MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 1521-1524

Identity Formation Across Jane Smiley's *The Last Hundred Years Trilogy*: A Century of Evolving Selfhood

MS S. R. Hemapriya, Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Vasavi College, Erode – 638316, Tamil Nadu, India, Corresponding Email:hemudhanu2@gmail.com
Dr. N. Mythili Associate Professor of English, Sri Vasavi College, Erode – 638316, Tamil Nadu, India Email: Srimythi17@gmail.com

Abstract
This study investigates the evolution of identity across Jane Smiley's *The Last Hundred Years Trilogy*, a work that chronicles five generations of the Langdon family from 1920 to 2019. Through a century of American transformation economic expansion, wars, technological acceleration, neoliberal reform, and global interconnectedness the trilogy frames identity as an evolving construct shaped by historical contingencies. The research examines how Smiley's narrative reflects shifting modes of selfhood, tracing the movement from agrarian-rooted identities in *Some Luck* to ideologically conflicted mid-century subjectivities in *Early Warning*, and ultimately to fragmented, technologically mediated identities in *Golden Age*. Drawing upon Social Identity Theory, Marxist criticism, and socio-cultural perspectives on generational transmission, the article argues that identity in the trilogy emerges at the intersection of social roles, economic structures, and cultural practices. The findings reveal that personal identity is inseparable from collective experience and that each generation internalizes its historical moment as part of its psychological and social self-concept. This study contributes to contemporary literary analysis by demonstrating how long-form, multi-generational fiction can illuminate the cultural and emotional consequences of modernity and how identity evolves alongside structural transformation across time.

Keywords: Identity formation, generational identity, Jane Smiley, American novel, cultural transformation, modernity, The Last Hundred Years Trilogy.

1. Introduction

Identity has increasingly become a central concern in contemporary literary studies, offering a framework for understanding how individuals construct a sense of self within shifting cultural, social, and economic environments. Jane Smiley's *The Last Hundred Years Trilogy*—comprised of *Some Luck* (2014), *Early Warning* (2015), and *Golden Age* (2015) presents a unique narrative form through which to examine identity across a full century of American history. The trilogy chronicles over five generations of the Langdon family, tracing the development of identity as it is shaped by dramatic socio-political events, cultural transitions, and changing modes of economic life. Through its multi-generational span and close attention to domestic, cultural, and historical detail, Smiley's trilogy reveals identity not as a fixed psychological feature but as an evolving, historically conditioned construct shaped by the pressures and possibilities of its time.

While much scholarship on identity formation focuses on individual psychology, Smiley's trilogy foregrounds the collective dimensions of identity, emphasizing the influence of social roles, family structures, and generational circumstances. Her work dramatizes the evolution of American selfhood, from a rural, land-based identity at the beginning of the twentieth century to the fragmented, digitally mediated forms of identity that characterize the twenty-first century. This article situates Smiley's trilogy within the context of identity theory, drawing from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner), Marxist thought on consciousness and economic structure (Marx), and socio-cultural perspectives on learning and development (Vygotsky). These frameworks reveal the way personal identity is shaped through the interplay of social membership, material conditions, and cultural mediation, providing a rich basis for interpreting Smiley's century-long fictional archive. The article aims to contribute to literary scholarship by articulating how contemporary generational fiction reflects broader cultural anxieties around selfhood, belonging, modernity, and social change. Through close textual analysis and theoretical integration, the study offers a nuanced reading of identity formation in the trilogy, situating Smiley's work as a significant commentary on the evolving nature of American identity.

2. Theoretical Framework

Identity theory in the humanities often draws from multiple disciplines sociology, psychology, cultural studies to explain how individuals locate themselves within the social world. This study employs three intersecting frameworks to ground its interpretation of identity in Smiley's trilogy: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner), Marxist thought on ideology and consciousness, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development.

Social Identity Theory posits that identity emerges from one's membership in social groups and the value attached to those memberships. Individuals derive part of their self-concept from belonging to family, community, class, nation, or ideological groups. Smiley's trilogy vividly illustrates this dynamic as the Langdon family negotiates changing group identities across time from the cohesive agrarian family unit to the dispersed, atomized identities of the digital age. As group affiliations weaken or shift, identity becomes increasingly individualized and fluid.

