
**Inner Conflicts: Moral Values vs Societal Expectations in Salman Rushdie's
*The Golden House***

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Abstract

Inner conflict arises when an individual experiences a clash between personal values and societal expectations, leading to emotional turmoil, anxiety, guilt, and uncertainty. While such conflicts can cause distress and isolation, they can also serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and personal growth. This study examines how inner conflict manifests in Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*, particularly through the characters of Petya and D. Petya, due to his neurodivergence and rigid moral code, struggles to conform to societal standards of success and normalcy, leading to isolation and psychological distress. D, a filmmaker operating in a world that prioritizes appearances and conventions, wrestles with questions of morality and personal authenticity, navigating a society where identities are fluid and constantly shifting. Their contrasting struggles highlight the tension between upholding moral values and negotiating external pressures, eventually shaping their identities and relationships. This paper aims to analyze the psychological and emotional impact of inner conflict on Petya and D, exploring how their experiences reflect broader themes of moral dilemmas and societal expectations. Furthermore, it seeks to examine how their respective journeys illuminate the challenges of maintaining personal integrity while adapting to external demands, contributing to a deeper understanding of identity, agency, and self-liberation.

Keywords: Inner conflict, moral dilemma, societal expectations, identity, personal authenticity

Introduction:

Inner conflict is a fundamental and inescapable aspect of human existence, arising when an individual experiences a deep contradiction between personal moral values and the expectations imposed by society. This struggle can take various forms, ranging from minor ethical dilemmas to profound existential crises. At its core, inner conflict challenges an individual's sense of self, often leading to emotional distress, anxiety, and self-doubt. When personal beliefs, values, or ethical principles come into direct conflict with societal norms, individuals may experience a psychological tug-of-war, torn between staying true to their convictions and conforming to external demands. Society establishes norms and expectations that dictate acceptable behavior, success, and identity, shaping how individuals interact with the world. These societal frameworks often define what is considered respectable, desirable, or even morally correct, influencing personal choices and actions. However, individuals do not always align with these predefined expectations. Charles Shelton has referred to identity as "a person's acquisition of a meaningful sense of self, of what he or she is, of what he or she is about, and of where he or she is going" (78). When one's deeply held beliefs contradict these external standards, it creates a sense of internal dissonance, leaving the individual feeling trapped or isolated. This conflict can be particularly intense in cases where societal norms are rigid or where deviation from the accepted path results in social rejection or criticism. For some, this tension can lead to alienation, both from society and from their own sense of self. Individuals struggling with inner conflict may feel disconnected from their surroundings and unable to fully participate in social structures without compromising their values. This alienation can manifest in various ways—withdrawal from social interactions, an inability to establish meaningful relationships, or even self-destructive behaviors. In extreme cases, unresolved inner conflict may lead to severe psychological distress, including depression, identity crises, or suicidal thoughts. Despite its challenges, inner conflict is not necessarily a wholly negative experience. While it often brings discomfort and uncertainty, it can also serve as a catalyst for self-discovery and personal growth. The struggle to reconcile moral values with societal expectations forces individuals to reflect on their beliefs, question societal norms, and finally make choices that define their identity. Whether one chooses to conform, rebel, or find a middle ground, the process of navigating inner conflict is central to personal development and the formation of a strong, independent sense of self.

“Written in the buildup to Trump’s presidential campaign and completed well before his electoral win of November 2016” (Resano 515), Rushdie’s *The Golden House* vividly portrays the internal struggle of individuals torn between self-authenticity and societal norms through the characters of Petya and D. Petya, who is neurodivergent and adheres to a strict moral code, finds it challenging to function within a world that prizes ambition, social charm,

