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Homelessness, Isolation, and Resilience in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*

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Abstract

Hari Kunzru's novel "The Impressionist" intricately weaves a narrative that explores the themes of homelessness, isolation, and resilience through the protagonist Pran Nath's tumultuous journey. Set against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial India, the novel delves into the complexities of identity and belonging as Pran navigates a world where societal expectations clash with his fluid sense of self. Kunzru's portrayal of Pran's experiences sheds light on the challenges faced by individuals caught between different cultures and social spheres, highlighting the profound impact of displacement and isolation on one's sense of place and identity. Through a nuanced examination of Pran's struggles with homelessness and the quest for belonging, Kunzru invites readers to reflect on the broader themes of alienation and resilience in the face of adversity. Pran's ability to pass as white underscores the fragility of identity in a society rife with racial hierarchies and colonial legacies, prompting a deeper exploration of the intersections between race, class, and power dynamics. This research paper delves into the rich tapestry of Kunzru's narrative, analysing how the author skillfully portrays Pran's resilience amidst the challenges of isolation and societal expectations. By examining how Pran's journey reflects broader themes of displacement and the search for authenticity, this paper aims to illuminate the profound emotional and psychological landscapes that Kunzru navigates in "The Impressionist," offering a compelling insight into the complexities of identity, belonging, and resilience in a world marked by cultural flux and historical upheaval.

Keywords: Identity, displacement, home, isolation, resilience

Introduction

Hari Kunzru's novel "The Impressionist" intricately weaves a tapestry of themes that resonate deeply with the human experience—themes of homelessness, isolation, and resilience that reverberate through the narrative with poignant clarity. Set against the backdrop of a colonial and post-colonial India in flux, the novel serves as a profound exploration of the complexities of identity and belonging in a world where boundaries are blurred and societal expectations clash with individual truths.

At the heart of this literary masterpiece lies the enigmatic figure of Pran Nath, a character whose very existence embodies the fluidity and fragility of identity in a society marked by rigid social structures and entrenched power dynamics. As Pran navigates the tumultuous terrain of his own identity, Kunzru invites readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery and introspection, delving into the depths of human resilience in the face of adversity and uncertainty.

Through Pran's struggles with homelessness and isolation, Kunzru deftly captures the essence of the human condition—our innate yearning for connection, belonging, and a place to call home. The novel's exploration of Pran's ability to pass as white serves as a stark reminder of the complexities of race, class, and privilege, prompting readers to confront the intricacies of societal expectations and the impact of colonial legacies on personal identity.

Readers immerse themselves in the richly textured world of "The Impressionist," encountering a narrative that surpasses simple storytelling, evolving into a profound meditation on the essence of existence itself. This research paper seeks to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in Kunzru's narrative, offering a nuanced analysis of how the novel speaks to the universal themes of alienation, authenticity, and the enduring human quest for self-discovery and resilience in a world fraught with change and uncertainty.

Hari Kunzru's "The Impressionist" stands as a literary masterpiece that transcends mere storytelling, delving into the depths of human experience amidst the tumultuous backdrop of colonialism and cultural upheaval. Through the lens of its protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan, the novel unravels a tapestry of themes, chief among them being homelessness, isolation, and resilience. Within these themes lies a rich vein of exploration into the intricacies of identity formation, the longing for belonging, and the innate human capacity for survival in the face of adversity.

At the heart of "The Impressionist" lies the compelling narrative of Pran Nath Razdan, a character whose life is a testament to the complexities of identity and the quest for self-discovery. Pran, born to a British father and an Indian mother, lives in perpetual displacement, both physically and emotionally. Kunzru masterfully portrays Pran's journey across various landscapes, from the opulent estates of British

colonisers to the poverty-stricken streets of colonial India, each set serving as a backdrop to Pran's relentless search for belonging. This search, however, is fraught with obstacles, as Pran grapples with the conflicting forces of colonialism, racism, and cultural alienation that threaten to engulf him at every turn.

