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THE POETICS OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY DETECTIVE FICTION

(A Comparative Study of Nuriddin Ismoilov's "O'limga mahkum qilinganlar" and Tana French's "In the Woods")

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Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary detective fiction transforms the detective protagonist into a figure of existential uncertainty. Through a comparative reading of Nuriddin Ismoilov's "O'limga mahkum qilinganlar" and "Tana French's In the Woods", the study argues that the modern detective is no longer presented only as an investigator who solves a criminal case. Instead, the protagonist becomes a character whose work exposes a deeper crisis of identity, memory, loyalty, and moral responsibility. In Ismoilov's novel, Sobir exists inside a dangerous world of secret service, disguise, and constant vigilance, and this environment makes identity appear unstable but ethically necessary. In French's novel, the detective is shaped by memory, trauma, and the pressure of an unresolved past, so the investigation becomes a personal search for meaning as much as a professional task. The comparison shows that detective fiction in the



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contemporary period often uses crime narratives to examine the fragile relation between outward roles and inward selfhood.

Keywords: contemporary detective fiction; identity crisis; existential hero; psychological conflict; moral responsibility; memory; trauma; Nuriddin Ismoilov; Tana French; detective protagonist

Introduction

Contemporary detective fiction has developed far beyond the classical formula of crime, clue, and solution. In earlier models of the genre, the detective usually appeared as a stable rational mind that restored order after disruption. Modern fiction is more complex. It often presents a world in which order is incomplete, truth is fragmented, and the person who investigates crime is himself emotionally unsettled. For that reason, the detective protagonist has become one of the most important figures for reading the existential dimension of contemporary literature.

The concept of identity crisis is especially useful here because the detective in modern fiction is often caught between several selves. He may have a professional role, a private memory, a moral code, and a hidden fear that do not fit together neatly. As a result, the investigation is never only about an external case. It is also about who the detective becomes while pursuing the case. This is why the genre has moved toward psychological depth: a crime story can now function as a story of self-recognition, self-loss, and self-testing.

Nuriddin Ismoilov's "O'limga mahkum qilinganlar" is an important example of this development. According to the uploaded edition, the novel centers on the dangerous life of secret-service workers, the struggle between loyalty and betrayal, and the moral tension that appears when human beings live under



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constant threat. The protagonist Sobir is placed in a situation where identity is never simply natural; it is guarded, performed, and sometimes concealed. Tana French's *In the Woods* also offers a protagonist whose professional role is inseparable from private fracture, because the detective's work is deeply connected with memory and personal trauma. These two novels, though different in setting and cultural background, both show that the detective protagonist in contemporary fiction is a person under pressure from inside and outside at the same time.

Theoretical Perspective

The existential hero is a character who must create meaning in a world that does not offer final answers. He is not defined by certainty, but by confrontation with uncertainty. He does not move through life with a fixed map of truth; instead, he acts while facing danger, ambiguity, and the burden of choice. In literary studies, this kind of hero is often associated with anxiety, freedom, responsibility, and the problem of authenticity. A person is not merely what society assigns to him. He also becomes what he decides to sustain under pressure.

When this idea is applied to detective fiction, the genre reveals a new layer of meaning. The detective is traditionally expected to gather evidence and resolve mystery, but contemporary fiction often makes that process existential. Every clue raises a deeper question. Every discovery threatens a stable belief. The protagonist begins as a solver of problems and ends as a witness to the instability of his own consciousness. Thus, the detective story becomes a narrative of being, not only of knowing.

The poetics of identity crisis emerges when the text shows that the protagonist's outward role cannot fully contain his inward life. In such novels, identity is not a finished state but a process. The hero must hold together contradictory elements:



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duty and fear, loyalty and doubt, public action and private emotion. This is why contemporary detective fiction often sounds more philosophical than classical detective prose. It asks not only what happened, but how human beings remain themselves when the world keeps changing their names, roles, and moral expectations.

Sobir in “O’limga mahkum qilinganlar” is one of the most compelling detective-adjacent figures in modern Uzbek prose because he is shown within a system where danger is routine and identity is politically loaded. The paratext of the uploaded edition describes the novel as a story of secret-service employees whose lives are filled with risk, with a struggle between goodness and evil, loyalty and betrayal, faith and greed. That framing already places Sobir in an existential zone, because his life is defined by tension rather than comfort. He is not a man who observes danger from a distance. He lives inside it.

What makes Sobir existential is not simply the fact that he is brave. It is the way bravery is presented as endurance. He must remain functional under pressure, yet the novel does not erase the human cost of that pressure. The reader senses that constant alertness requires emotional discipline and that discipline itself is exhausting. In this sense, identity in Ismoilov's novel is inseparable from responsibility. Sobir cannot afford to be a loose or casual self; his life demands attention, control, and readiness.