and

conformity. His struggle to fit within these rigid expectations leads to profound isolation, anxiety, and self-doubt. Unable to compromise his deeply ingrained values, Petya remains on the fringes of society, grappling with inner turmoil that shapes his identity and emotional well-being. In contrast, D, a filmmaker operating in a world governed by appearances and constructed realities, faces an entirely different yet equally intense conflict. As someone who thrives in an industry that demands flexibility and adaptation, D is constantly forced to negotiate between his creative aspirations and the moral frameworks he seeks to challenge. His journey is one of self-discovery, as he questions established conventions while striving to maintain artistic integrity. Unlike Petya, D actively engages with the tension between personal values and external expectations, attempting to carve out a space for himself where authenticity and societal pressures can coexist. Through the experiences of Petya and D, the novel delves into broader questions of identity, agency, and moral resilience in the face of social demands. Their struggles illustrate the profound psychological cost of inner conflict, shedding light on how personal values can both liberate and constrain an individual. While Petya's rigidity isolates him, D's ability to adapt to shifting norms offers a different perspective on the same conflict, demonstrating that the negotiation between selfhood and external influence is deeply personal and multifaceted. The novel eventually suggests that while societal norms often appear rigid and unyielding, individual identity remains fluid, shaped by both intrinsic beliefs and external pressures. The tension between these forces reveals the complex ways in which morality and selfhood are continually redefined in an evolving world. By exploring these themes, the novel provides a compelling meditation on the challenges of maintaining personal authenticity within an ever-changing social landscape—

At the center of the novel is the story of Nero, a man of fabulous wealth, who moves to New York with his three sons, harboring an explosive secret. It is a tale of great wealth and a great fall, replete with film references. At the center of each character's predicament lies the question of identity, the ever-shifting sands of identity – national, race, sexuality – there is even a fictional Museum of Identity. (Vir)

The Burden of Moral Integrity: Petya's Struggle

Petya, one of the central characters in *The Golden House*, epitomizes the profound inner conflict that arises when rigid moral values clash with societal expectations. His neurodivergence and unwavering commitment to a strict moral code set him apart from a world that prioritizes social charm, ambition, and conformity— “Petya's Golden situation of high autism and agoraphobia had something to do with his identity formation” (Noronha D. 79). Unlike those who move through societal structures with ease, Petya finds himself unable to fit into the frameworks that define success and belonging. His struggle is not just external

but deeply internal, as he constantly battles the pressure to conform while staying true to his personal ethics. The psychological and social ramifications of his inner conflict illustrate how his inability to reconcile these tensions leads to isolation, fear, and, ultimately, emotional distress. One of the key aspects of Petya's struggle is his resistance to societal expectations of success. The modern world demands adaptability, social engagement, and professional ambition—qualities that Petya, with his neurodivergent tendencies, struggles to embody. His rigid sense of morality prevents him from engaging in the compromises and performative behaviors that are often necessary for social and professional advancement. As a result, he remains on the periphery, unable to integrate into the very society that demands his participation. His failure to meet these external expectations leads to an overwhelming sense of alienation, reinforcing the idea that moral integrity when inflexible, can become a burden rather than a guiding principle. Petya's internal conflict manifests in deep-seated anxiety and fear, which further hinder his ability to connect with the world. His struggle is not simply about resisting societal norms but also about the emotional turmoil that accompanies his inability to adapt. This turmoil is intensified by the fact that society does not make accommodations for those who operate outside its defined structures. Petya's experiences highlight the psychological cost of being unable—or unwilling—to conform, demonstrating how inner conflict can lead to profound distress and self-doubt. His journey underscores the difficulties of existing in a world that prioritizes social integration over individual complexity.

Rene's portrayal of Petya in chapter six is, "The sad, brilliant strangeness of the man we called Petya Golden was clear to everyone from the first day" (Rushdie 41), emphasizing the internal struggle between moral principles and social norms. His relationships, or lack thereof, further illuminate the cost of his unwavering moral stance. Unlike other characters who negotiate their values to maintain social connections, Petya remains largely isolated due to his inability to compromise. His rigid adherence to his personal principles alienates him from those around him, making it difficult for him to form meaningful relationships. This isolation is not entirely self-imposed but rather a result of his deep-seated fear of betrayal and societal rejection. His struggle highlights a crucial theme in *The Golden House*: the tension between maintaining personal integrity and the need for human connection. Despite the emotional and psychological suffering he endures, Petya's struggle raises an important question—does his refusal to conform represent moral strength or a tragic flaw? His character challenges the conventional notion that adaptation is necessary for survival. Instead, he embodies the idea that integrity, even when isolating, holds intrinsic value. However, his experience also suggests that an inability to cope with the complexities of societal expectations can lead to suffering rather than empowerment. His fate forces readers

to consider whether rigid morality is sustainable in a world that thrives on negotiation and compromise. Eventually, Petya's journey serves as a powerful exploration of the burdens of moral integrity in an unforgiving society. His internal battle reflects the universal struggle of individuals who find themselves at odds with societal norms, emphasizing the psychological weight of inner conflict. Through his character, Salman Rushdie critiques a world that demands conformity while offering little space for those who refuse to adhere to its expectations. Petya's experience underscores the difficulty of maintaining one's values in a world that often punishes deviation, raising profound questions about the cost of self-authenticity and the limits of moral resilience.