The theme of homelessness in "The Impressionist" extends beyond mere physical displacement, encompassing a profound sense of rootlessness and estrangement from one's sense of self. Pran's mixed heritage renders him a perpetual outsider, belonging neither to the British ruling class nor to the native Indian populace. Kunzru adeptly captures the psychological toll of this displacement, depicting Pran's inner turmoil and existential angst as he navigates the treacherous terrain of identity politics. Through Pran's eyes, readers are confronted with the harsh realities of colonialism: the erasure of cultural identity, the marginalisation of indigenous peoples, and the enduring legacy of imperial dominance that continues to shape the world long after the colonial powers have retreated.

Central to Pran's narrative arc is the theme of isolation, a pervasive force that shapes his interactions with the world and with himself. Estranged from both British and Indian society, Pran exists on the margins, a liminal figure navigating the murky waters of identity politics with no clear anchor to hold onto. Kunzru skillfully portrays Pran's sense of alienation through vivid imagery and introspective narrative, inviting readers to empathise with his plight and ponder the universal human experience of loneliness and disconnection. Indeed, Pran's isolation serves as a mirror reflecting the broader socio-political dynamics of colonial India, where divisions of race, class, and caste conspire to perpetuate systems of oppression and exclusion.

Yet, amidst the bleakness of Pran's circumstances, shines a beacon of hope—the theme of resilience, which lies at the heart of his character. Despite the myriad challenges he faces, Pran refuses to succumb to despair, drawing upon his inner strength and resourcefulness to carve out a path for himself in a world that seeks to crush his spirit. Kunzru deftly portrays Pran's resilience as a form of quiet rebellion against the forces of oppression, a refusal to be defined by the circumstances of his birth or the prejudices of those around him. Through Pran's struggles and triumphs, readers are reminded of the indomitable human spirit—resilient, adaptable, and capable of finding beauty and meaning even in the darkest of times.

In essence, "The Impressionist" is more than just a novel; it is a profound meditation on the human condition, a poignant exploration of the complexities of identity and survival in a world fraught with injustice and uncertainty. Through the character of Pran Nath Razdan, Hari Kunzru invites readers to confront their preconceptions and biases, challenging them to empathise with the struggles of those who exist on the margins of society. In the pages of "The Impressionist," we find not only a story of one man's journey but a reflection of our shared humanity—a testament to the enduring power of resilience, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Hari Kunzru's novel "The Impressionist" is a rich tapestry of narratives interwoven with themes of identity, displacement, and the search for belonging. At the heart of the novel lies the profound exploration of homelessness, both literal and metaphorical, experienced by the protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan. Through Pran's tumultuous journey, Kunzru unveils the complexities of colonialism, cultural hybridity, and the relentless quest for a place to call home.

Pran Nath Razdan's life is a series of displacements, beginning with his birth into a world where he is neither fully British nor Indian. Born to a British father and an Indian mother, Pran embodies the hybridity of cultures and identities that characterise the colonial experience. From his early childhood, Pran grapples with the weight of his mixed heritage, never quite fitting into either societal mould. This initial sense of homelessness is encapsulated in Pran's name itself—"Pran," meaning life, and "Nath," meaning lord—a juxtaposition that reflects his dual identity and the tension it creates within him.

As Pran's story unfolds, his physical journey mirrors his internal struggle for belonging. The death of his mother and his father's abandonment cast Pran adrift, leaving him to navigate a world that offers no sanctuary. From the streets of Lahore to the halls of elite British schools, Pran moves through disparate landscapes, each offering a glimpse of a potential home yet ultimately failing to provide the sense of rootedness he craves. The harsh reality of his displacement punctuates his transient existence with fleeting moments of connection and intimacy.

