theory focuses not only on the language itself but also on "language used to do something and mean something, language produced and interpreted in a real-world context". The reference here is obviously to sociolinguistics and pragmatics, and thus sociopragmatics, a sub-area of applied linguistics.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study is descriptive textual analysis. The primary text, Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) is carefully read, and eleven excerpts that instantiate indices of identity issues are purposefully extracted and numbered as Excerpts i–xi for ease of analysis using Positioning and Pragmatic Act theories as analytical tools to show how the characters negotiate their respective positions and identities in the text.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

### Excerpt i

In the early opening of the novel, Sophie has just returned from school, and her aunt, who happens to be her guardian, inquires about how her day went in school. School for her was fine, but Tante Atie is not always there for the afternoon reading classes.

School was all right" I said. "I like everything but those reading classes they let parents come to in the afternoon. Everybody's parents come except you. I never have anyone to read with. So, Monsieur Augustin always pairs me with an old lady who wants to learn her letters, but does not have children at the school."

"I do not want a pack of children teaching me how to read," she said. "The young should learn from the old. Not the other way. Besides, I have to rest my back when you have your class. I have work."... . At one time, I would have given anything to be in school. But not my age. My time is gone. Cooking and cleaning, looking after others, that's my school now. That schoolhouse is *your* school. Cutting sugar cane was the only thing for a young one to do when I was your age. That is why I never want to hear you complain about your school... (Danticat, 1994, p. 4)

Tante positions herself in this conversational act as if her time of learning to read is gone or past. Even though other parents like her involve themselves in this reading act with their children. Tante Atie thinks that children should learn from adults, not the other way around. Deducible from this conversation between Sophie and Tante Atie is the pragmatic act of regretting, requesting, and encouraging. Sophie's wish is for her aunt to consider taking reading lessons with her in school, just like other parents do. It is noteworthy that no explicit request takes place here; in other words, no actual speech acts of requesting are encountered in this dialogue. Sophie merely tells her that other parents are always there with their children to take the afternoon reading lessons while she has no one to read with, thereby making her be paired with someone else. Inference is drawn from this fact that Tante had a deprived childhood and was lonely, and she bemoans this.

There is a case of reflexive positioning here as Tante Atie positions herself. She resolves never to learn to read again, as she intends to live her life in terms of her beliefs and self-production. Tante Atie rejects being positioned as an adult who would take reading lessons from children. The storyline in this narrative describes her life and perception. According to Tante, "at one time I would have given anything to be in school. But not at my age; my time is gone". She tells Sophie that when she was her age, there was nothing like schooling for girls, as cutting cane was the only thing for them to do. This is a form of gender-based identity crisis. Tante Atie's belief is stereotypical, and she firmly upholds her opinion as regards the issue of learning to read. Sophie tries to make this speech act open to further negotiations by encouraging her to have a change of mind. Sophie makes an effort to co-opt her by subtly encouraging her to take the afternoon reading lessons like other parents her age who have not learned to do, but Tante is determined not to demean herself by learning from children. She encourages Sophie to take her studies seriously. Tante Atie assumes a position of powerlessness. Her experience as a child has a kind of indexical influence on her positioning and identity.

### Excerpt ii

This excerpt captures Martine telling her daughter Sophie about their dreams of going to school and becoming successful women. The context is that of Martine inquiring about her sister Tante Atie's school and Sophie replies in the negative:

"How is your Tante Atie?" she asked. "Does she still go to night school?"

Night school?" "She told me once in a cassette that she was going to night school. Did she ever start it?"

"Non"

"The old girl lost her nerve. She lost her fight. You should have seen us when we were young. We always dreamt of becoming important women. We were going to be the first women doctors from my mother's village. We would not stop at being doctors either. We were going to be engineers too. Imagine our surprise when we found out we had limits". (Danticat, 1994, p. 42–43)

The pragmatic acts of regretting and lamenting are visible in this conversational act. Reference is made to their youthful age when they had hopes, dreams, and expectations of studying to be medical doctors and engineers. Tante is disappointed because she never had the opportunity to actualize her dreams. Martine referring to Tante Atie as "the old girl" here is of sociopragmatic significance.

The position, social meaning, and illocutionary force of Martine's utterance reveal disillusionment and regret, which emanate from deprivation. This discourse makes reference to gender and class, which are forms of identity issues while revealing a tone of pain and disappointment. As Tante Atie said earlier, cutting sugar cane was the only thing for them to do when she was Sophie's age-mate; they were not given the opportunity to go to school. Their gender was a deterrent to achieving their dreams of becoming important women—the first female doctors and engineers from their mother's village. Reference can be drawn from Martine's comment, "The old girl lost her nerve, she lost her fight", that they actually tried and wished to go to school to have better lives, but the prevalent sociocultural circumstances that prevented girls from going to school were a barrier to them.