Constructed Realities and Artistic Dilemma: D's Conflict

The character D states, perhaps a bit too emphatically, "This modern obsession with identity revolts me, perhaps emphatically. It is a way of narrowing us until we are like aliens to one another" (70) in chapter eight. This emphasis on individuality in contemporary society can be isolating, he claims. D, a filmmaker in the novel, embodies the struggle between self-authenticity and societal expectations in an industry that thrives on illusion and constructed identities. Unlike Petya, whose inner conflict arises from his rigid moral integrity, D faces a more fluid yet equally intense dilemma—how to reconcile his creative ambitions with the expectations imposed upon him by both his profession and society. His struggle highlights the tension between artistic integrity and the pressure to conform to commercial and ideological demands. As a filmmaker, D operates in a world where truth is often subjective, and appearances hold more value than moral absolutes. This section explores how his conflict unfolds, analyzing the ways in which he negotiates his sense of self within a society that commodifies identity. D's artistic ambitions place him in a paradoxical position—his work requires him to manipulate reality, yet he longs for authenticity in his personal and professional life. Filmmaking, as an art form, allows for reinterpretation, distortion, and reinvention, but this creative freedom also creates moral dilemmas. In a world where narratives are shaped to serve particular interests, D is forced to question whether he is simply reinforcing societal illusions or using his platform to challenge them. His conflict arises from the realization that artistic expression is rarely free from external pressures, and the line between authenticity and performance is often blurred. A key aspect of D's struggle is his engagement with dominant moral frameworks. As a filmmaker, he is expected to adhere to industry standards, which often prioritize profit, mass appeal, and political correctness over artistic depth. His work is scrutinized not only by audiences but also by the broader structures of media and entertainment, which dictate what is acceptable and marketable. This external control forces him to move through a landscape where his personal values and creative vision frequently come into conflict with societal expectations. Unlike Petya, who rigidly resists

external influence, D must actively engage with these forces, attempting to carve out a space where he can remain true to his art without being entirely consumed by commercial pressures. D's friends advise him to get professional assistance in order to ascertain whether he is transgender, transsexual, transvestite, or crossdresser. In answer, D states that being gay was a biological fact rather than a personal preference. When they start talking about gender identity, he wonders whether they are suggesting that it's a decision. The reply from his friend is, "Choosing an identity isn't as simple or superficial as picking a box of cereal at the store" (Rushdie 111-112).

D's relationships further complicate his internal conflict, as he is constantly caught between personal authenticity and the roles he is expected to play. In both his professional and personal life, he is expected to present a version of himself that aligns with societal ideals. His struggle is not just about artistic expression but also about identity—who he is beyond the carefully curated image demanded by his industry. In chapter twenty-four, after the death of Nero Golden's middle child Apu, he says to D for his gender identity—

He was no longer the boy I knew, not the son I raised, but a stranger in his own skin.

A creature of his own making, a phoenix rising from the ashes of the old self. I don't know how to love this new being, this creature of light and shadow" (Rushdie 241)

This tension is reflective of a broader theme in the novel: the difficulty of maintaining personal integrity in a world where identities are often performative. His relationships serve as a microcosm of this battle, showing how the pressure to conform extends beyond professional spaces into personal interactions. The psychological impact of D's dual existence is profound, as he continuously oscillates between self-expression and social expectation. Unlike Petya, who is paralyzed by his moral rigidity, D actively engages in negotiation, but this comes at a cost. The constant pressure to align his work and identity with societal norms leads to self-doubt and existential questioning. His internal battle raises the question of whether true authenticity is possible in a world driven by spectacle and illusion. Can one ever be entirely free from external influence, or is selfhood always a construct shaped by the world around us? Thus, D's journey reflects the broader existential crisis of individuals navigating creative and moral dilemmas in a society governed by constructed realities. His struggle highlights the difficulty of maintaining artistic and personal authenticity within industries and cultures that prioritize superficiality over substance. Through D's character, Salman Rushdie explores the tension between creation and conformity, raising important questions about the cost of self-expression in a world that demands performance. His journey suggests that while negotiation with societal norms is inevitable, the pursuit of authenticity remains an ongoing and deeply personal battle.