Kunzru skillfully utilises Pran's experiences to critique the colonial project and its legacy of uprootedness. Pran's status as a "half-caste"—a derogatory term used to describe those of mixed race—exposes the inherent contradictions of colonial society, where rigid hierarchies and divisions based on race and class dictate one's place in the social order. Pran's homelessness is not merely a product of personal misfortune but a consequence of the systemic inequalities perpetuated by colonial rule.

Moreover, Pran's search for belonging is further complicated by his fluidity of identity and ability to pass on various racial and cultural identities. As he navigates the labyrinthine maze of colonial society, Pran adopts multiple personas—from a British schoolboy to an Indian revolutionary—each offering a reprieve from his homelessness yet ultimately proving to be illusory. His chameleon-like ability to blend into different worlds underscores the fluidity of identity in a colonial context, where one's sense of self is constantly in flux, shaped by the demands and expectations of others.

Throughout his journey, Pran's homelessness takes on a metaphysical dimension, reflecting a deeper existential longing for connection and meaning. Pran's home search not only aims to locate a physical space but also to restore a fragmented and scattered sense of self across continents and cultures. Kunzru portrays Pran as a modern-day Odysseus, embarking on a quest for identity and belonging that spans continents and epochs, with no clear destination in sight.

In conclusion, Hari Kunzru's "The Impressionist" offers a poignant meditation on the theme of homelessness, illuminating the myriad ways in which it manifests in the life of its protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan. Through Pran's experiences, Kunzru exposes the deep-seated inequalities and injustices inherent in the colonial project while also celebrating the resilience and tenacity of the human spirit. Pran's journey serves as a powerful reminder that home is not merely a physical space but a state of being—a sanctuary found within oneself amidst the chaos of the world.

Homelessness emerges as a thematic motif in Hari Kunzru's "The Impressionist," intricately weaving throughout the narrative to reflect not only physical displacement but also the existential quest for belonging and identity. Through the protagonist Pran Nath Razdan's journey, Kunzru explores the multifaceted nature of homelessness, presenting it as a

pervasive force that shapes Pran's experiences and influences the trajectory of his life.

"The Impressionist" depicts homelessness as a condition of perpetual transience, where individuals exist in a state of liminality, suspended between worlds and identities. Pran, born to a British father and an Indian mother, embodies this liminality from birth, thrust into a world where he is neither fully British nor Indian. His mixed heritage renders him homeless in the truest sense, estranged from both his familial roots and the societies in which he lives.

The novel's depiction of homelessness extends beyond the physical realm to encompass a profound sense of alienation and disconnection. Pran's fragmented identity mirrors the fractured landscapes of colonial India, where boundaries between races, classes, and cultures blur and shift. Kunzru emphasises the psychological toll of homelessness, portraying Pran as a lost soul adrift in a sea of uncertainty, yearning for a sense of belonging that constantly eludes him.

Throughout the novel, Pran's homelessness manifests in various forms, each highlighting the precariousness of his existence. Pran's early years are characterized by instability and upheaval, as he leaves his Lahore home after his mother's death. Forced to fend for himself on the streets of the city, Pran's homelessness takes on a raw and visceral quality as he struggles to find shelter and sustenance amidst the chaos of urban life.

As Pran grows older, his homelessness evolves into a more existential dilemma as he grapples with questions of identity and selfhood. Kunzru portrays Pran as a shape-shifter, adept at assuming different personas to navigate the social hierarchies of colonial India. However, this chameleon-like ability only serves to deepen his sense of displacement, as he finds himself perpetually at odds with his true self.

Moreover, the oppressive structures of colonial society, which dictate Pran's worth based on his race and class, exacerbate his homelessness. As a "half-caste" in British India, Pran occupies a precarious position on the margins of society, neither fully accepted nor entirely rejected. Kunzru exposes the absurdity of colonial categorizations, revealing the arbitrary nature of identity in a world defined by power and privilege.