The hero's identity is also shaped by concealment. A secret-service figure often exists through roles that others can see but never fully know. That condition creates a split between appearance and inner life. From an existential perspective, such a split is not a technical matter only. It is a human problem, because a person who must repeatedly hide parts of himself begins to ask where the genuine self remains. Is it in action, in memory, in loyalty, or in the silent space that no assignment can reach? Ismoilov's novel does not answer these questions directly,



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but it makes them felt through the protagonist's constant movement between danger and self-control.

Identity Crisis as Moral Pressure

In O'limga mahkum qilinganlar, identity crisis is not presented as a psychological illness detached from life. It is produced by the demands of service, the pressure of secrecy, and the fear of failure. Sobir must work in environments where a wrong gesture may have serious consequences. That condition produces a special kind of self-awareness. He cannot simply act; he must measure himself while acting. He cannot remain innocent in the ordinary sense, because he is always reading the situation, calculating risk, and preparing for betrayal.

This creates a powerful moral dimension. Identity crisis here is not only confusion. It is also the strain of trying to remain ethically coherent while the world rewards concealment. The protagonist's loyalty therefore becomes more than a duty. It becomes a test of inner continuity. If he remains faithful, he preserves a core self. If he collapses into selfishness or fear, the self becomes fragmented. That is why the novel gives the detective protagonist existential weight: the case is not separate from the soul of the man solving it.

The uploaded text makes clear that the novel is concerned with the broader conflict between loyalty and betrayal, purity and corruption, faith and greed. These oppositions are not simply thematic decorations. They frame the protagonist's identity as something that must be defended continuously. Sobir's experience therefore reflects a contemporary understanding of heroism, in which the greatest struggle is not physical strength alone, but the refusal to let pressure destroy the moral center.



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In the Woods and the Fragmentation of Self

Tana French's "In the Woods" approaches the detective protagonist from a different angle, but the existential effect is closely related. French is particularly interested in memory, trauma, and the emotional weight of the past. The detective figure in the novel is not simply someone who searches for external evidence. He is someone who cannot fully escape what has been broken within him. As a result, the investigation becomes a double movement: it looks outward toward a crime and inward toward a fractured self.

The identity crisis in French's novel is shaped by uncertainty rather than by secrecy alone. The protagonist's past does not sit quietly behind him; it continues to intrude, disturb, and redirect perception. This means that the detective's professional role is constantly disrupted by personal memory. He is expected to explain the case, yet he cannot always explain himself. The novel therefore creates a strong existential atmosphere: truth is important, but truth is not easy, clean, or emotionally neutral.

French's detective protagonist is also marked by vulnerability. Unlike a purely rational investigator, he is drawn into the case because the case touches unresolved inner material. The result is a highly psychological narrative in which the detective becomes a subject of analysis as much as a producer of analysis. The search for truth becomes a search through layers of uncertainty, and the more the hero seeks explanation, the more he confronts the unstable structure of his own identity.

Comparative Discussion

A comparison of the two novels makes it possible to see both a shared pattern and a significant difference. In both texts, the detective protagonist is not secure. He is always under pressure, always interpreting the world, and always aware that



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the world may hide more than it reveals. This shared condition is the basis of the existential detective. He does not merely solve; he survives the process of solving. The difference lies in the direction of pressure. Ismoilov's novel places greater emphasis on external danger, service, discipline, and ethical loyalty. French's novel places greater emphasis on internal fracture, memory, and the persistence of trauma. In one case, identity crisis is closely tied to political and professional obligation. In the other, it is tied to psychological residue and the incompleteness of personal history. Yet both works insist that identity is fragile and that the detective's work intensifies that fragility rather than hiding it.

This comparison also shows how contemporary detective fiction has changed in structure. The genre no longer depends only on the final answer. It is equally interested in the cost of reaching that answer. The detective protagonist may gain knowledge, but knowledge does not necessarily bring peace. Instead, the process of investigation often reveals that the self is divided, that memory is unstable, and that truth itself may be ethically painful. That is the poetics of identity crisis in its most visible form.

Conclusion

The poetics of identity crisis in contemporary detective fiction can be understood as a shift from external mystery to internal uncertainty. Nuriddin Ismoilov's *O'limga mahkum qilinganlar* presents Sobir as a figure whose identity is shaped by danger, concealment, and moral duty. Tana French's *In the Woods* presents a detective protagonist whose work is haunted by memory, trauma, and unresolved personal history. In both novels, the detective is not merely a problem-solver. He is a human being whose role in the investigation exposes the unstable relationship between selfhood and the world.



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The comparative reading shows that contemporary detective fiction has become one of the most effective spaces for exploring existential questions in narrative form. It asks how a person remains morally coherent while living under pressure, how identity survives disguise and trauma, and how truth changes the one who seeks it. For that reason, the detective protagonist in modern fiction should be read not only as a genre figure, but also as an existential one. The strength of the genre lies in this double movement: it solves a case while simultaneously revealing the fragility of the self.

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