### Excerpt iii

In Excerpt IV, Martine recounts to Sophie how Marc helps her whenever she has the nightmares. Sophie encourages her to seek the professional help of a therapist:

Since you left, he stays with me at night and wakes me up when I have the nightmares. "You still won't go for help?"

"I know I should get help, but I am afraid. I am afraid it will become even more real if I see a psychiatrist and he starts telling me to face it. God help me, what if they want to hypnotize me and take me back to that day? I'll kill myself. Marc, he saves my life every night..." (Danticat, 1994, p.190)

Here, Sophie ascribes the position and identity of a caring partner to Marc. Sophie assumes the duty and obligation of trying to offer a solution to her mother, who suffers from hallucinations because of her past experiences. The pronoun "it" in the expression "it will come again" is a reference to the horrible nightmares she experiences. Sophie tries to ascribe to her a position and an identity of someone who is vulnerable and should seek help immediately, but Martine contests this position by rejecting it. The use of the noun phrase "that day" is quite purposeful. By this, she makes reference to the day she was raped, and Sophie leverages SSK to decode the meaning of her expression; hence, there is no pragmatic failure.

### Excerpt iv

Identity issues caused by low self-esteem are also evident in the following excerpt:

You do wonders for my English. I said, hoping it wasn't too forward.

"You're such a beautiful woman".

"You think I am a woman. You're the first person who has called me that".

"In that case, everyone else is blind". ((Danticat, 1994, p. 75)

In this context, Sophie suffers from low self-esteem. She admits to Joseph that he does wonders for her English. She believes her English is not good enough. By doing so, she concedes the fact that Joseph's English is way better than hers. The pragmatic acts of complimenting, appreciating, and interrogating are present in this conversation. Joseph positions himself as a great lover and compliments his 18-year-old heartthrob. Sophie is taken aback that he calls her a beautiful woman and points out that she has never been thus addressed. Joseph positions her as an adult who is now free to make decisions for herself. Sophie also commends him for his impact on her English. This has enhanced her identity and social image and positioned her in a more positive light.



Different contextual cues interact to generate the pragmatic acts of accepting, complimenting, reassuring, and wooing that can be deduced from this conversational act between Sophie and Joseph. The elements are reference, inference, and relevance. The implication of Sophie telling Joseph that nobody has ever called her a beautiful woman is that she suffers from low self-esteem. The utterance "you're such a beautiful woman" is an indirect speech act or an implicit way of professing his love for Sophie and requesting the same from her. It shows a subtle pract of wooing. Sophie and Joseph discursively construct themselves as characters in this storyline. Joseph uses his position and story as a resource for strategic interaction. He positions Sophie positively as a beautiful woman while positioning himself as her admirer. Joseph and Sophie jointly tell a story in this conversation, which unfolds through their joint action. In this discursive practice, the stories interact with one another. Joseph assumes the subject position in this storyline. He sees it as his duty and obligation to reassure Sophie by professing beautiful words to boost her self-esteem and make her happy. Sophie takes up the position that Joseph has made available to her.

### Excerpt vi

In the conversational act in Excerpt vii, Sophie attempts to co-opt Martine to marry Marc, her lover. Martine's response "Jesus Marie Joseph. Am I going to do what?" is an indirect speech act that means it is impossible for her to marry him because she sees herself as unworthy of his love.

"Are you going to marry him?"

*Jesus Marie Joseph.* Am I going to do what?"

"Doesn't he want to marry you?"

"Of course he wants to marry me, but look at me. I am a fat woman trying to pass for light. And I have no breasts. I don't know when this cancer will come back. I am not an ideal mother". ((Danticat, 1994, p. 189)

Sophie, who sees no reason why she cannot marry him, tries to probe further as Martine voices out her imperfections and how less of a good or ideal woman she is. The pragmatic acts of confessing and admitting are presented in this dialogue. Martine ascribes the second fiddle position and identity to herself, as she affirms that the reason she can never expect Marc to marry her is as a result of her physical attributes and her health condition. She struggles with identity crises when her conception of herself is vocalised to Sophie. Martine employs deliberate self-positioning in this storyline as she expresses her identity by referring to her perception of herself or her point of view. Her choice of words in describing herself is derogatory.