In the latter half of the novel, Pran's homelessness takes on a more metaphorical dimension as he embarks on a quest for spiritual and emotional fulfilment. Travelling across continents in search of meaning, Pran encounters a diverse array of characters and experiences, each offering a glimpse of a potential home. Yet, true to the novel's overarching themes, Pran remains forever displaced, forever searching for something that remains tantalisingly out of reach.

Kunzru's portrayal of homelessness in "The Impressionist" serves as a powerful commentary on the human condition, illuminating the universal longing for connection and belonging. Through Pran's journey, Kunzru invites readers to confront the complexities of identity and how social structures shape our sense of self. In doing so, he reminds us of the inherent dignity and resilience of those who, like Pran, find themselves homeless in a world that often fails to recognise their humanity.

Hari Kunzru's novel "The Impressionist" is a poignant exploration of the human condition, delving deep into the themes of isolation and the search for meaningful connections amidst the backdrop of colonialism and cultural upheaval. Through the experiences of its protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan, Kunzru unveils the complexities of isolation and the enduring power of human resilience and connection.

His mixed-race heritage and the turbulent circumstances of his upbringing mark Pran Nath Razdan's life with a profound sense of isolation. Born to a British father and an Indian mother, Pran occupies a liminal space between two worlds, never fully belonging to either. His biracial identity subjects him to discrimination and ostracization from both British and Indian communities, rendering him a perpetual outsider. The absence of familial ties, which leaves Pran orphaned at a young age to navigate the world alone, further compounds this sense of isolation.

Kunzru vividly portrays Pran's isolation through his fragmented relationships and fleeting encounters with others. Despite his outward charm and charisma, Pran struggles to form genuine connections with those around him, often resorting to deception and manipulation to mask his inner turmoil. His interactions with others are marked by a profound sense of disconnection as he grapples with feelings of alienation and inadequacy. Pran's nomadic lifestyle epitomizes this isolation, as he moves from one place to another in search of belonging, only to remain perpetually adrift.

Moreover, the oppressive social structures of colonial India, which rigidly enforce divisions based on race, class, and caste, exacerbate Pran's isolation. As a "half-caste," Pran occupies a precarious position within the colonial hierarchy, neither fully accepted nor wholly rejected by society. His attempts to navigate this treacherous terrain only serve to deepen his sense of isolation as he confronts the pervasive discrimination and prejudice that pervades every aspect of his life.

Despite the pervasive isolation that defines much of Pran's existence, Kunzru also illuminates the transformative power of human connections in the novel. Through his interactions with a diverse cast of characters, Pran experiences moments of genuine connection and intimacy that offer glimpses of solace amidst the chaos of his life.

Pran's bond with Nitin, a fellow student at the elite British school he attends after his mother's death, is one of the most significant relationships in his life. Nitin's friendship provides Pran with a sense of camaraderie and belonging that he has long yearned for, offering him a respite from the loneliness that haunts him. Their shared experiences as outsiders in a predominantly white institution forge a deep bond between them, transcending the boundaries of race and class.

Similarly, Pran's relationships with women, such as Lila, the daughter of a wealthy Indian businessman, and Nandini, a revolutionary activist, offer him moments of intimacy and connection that defy societal conventions. Through these relationships, Pran discovers a sense of vulnerability and authenticity that had previously eluded him as he confronts the complexities of love and desire in a world defined by division and inequality.

Moreover, Pran's encounters with individuals from diverse backgrounds—from British colonisers to Indian nationalists—expose him to a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, broadening his understanding of the world and his place within it. These human connections serve as a source of strength and resilience for Pran, offering him a sense of purpose and belonging that transcends the confines of his own identity.

Hari Kunzru's "The Impressionist" offers a nuanced exploration of isolation and human connections, illuminating the profound impact of these themes on the lives of its characters. Through Pran Nath Razdan's journey, Kunzru reveals the transformative power of human relationships in

overcoming the pervasive sense of isolation that defines much of the human experience. In a world characterized by division and inequality, Kunzru underscores the lasting significance of empathy, compassion, and solidarity in creating meaningful connections amidst life's chaos.