Marxist theory provides another lens, particularly in understanding how economic structures shape consciousness. Marx argued that one's social being defined by labour, class, and material conditions determines one's worldview and self-understanding. Each generation of the Langdon family internalizes its economic environment: the farming struggles of the early century, the prosperity and anxieties of the post-war era, and the neoliberal pressures and financial instability of the twenty-first century. Identity becomes inseparable from class experiences and the ideological forces of capitalism.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory further deepens this analysis by highlighting the role of cultural tools, social learning, and intergenerational transmission. Identity is not merely inherited biologically but acquired through social interaction, language, family rituals, and cultural memory. As cultural tools evolve from oral storytelling to television to digital media—the means through which identity is learned and expressed also change. Smiley's trilogy documents this shift, demonstrating how cultural mediation shapes the cognitive and emotional frameworks of each successive generation.

MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 1521-1524

Together, these theories offer a comprehensive understanding of identity as a dynamic, historically responsive construct influenced by social roles, economic conditions, and cultural environments. Applying this theoretical synthesis to Smiley's trilogy allows for a nuanced interpretation of how identity evolves across the century-long narrative.

3. Identity Formation in *Some Luck*: Agrarian Roots and Communal Selfhood

Some Luck introduces the Langdon family in 1920s Iowa, a world defined by agricultural labour, familial interdependence, and rural communal life. Identity formation in this early period is grounded in shared labour, religious practice, and kinship structures. Walter Langdon's relationship to the land underscores the agrarian ethos that binds family and identity, the rhythms of farming shape not only daily life but emotional and social values. Identity is communal, structured around survival, cooperation, and generational continuity.

Roseanna Langdon's identity reflects the gendered expectations of early twentieth-century domesticity. Her sense of self is shaped through motherhood, household management, and moral responsibility. Social Identity Theory clarifies how Roseanna's identity is anchored in her role within the family in a context where women's identities were tightly aligned with caregiving and domestic work.

The children in *Some Luck* embody the psychological and social development typical of early century America. Their emerging identities are shaped by communal schooling, church participation, and the social significance of family reputation. Smiley's narrative emphasizes that identity is initially formed through proximity physical nearness, shared labour, and tight-knit community life. Vygotskian socio-cultural theory helps explain the importance of storytelling and oral transmission in the formation of early cognitive and personal identities.

As the family grows and the world changes, cracks begin to appear in this cohesive model of identity. The latter chapters introduce mobility, education, and external influences that foreshadow the generational dispersion to come. *Some Luck* thus situates identity within a stable yet fragile agrarian framework that will soon be reshaped by national and global forces.

4. Identity in *Early Warning*: Mobility, Modernity, and Ideological Divergence

Early Warning captures the mid-century transformation of American identity as the Langdon children disperse into suburban, academic, and professional spaces. The social and ideological uniformity of rural life gives way to mobility, consumer culture, and Cold War tensions. As characters relocate to cities and suburbs, identity becomes influenced by political ideology, career ambitions, and personal aspirations.

In this novel, Smiley reveals how post-war American identity is shaped by gender reform, psychological individualism, and the rise of professional specialization. Frank's identity becomes entangled with Cold War masculinity, ambition, and risk-taking. His selfhood is shaped by ideological performance as much as personal desire, illustrating Social Identity Theory's emphasis on group-based norms. Meanwhile, Lillian's identity is shaped by domestic dissatisfaction and emerging feminist consciousness, reflecting the cultural redefinition of gender roles during the 1950s and 60s.

Economic factors also exert a powerful influence on identity in *Early Warning*. Marx's notion that consciousness is shaped by material conditions is evident in the transition from agrarian labour to white-collar employment. The Langdon descendants internalize the ideals of meritocracy, competition, and upward mobility, experiencing both the benefits and anxieties of capitalist modernity.