### Excerpt vi

Loss of personhood is another identity crisis encountered in the text under study. Personhood is the state of being a person or an individual. It means possessing the qualities or features of a person or a human being. Loss of personhood takes place when the characteristics of being an individual are affected by factors such as difficulties, challenges, harsh realities, or other conditions that tamper with general mental well-being. This distorts the psychological makeup of the individual as instantiated in the extract below:

"I am a musician".

"I know. Sometimes I hear you playing at night".

"Does it bother you?"

"*Non* it's very pretty"

I detect an accent"

(Thinks to herself) "Oh please, say a small one. I was tired of having people detect my accent. I wanted to sound completely American, especially for him.

"Where are you from?"

"Haiti'"

"Ah, I have never been there. Do you speak Creole?"

oui, *ou..*. ((Danticat, 1994, p. 69)

In this conversational act, Sophie and Joseph meet each other for the first time and try to get acquainted. Joseph detects from Sophie's accent that she is not American and explicitly voices out his observation. This is to the chagrin of Sophie, as she wishes to sound completely American after spending six years in the country. Joseph draws an inference from her accent that she must be an immigrant, as her accent gives her away and suggests her identity as a non-American. This makes him want to further ask her where she is from. Sophie is somewhat disappointed or quite embarrassed, as she has obviously made efforts to sound completely American; hence, she thinks to herself that she should say the accent is a small one. She suffers a loss of personhood as she is neither truly American nor truly Haitian. The accent affects her confidence in a way. Sophie positions herself as being obligated to acquire the American accent. She experiences a form of identity crisis here, which manifests in language. She is from Haiti, but she does not want her spoken language to reveal who she truly is; hence, she is in a kind of dilemma. The psychology of her personhood is plagued by the ambiguity of her concept of self. Sophie engages in deliberate self-positioning here as she expresses her personal identity by stressing her agency while referring to her unique point of view, especially as she responds "oui, oui" when Joseph asks her if she speaks Creole. This sort of refers to events in her biography that give a window into her personality. Joseph applies the pragmatic acts of informing, interrogating, and fishing for information to know more about Sophie, while she positions herself as duty-bound to provide the information required by Joseph. Sophie adapts herself linguistically to her world.

### Excerpt vii

In this context, Joseph tries to ask Sophie if what he feels for her is mutual. Sophie is unsure about his intention towards her and, as such, is skeptical about giving an answer to Joseph when he asks her if she likes him:

"Can you tell I like you?"

I can tell"

"Do you like me?"

"You will not respect me if I say yes."

"Where do you get such notions?"

"How do I know you are not just saying these things so you can get what you want?"

"What do you think I want?"

"What all men want."

"Which is?"

I don't want to say it".

"You will have to say it. What is it? Life? Liberty? The pursuit of happiness? I am not about that. I am older than that. I am not going to say I am better than that because I am not a priest, but I am not about that". (Danticat, 1994, p. 76)

In this storyline, Sophie negotiates her identity with that of Joseph. There is a case of interactive and reflexive positioning here, as Sophie positions Joseph as being like other men. Joseph, however, repositions himself and tries to change Sophie's perception of him. Joseph manages his identity strategically by assuming the subject position and negotiating his own identity. The storyline is generated by culture, as reference is made to a mutually shared master narrative about how most men behave when it comes to dealing with women. There is a shared situational knowledge between Sophie and Joseph here about men wanting what is in between women's legs and going away afterward, and this aids the understanding between both of them in this discourse. This is the kind of behaviour certain men display when it comes to romantic love. The cultural storyline has a decisive and powerful effect on this discourse between Sophie and Joseph, even though Sophie is oblivious to the fact that she is drawing upon these cultural facts to formulate her actions and opinions, thereby interpreting the actions of Joseph. This also plays out in her response to Joseph, who says that he would consider her cheap if she told him that she liked him. It is a sociopragmatic fact that men ought to do the "chasing" and not the other way around. Sophie misinterprets Joseph's intention, personality, and moral character. There is a dynamic and interactive positioning in this conversation as Sophie positions Joseph, and Joseph, in turn, repositions himself.

### **Excerpt viii**

This speech act is an explicit instantiation of an identity crisis. Sophie, the narrator here, deeply expresses her worries as she suffers a loss of identity. She is in doubt of who she truly is. Reference is made to how confused she is as an individual:

"I feel like I could have been Southern African-American. When I just came to this country, I got it into my head that I needed some religion. I had to go to this old Southern church in Harlem where all they sang was Negro Spirituals. (Danticat, 1994, p. 214)

In the above, deliberate self-positioning manifests as Sophie expresses her identity by stressing her point of view about her existence. The personal pronoun "I" in her expression refers to her biography. Her agency here is made obvious. She introduces doubt in her individuality, by using REF to give a window into her inner turmoil. She reveals her skepticism concerning her individuality or personhood. Her utterances provide coherence and meaning to her existence. Despite the length of time she has spent there, she positions herself as someone who is not yet acclimatised with the environment she migrated to. The pragmatic act of complaining can be deduced from Sophie's utterance.