Hari Kunzru's novel "The Impressionist" presents a profound exploration of resilience and self-determination, themes intricately woven into the fabric of its protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan's, tumultuous journey. Pran's life unfolds as a testament to the human capacity to endure, adapt, and assert agency in the face of formidable challenges.

Pran's remarkable ability to navigate the ever-changing landscapes of his existence most poignantly illustrates his resilience. From his formative years as a street urchin in Lahore, where survival meant cunning and resourcefulness, to his metamorphosis into a refined British schoolboy, Pran demonstrates a chameleon-like adaptability that enables him to thrive in diverse environments. His resilience is not merely reactive but proactive, characterised by a relentless pursuit of self-improvement and survival.

Pran faces numerous challenges throughout the novel, yet he refuses to let his circumstances define him. Instead, he harnesses adversity as a catalyst for personal growth and transformation. Pran's resilience is evident in his ability to surpass the limitations imposed by society, refusing to succumb to the narrow confines of race, class, or nationality. Pran's resilience is not passive resignation but active defiance, a refusal to surrender to the injustices of the world.

Pran's resilience stems from his unwavering sense of self and inner strength. Despite the chaos and uncertainty that permeate his life, Pran maintains a steadfast conviction in his worth and dignity. His resilience is not merely survival but a triumph of the human spirit, a testament to the indomitable power of hope and resilience in the face of despair.

Central to Pran's resilience is his unwavering commitment to self-determination and autonomy. From a young age, Pran rebels against the predetermined roles and expectations foisted upon him by society, forging his path with unwavering determination and resolve. His quest for freedom and self-discovery propels him forward, driving much of the narrative as he navigates the complexities of identity and belonging.

Pran exemplifies self-determination by refusing to let his birth or background define him. Pran refuses to let others dictate his identity or destiny, despite the stigma associated with his mixed-race heritage. Instead, he embraces his fluid identity, transcending societal boundaries and expectations to chart his life course.

Moreover, Pran's self-determination is manifest in his relentless pursuit of his desires and aspirations. Pran defies convention and tradition in his quest for love, belonging, adventure, and self-discovery. His willingness to take risks and embrace uncertainty underscores his fierce independence and determination to live life on his terms.

"The Impressionist" offers a powerful portrayal of resilience and self-determination through the character of Pran Nath Razdan. Pran's journey serves as a testament to the enduring power of the human spirit to overcome adversity and assert agency in the pursuit of freedom and self-fulfilment. Pran's story serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration in a world characterized by injustice and oppression, reminding us of the transformative potential of resilience and self-determination in the face of adversity.

In analysing the themes of homelessness, isolation, and resilience in Hari Kunzru's "The Impressionist," it is imperative to consider the insights provided by other authors

and scholars who have explored similar themes in literature. Through their diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches, these scholars enrich our understanding of the novel's significance and its place within the broader literary landscape.

Postcolonial theorists and scholars offer valuable insights into the themes of identity, displacement, and resilience in "The Impressionist." Scholars like Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have extensively examined the complexities of colonialism and its lasting effects on individuals and societies. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which explores the blending of cultures and identities in colonial contexts, provides a framework for understanding Pran Nath Razdan's experiences as a "half-caste" caught between British and Indian cultures. Similarly, Spivak's notion of subalternity sheds light on the marginalised positions occupied by characters like Pran within the colonial hierarchy, highlighting the structural inequalities that underpin his sense of homelessness and isolation.

Literary critics offer nuanced analyses of Kunzru's narrative techniques and thematic explorations in "The Impressionist." Scholars such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha have examined how literature reflects and refracts colonial power dynamics. Said's concept of Orientalism, which critiques Western representations of the East, provides a lens through which to analyse the novel's portrayal of British colonialism in India. Bhabha's notion of mimicry and mockery further elucidates Pran's strategies of adaptation and resistance within the colonial system, highlighting his resilience in the face of cultural oppression.