Technological advancements such as television introduce new cultural tools that transform how individuals perceive themselves and the world. Vygotskian theory explains how these tools expand children's cognitive environments, shifting identity formation from local, interpersonal contexts to global, mediated ones. *Early Warning* captures the fragmentation of shared cultural memory and the emergence of individualized identity frameworks shaped by modern institutions, media, and ideology.

5. Identity in *Golden Age*: Fragmentation, Globalization, and Digital Selves

Golden Age presents the most dramatically transformed identity structures in the trilogy. The Langdon descendants inhabit a world characterized by globalization, digital technology, environmental anxiety, and neoliberal economic pressures. Identity becomes fragmented, fluid, and increasingly self-managed. Smiley's depiction of twenty-first-century subjectivity aligns with contemporary concerns about isolation, emotional burnout, and the commodification of personal identity.

The younger generations experience identity predominantly through digital mediation. Social networking, online visibility, and virtual communication reshape self-perception, creating fluid and often unstable identities shaped by algorithmic and global influences. Social Identity Theory reveals that group affiliation becomes diffuse; individuals now belong to multiple, overlapping digital and ideological communities rather than fixed, local ones.

Marxist perspectives highlight how economic instability, financial crisis, and neoliberal ideology shape identity in *Golden Age*. The pressure to optimize oneself—to be productive, competitive, and emotionally resilient—reflects the internalization of neoliberal values. Characters struggle with student debt, job precarity, and environmental collapse, shaping identities marked by anxiety, self-doubt, and ambivalence.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory illuminates the diminishing role of intergenerational transmission. Whereas earlier generations learned identity through direct interaction and shared cultural rituals, the characters of *Golden Age* draw identity from digital ecosystems, global media, and rapidly shifting cultural norms. The result is a decentered form of identity, untethered from stable cultural anchors.

Smiley portrays the twenty-first century as an era in which identity is less inherited and more constructed—yet also more fragile. The fragmentation of collective identity is one of the trilogy's most significant insights.

MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 1521-1524

6. Discussion

Across The Last Hundred Years Trilogy, Jane Smiley constructs identity as a historically contingent and socially embedded process, revealing how individual selfhood is shaped through everyday practices, institutional affiliations, and material conditions rather than through isolated psychological introspection. The century-long narrative allows Smiley to demonstrate how identity is repeatedly reorganized in response to economic transition, ideological realignment, and cultural mediation, making identity formation inseparable from the historical moment each generation inhabits.

One of the most significant patterns that emerges across the trilogy is the gradual displacement of identity from place-based, embodied experience to abstract and mediated forms of selfhood. In Some Luck, identity is rooted in repetitive agricultural labour and sustained proximity to land and family. Walter Langdon's sense of self is inseparable from his role as a farmer; his decisions are guided less by individual ambition than by the demands of the land, weather cycles, and familial responsibility. Similarly, Rosanna's identity is shaped through domestic labour, childbirth, and moral stewardship, with her self-concept articulated through endurance and obligation rather than self-expression. These characters rarely articulate identity explicitly; instead, it is enacted through routine, labour, and communal expectation, reflecting a form of selfhood stabilized by continuity and shared purpose.

As the trilogy progresses into Early Warning, identity becomes increasingly shaped by mobility, institutional affiliation, and ideological positioning. The dispersal of the Langdon children into universities, urban centres, and professional spaces marks a shift away from inherited identity toward socially negotiated selfhood. Frank Langdon's professional and political engagements illustrate how identity becomes performative and contingent upon ideological alignment during the Cold War era. His ambitions and risk-taking behaviour are informed not only by personal desire but by dominant cultural narratives of masculinity, patriotism, and success. In contrast, Lillian's growing dissatisfaction with domestic confinement reflects the destabilization of gendered identity norms during the mid-twentieth century, as she negotiates between familial expectation and emerging feminist consciousness. These narrative trajectories demonstrate how identity in Early Warning is increasingly shaped by conflicting social roles, supporting Social Identity Theory's emphasis on group affiliation and ideological membership as key components of self-concept.