Shaping the Self-Morality Society and Personal Identity

The statement "God is dead, and identity fills the vacuum" (Rushdie 72) reflects a postmodern condition where traditional sources of meaning—such as religion—have diminished, leaving individuals to seek purpose and belonging through personal or collective identities. In a world stripped of absolute truths, identity becomes a powerful construct through which people make sense of their existence and assert their place in society. This shift is evident in how D confronts their sexual identity, using it as a means to make sense of self in a fragmented cultural landscape. While Rushdie's works often foreground the fluidity and performance of identity in a postcolonial context, a deeper reading reveals a contrasting undercurrent of internal constancy—“The discussion on identity is, however, to be qualified in that Rushdie's characters hardly change; their inner identity remains stable” (Batra 506). The conversation between D, Riya, and Ivy Mantel centers around the complexities and tensions surrounding D's sexual identity. Through their exchange, the characters explore issues of self-discovery, societal expectations, and personal acceptance—

'Or maybe transfeminine, because you're born male, identify with many aspects of femaleness, but you don't feel you actually are a woman.'

'The word woman is being detached from biology. Also, the word man.'

'Or if you don't identify with woman-ness or man-ness, maybe you're non-binary.'

(Rushdie 111-12)

The struggle between morality and societal expectations is not limited to individual characters but extends to the broader philosophical and psychological exploration of identity in the novel. Petya and D, despite their different approaches to conflict, both highlight how personal identity is shaped through an ongoing negotiation between internal convictions and external pressures. Their contrasting experiences illustrate the complexities of selfhood in a world that demands both adherence to social norms and the assertion of individuality. The novel presents identity as a fluid construct shaped by moral struggles, societal expectations, and personal agency. Petya's rigid morality and inability to adapt reveal the challenges of selfhood when personal principles come into direct conflict with societal norms. His neurodivergence and strict moral code prevent him from engaging with the world in ways that would allow for personal and professional success. His identity remains largely static, defined by his resistance to compromise. However, this inflexibility leads to isolation, highlighting the dangers of an identity that refuses to evolve in response to external realities. Through Petya, Rushdie illustrates how an unyielding sense of morality can become a form of self-imposed exile rather than a source of strength. In contrast, D's identity is constantly shifting, shaped by his engagement with both artistic ambition and societal expectations. As

filmmaker, he understands that identity—both personal and collective—is often constructed, performed, and reinvented. Unlike Petya, who clings to a fixed sense of self, D actively participates in the process of self-definition, using his art as a means of exploring and questioning his own moral values. His journey reflects the idea that identity is not static but rather an evolving construct shaped by experience, relationships, and external pressures. However, this adaptability also comes with its own struggles, as D frequently questions the authenticity of his choices.

The novel presents a larger commentary on how society influences the construction of identity, often demanding conformity while simultaneously celebrating individuality. The tension between these opposing forces creates a paradox in which individuals must constantly balance between self-authenticity and social acceptance. Petya's failure to adapt and D's struggle to reconcile his personal and professional life both underscore the ways in which identity is shaped by the moral and social frameworks within which individuals operate. The novel suggests that identity is neither entirely self-determined nor entirely dictated by external forces but exists in the space between personal conviction and societal influence. A key question raised by *The Golden House* is whether true authenticity is possible in a world that constantly imposes expectations on individuals. Petya's rigid moral compass and D's flexible self-definition represent two ends of the spectrum, each with its own consequences. The novel challenges the reader to consider whether selfhood can ever be fully independent of social structures or if it is always, to some degree, a performance shaped by external forces. This dilemma reflects broader philosophical questions about free will, agency, and the nature of moral responsibility. Ultimately, the novel presents identity as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state, shaped through the continuous interaction between personal morality and societal expectations. Petya's tragic isolation and D's existential struggle both illustrate the costs of navigating this tension. Through these characters, Rushdie explores the fluidity of selfhood, suggesting that while complete authenticity may be unattainable, the act of shaping one's identity remains a crucial and deeply personal endeavor—