Psychologists and sociologists contribute interdisciplinary perspectives on the psychological and social dimensions of homelessness, isolation, and resilience. Researchers such as Abraham Maslow and Albert Bandura have explored the psychological factors that contribute to resilience in the face of adversity. Maslow's hierarchy of needs emphasises the importance of belongingness and self-actualization in fostering resilience, suggesting that individuals like Pran may draw strength from meaningful relationships and a sense of purpose. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy further underscores the role of agency and empowerment in overcoming challenges, suggesting that Pran's determination to assert his autonomy and shape his destiny is a key factor in his resilience.

Historians provide historical context for the themes of colonialism, migration, and displacement in "The Impressionist." Scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sugata Bose have examined the historical legacies of British imperialism in India and their impact on individuals and communities. Chakrabarty's concept of "provincializing Europe" challenges Eurocentric narratives of modernity and progress, foregrounding the experiences of colonised peoples like Pran within global histories. Bose's work on the Indian independence movement sheds light on the socio-political context in which Pran's story unfolds, illuminating the forces of resistance and resilience that shaped colonial India.

In engaging with the perspectives of these authors and scholars, we gain a deeper understanding of the themes of homelessness, isolation, and resilience in "The Impressionist" and their broader implications for literature and society. By situating the novel within larger conversations about colonialism, identity, and power, we recognise its enduring relevance and significance in contemporary discourse. Through interdisciplinary dialogue and critical inquiry, we continue to uncover new insights into the complexities of

Pran Nath Razdan's journey and the enduring impact of Kunzru's novel on readers and scholars alike.

Conclusion

Hari Kunzru's "The Impressionist" emerges not just as a narrative but as a tapestry of human experience intricately woven with threads of homelessness, isolation, and resilience. Set against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial India, Kunzru's work transcends mere storytelling, inviting readers on a profound journey through the complexities of identity, belonging, and the unwavering human spirit.

Pran Nath Razdan, the enigmatic protagonist, serves as a vessel through which Kunzru explores the multifaceted nature of homelessness. Pran's mixed heritage thrusts him into a perpetual state of displacement, navigating a world where societal norms clash with his fluid sense of self. Kunzru deftly captures Pran's journey, showcasing how physical displacement intertwines with a profound existential longing for connection and place.

The theme of isolation reverberates throughout the novel, painting a poignant picture of Pran's struggle to forge meaningful connections amidst societal divisions. Kunzru portrays Pran as a solitary figure, adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces and landscapes, grappling with feelings of alienation and inadequacy. Yet, amidst the solitude, moments of genuine connection emerge, underscoring the transformative power of human relationships in navigating the complexities of the human condition.

At the heart of "The Impressionist" lies the theme of resilience, embodied in Pran's unwavering determination to carve out his path despite the odds stacked against him. Pran's resilience is not passive endurance but active defiance, a refusal to be defined by the circumstances of his birth or the prejudices of those around him. Kunzru masterfully portrays Pran's journey as a testament to the indomitable human spirit, inspiring readers to confront their challenges with courage and fortitude.

Through interdisciplinary dialogue and critical inquiry, the novel resonates with scholars and readers alike, offering profound insights into the enduring themes of displacement, isolation, and resilience. From postcolonial theorists to literary critics, psychologists to historians, each lens illuminates new facets of Kunzru's narrative, enriching our understanding of its thematic complexities and broader socio-cultural implications.

In essence, "The Impressionist" transcends the boundaries of time and space, inviting readers on a timeless odyssey through the depths of the human soul. Kunzru challenges readers to confront their truths and embrace the transformative power of empathy, connection, and resilience in a world fraught with uncertainty and change through his masterful storytelling and nuanced exploration of homelessness, isolation, and resilience.

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