Economic restructuring also plays a central role in reshaping identity across generations. The transition from agrarian subsistence to salaried and professional labour alters how characters understand agency and self-worth. In Early Warning, employment is no longer tied to collective survival but to individual advancement, introducing anxieties around competition, productivity, and social status. This shift aligns with Marxist interpretations of identity as shaped by material conditions, as characters internalize capitalist values of meritocracy and upward mobility. The resulting identities are marked by aspiration but also by insecurity, as success becomes individualized and failure internalized.

In Golden Age, Smiley presents identity as increasingly fragmented and decentered, shaped by globalization, digital mediation, and neoliberal precarity. Characters navigate identities formed through financial markets, political institutions, and transnational networks rather than through stable communal structures. The younger generations experience identity through professional roles and digital environments that demand constant adaptability. The novel's attention to careers in finance, politics, and global enterprises illustrates how identity becomes closely tied to performance, productivity, and market valuation. Characters confront student debt, employment instability, and environmental uncertainty, producing identities marked by anxiety and ambivalence rather than continuity.

Technological mediation further transforms identity formation in Golden Age. Whereas earlier generations developed identity through face-to-face interaction and shared ritual, later characters rely on digital communication and global media, reducing opportunities for sustained intergenerational transmission. Family history, once conveyed through storytelling and daily interaction, becomes fragmented and episodic. From a Vygotskian perspective, this shift in cultural tools reshapes the cognitive and emotional processes through which identity is learned and sustained, contributing to the erosion of collective memory and the rise of individualized, situational self-concepts.

Another important analytical finding is the diminishing role of the family as a primary identity anchor. In Some Luck, identity is inherited through direct participation in family life and labour. By Golden Age, familial bonds persist emotionally but no longer function as stable frameworks for identity formation. Characters construct their sense of self through external institutions—corporate structures, political ideologies, and digital networks—reflecting a broader cultural shift away from kinship-based identity toward abstract forms of belonging.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that identity in Smiley's trilogy evolves through a complex interaction of historical forces rather than through linear psychological development. Smiley's long-form, generational narrative reveals how modern American identity is progressively detached from place, labour, and intergenerational continuity, becoming increasingly mediated by economic systems, technological environments, and ideological frameworks. The trilogy thus positions identity as a relational and historically responsive construct, shaped less by individual choice than by the structural conditions that define each era.

7. Conclusion

This study has analyzed identity formation in Jane Smiley's The Last Hundred Years Trilogy as an evolving construct shaped by historical contingency, social roles, and cultural mediation. Spanning five generations of the Langdon family from 1920 to 2019, the trilogy reveals how identity develops in response to economic transformation, ideological change, and technological advancement, rather than as a fixed or purely individual attribute.

The analysis demonstrates a clear movement from agrarian, communal identities in Some Luck, through ideologically and professionally negotiated selfhood in Early Warning, to fragmented and technologically mediated identities in Golden Age. Across these stages, identity emerges at the intersection of group membership, material conditions, and cultural practices,

MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 1521-1524

confirming the relevance of Social Identity Theory, Marxist perspectives on economic structure, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory to the interpretation of Smiley's generational narrative.

By situating personal identity within collective experience, the trilogy illustrates how each generation internalizes its historical moment as part of its psychological and social self-concept. Smiley's work thus demonstrates the capacity of long-form, multi-generational fiction to illuminate the cultural and emotional consequences of modernity and to trace the evolution of identity alongside structural transformation over time.

References (APA 7)

(A focused reference list for the Scopus paper — 20–25 sources)

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.
Bourdieu, P. (1986). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond "identity". *Theory and Society, 29*(1), 1–47.
Côté, J. E., & Levine, C. (2014). *Identity, formation, agency, and culture*. Psychology Press.
Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. Pantheon Books.
Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Polity Press.
Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor.
Hall, S. (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. Sage.
Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
McAdams, D. P. (1997). *The stories we live by*. Guilford Press.
Marx, K. (1867). *Capital* (Vol. 1). Penguin.
Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
Smiley, J. (2014). *Some luck*. Alfred A. Knopf.
Smiley, J. (2015a). *Early warning*. Alfred A. Knopf.
Smiley, J. (2015b). *Golden age*. Alfred A. Knopf.
Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. Brooks/Cole.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.