Just like the characters in this novel transform themselves and move towards the other extreme, the surviving truth, if it could be termed so, is the only transcending reality changing itself with every turn of the event. Yet Rushdie ends the novel with a sense of hope with the baby and the Rene couple. Thus, *The Golden House* is all about the pursuit of identity. (Prasad 604)

Therefore, the novel invites readers to reflect on their own negotiations with morality, society, and the construction of self.

Conclusion

The inner conflicts faced by Petya and D in *The Golden House* highlight the profound struggle between personal morality and societal expectations. Their journeys illustrate the psychological and emotional turmoil that arises when individuals are forced to struggle with the complexities of selfhood in a world that demands both conformity and self-expression. Petya, with his rigid moral integrity and neurodivergence, finds himself increasingly isolated, unable to reconcile his values with the demands of society. In contrast, D, as a filmmaker working in an industry built on illusion, grapples with the difficulty of maintaining artistic and personal authenticity in a space where identity is constantly shaped and reshaped. These struggles serve as a microcosm of the broader tension between moral conviction and societal pressure, raising important questions about the nature of identity and selfhood. Petya's downfall underscores the dangers of moral inflexibility in an unforgiving society. His inability to adapt, coupled with his intense fear of failure and rejection, leads him into a state of emotional and psychological distress. His story demonstrates that while moral integrity is often seen as a virtue, an unyielding adherence to rigid principles can become a form of self-destruction. His tragic arc suggests that a balance between personal values and societal engagement is necessary for survival, as complete detachment from the external world results in alienation and suffering. Through Petya, Rushdie critiques a society that fails to accommodate those who do not fit within its predefined structures, exposing the harsh realities faced by individuals who struggle with neurodivergence and social nonconformity.

In contrast, D's conflict illustrates the challenges of negotiating selfhood in a world where identity is often a construct shaped by external forces. Unlike Petya, D actively engages with the tensions between his personal beliefs and societal expectations, attempting to reconcile his artistic ambitions with the constraints of the industry he operates in. However, his constant negotiation comes at a cost, leading to self-doubt and existential questioning. His journey suggests that while adaptation is necessary for personal and professional survival, it can also blur the boundaries of authenticity. Through D, Rushdie explores the price of self-expression in a world governed by constructed realities, demonstrating that even those who actively shape their identities are not entirely free from external influences. Together, the experiences of Petya and D offer two contrasting but complementary perspectives on the struggle between morality and societal norms. Petya's rigid stance and D's fluid negotiation represent two different ways of dealing with inner conflict, each with its own set of consequences. Their stories reveal that identity is neither completely self-determined nor entirely dictated by society; rather, it is an evolving construct shaped by personal convictions, external expectations, and the ability to balance between the

two. The novel suggests that while inner conflict is inevitable, individuals must find ways to balance personal integrity with social engagement in order to forge a meaningful existence.

At its core, Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*, "An amalgamation of political and social satire, internal identity struggle and a reinterpretation of historical events" (Mehra 774), presents a meditation on the fluidity of identity and the ongoing negotiation between selfhood and societal influence. Rushdie challenges the reader to consider the extent to which individuals can remain true to themselves while operating within a world that imposes expectations and limitations. The novel does not offer definitive answers but instead invites reflection on the complex and often painful process of self-definition. Petya and D's struggles serve as a reminder that identity is never fixed; it is continuously reshaped through experiences, relationships, and the choices one makes in response to external pressures. Hence, the novel reveals that the battle between moral values and societal expectations is a universal human experience. Whether through resistance, as seen in Petya, or negotiation, as seen in D, individuals must deal with the challenges of self-definition in a world that demands both authenticity and adaptation. Rushdie's novel encourages readers to examine their own conflicts between personal values and external demands, highlighting the delicate and often precarious nature of identity. In doing so, it affirms that while the struggle between morality and society may never be fully resolved, it is in this very struggle that the essence of selfhood is formed.

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