### **Extract ix**

The identity crisis in Excerpt XVI is triggered by racism. This has to do with prejudice based on race or ethnicity.

My mother said it was important that I learn English quickly. Otherwise, the American students would make fun of me or even worse, beat me. A lot of other mothers from the nursing home where she worked had told her that their children were getting into fights in school because they were accused of having HBO- Haitian Body Odour. Many of the American kids even accused Haitians of having AIDS because they had heard on television that only the four Hs' got AIDS - Heroine addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals and Haitians. (Danticat, 1994, p. 51)

In the above conversational act, different contextual cues synergize to generate the pragmatic acts. These are reference, relevance, and SSK. The union between the psychological acts and the different contextual elements generates the practs of advising, informing, warning, and lamenting. These practs are all realizations of the pragemme "racism". This is an identity crisis induced or triggered by migration in the text under study. Sophie's mother engages in reference to warn her daughter about the attitude of the American students and makes her see the importance of learning English quickly. She warns her about the implications of not acquiring the English language. This according to her would amount to the American students beating her up in school. She also employs reference to tell her about the children of other mothers who go into fights in school because they were accused of having HBO- Haitian Body Odour. This incident is relevant in making Sophie understand Martine. The implication of not learning English also includes being accused of having AIDS. According to American schoolchildren, those likely to contract AIDS are the heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians. These they refer to as the four "Hs".

SSK here aids Sophie in understanding her mother's warning and the implications of it all. The disposition of the American children towards Haitians is such a negative one. Just being Haitian elicits the treatment of having AIDS from the Americans. This psychological act largely hinders acculturation as the Haitians are treated with so much contempt.

Positioning and narratives arise from this storyline. Martine positions the American children as racists who are very biased in dealing with the Haitians. She ascribes the duty and obligation of learning the English language to Sophie as that is the only condition that would make her be able to coexist or cope in school.

This is a case of performative positioning. She positions herself as someone who has the right and duty to advise her daughter and tell her what to do. Martine through this discursive process negotiates her identity and the identities of other Haitians in America as characters unjustly treated by the natives in the host country. This is a case of reflexive positioning. This story has to do with her personal history, her own biography.

Martine exposes the kind of behavior the Americans display, their ill-treatment of the Haitians, just because of their identities. Martine invokes a storyline in this interaction and takes up for herself, Sophie, and other Haitians living in America the position of second-class citizens which sociocultural factors compel them to assume.

Circumstances make it almost impossible to resist or challenge the position and they try to comply with the status quo; thus she advises Sophie to learn the English language as fast as possible as that is the only condition that would make her fit into the society. Martine positions herself and other Haitians in America as victims of some form of misfortune. She grapples with the second-fiddle position they have been made to assume and this triggers identity crises.

**Excerpt x**

In this conversational act between Sophie and Joseph, reference is made to the deep sadness and depression Sophie suffers.

"You know my problems"

"The therapy, that helping you".

"I don't think it is."

"You'll have to start over but you're okay"

"I don't feel okay".

"You're a beautiful woman. It's natural. You're desirable

"Nothing is wrong with that"

"But we can't even be together".

"That's all right. I told you after the baby was born".

"As long as it takes, I will wait".

But what if I never get over it? What if I never get fixed?"

"You're not a machine. You can't go to a shop and get fixed. It will happen slowly. I've always told you this, haven't I? I will be there for you"

"Why didn't you answer the phone for the first time? I asked.

"How's your mother?"

"She wants us to have dinner with her male friend soon."

"You mean her boyfriend?"

"I suppose". (Danticat, 1994, p. 185)

In the first line "You know my problems", Sophie constructs the identity of an unhappy person. The identity is further elaborated when she says to Joseph that the therapy hasn't helped her. The subject matter here is that Sophie is deeply distressed and overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding her, and Joseph tries to help her come out of her depression. Sophie refers to her pessimism when she asks Joseph, "What if I never get over it? The pronoun "it" refers to her state of depression. Joseph implicitly professes her undying love for her in his indirect speech act "as long as it takes I will wait". Sophie's statement is an act of deliberate self-positioning. She expresses her personal identity unapologetically by stressing her agency. This is a case of reflexive positioning. The apparent act of stating and declaring gives a textual interpretation of her emotion, for this appears to be an outburst of how she feels inside.

Joseph positions himself as someone who cares about Sophie's well-being. He ascribes to himself the duty and obligation to make Sophie's burden lighter. Sophie referring to her mother's boyfriend as her "male friend" is of sociopragmatic significance. She considers it disrespectful to call him her boyfriend. So she uses a euphemistic way to conceal the fact. Joseph, however, is explicit about it, and he asks, "You mean her boyfriend? In this act of requesting information, Joseph explicitly demands that Sophie clarify the relationship between her mother, Martine, and the so-called male friend.

**Extract xi**

"Why did you put me through those tests?" I blurted it out. I wanted to reserve my right to ask as many times as I needed to. I was not angry with her anymore. I had a greater need to understand so that I would never repeat it myself. "I did it," she said, "because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realise standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about being raped was that it made the *testing* stop. The testing and the rape I live both every day. ((Danticat, 1994, p. 170)

As vividly illustrated in this extract, both Sophie and Martine employ SSK and REF. The psychological act is such that it elicits pity. Reference is made to the pains that submerge Martine. In this context, Sophie demands to know why her mother tested her. She assumes the right to be aware of the reasons her mother has subjected her to such barbaric acts, which have made her depressed. She ascribes to her mother the duty and obligation to explain to her the reason behind such a terrible act. This is a case of performative positioning, as Martine does not reject the duty ascribed to her; rather, she tells her it's just a family tradition. Though she does not like the act, she is passive and does nothing to object; rather, she simply passes it on. She makes reference to the two greatest pains in her life being related, with the beginning of one being the end of the other. Martine tries to position herself in a positive light, as she was only a dutiful mother doing what she was expected to do, despite the psychological implication of the act on her mother. The fact that the rape is the end of the testing is a metaphor showing that she is never free from pain, as the end of one birth another. Sophie negotiates her identity and takes a stance. SSK brings to the fore the practice of accusing in Sophie's question, "Why did you put me through those tests? Martine's response to Sophie's question is an instantiation of forced self-positioning.

**DISCUSSIONS**

Migration-motivated identity issues are of intense concern in the contemporary world. This study of the role of sociopragmatics of language in how migrants negotiate their identities in the social-cultural context of their diasporic world in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is necessary to enhance a deeper understanding of how the identity of the Haitian characters is affected by migration. The author, Edwidge Danticat, is versed both in the language and the culture of her own country, Haiti, and that of the United States where she migrated. This also applies to the characters depicted in the novel. Their migration pattern is voluntary: from post-independence countries to the United States. Apart from the fact that the work bears relevance to the espousal of migration and identity crises among other significant social-cultural issues, the chosen text also focuses on cross-cultural linguistics which is a viable area of study that requires scholarly attention as it helps to promote mutual co-existence among people of diverse culture.

There also exists a close affinity between Danticat's novel and her world, her society, and her life, thereby bridging the gap between fiction and reality. The Caribbean has a history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the modern era of postcolonial migration due to social, economic, and political instabilities. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a fictional representation of characters who emigrated from post-independence countries to the United States. Guided by this fictional work, this study has interrogated the sociopragmatic pattern and usage of language by immigrant characters in negotiating their identities.

## CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a sociopragmatic analysis of Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. It has been shown that Danticat is an attentive and true observer of the sociopragmatics of identity issues induced by migration. The positioning and pragmatic act theories have proven to be verifiable tools to uncover how characters behave, react, and negotiate their identities in the socio-cultural and pragmatic contexts of the novel. Danticat's characters are in an unending battle with their host environments, which seem to strip them of their personhood. The identity crises in the novel are culturally and migration-motivated, and they hurt the personhood of the characters. The inferiority complex of women in Haitian culture is portrayed as the girl child, symbolised by Tantie Atie, was not allowed to go to school; cutting sugarcane was the only thing women were allowed to do. The study further reveals that Sophia sociopragmatically denounces the traditional role of women in Haitian society and seeks to negotiate her identity in American society, where she finds herself as a migrant. In doing this, she finds herself between two worlds, two languages, and two socio-cultural traditions that were imposed on her by her chance of birth and migration.

The application of positioning and pragmatic act theories reveals that the characters in this novel manifest different forms of identity crises resulting from their migratory experiences. Some of these include loss of personhood, depression, loneliness and alienation, nostalgia, and low self-esteem, confusion, trauma and frustration. This study has discovered how migrants use language to negotiate their being and status, especially in their host countries. The study enhances a better understanding of migration-motivated identity crises from the language use perspective.

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