

## Faction or Self? The Politics of Identity in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*

Dr. R. Rooban Raja Sekhar<sup>1</sup>, Mrs. P. Anisha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nanjil Catholic College of Arts and Science, Kaliyakkavilai-629153, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Abstract

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* explores the conflict between collective identity and individual selfhood within a dystopian society organized through rigid factional divisions. This paper examines the politics of identity in the novel by analyzing how the faction system functions as an ideological mechanism of social control that reduces human complexity to singular moral categories. Through the experiences of Beatrice "Tris" Prior, the study argues that Roth critiques authoritarian structures that demand conformity, suppress individuality, and regulate behaviour through surveillance, discipline, and ideological conditioning. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, and postmodern theories of subjectivity, the paper demonstrates how faction identity is socially constructed and performative rather than natural or fixed. Tris's condition of "Divergence" symbolizes multiplicity, hybridity, and resistance against systems of categorization that seek to define individuals according to rigid ideological boundaries. The paper further explores how the novel reflects contemporary concerns regarding political polarization, surveillance capitalism, algorithmic profiling, gender expectations, and identity politics. By situating *Divergent* within the broader tradition of dystopian literature, the study reveals how Roth transforms adolescent struggles for self-definition into a broader critique of social fragmentation and authoritarian governance. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Divergent* advocates for fluid and evolving selfhood while warning against political systems that privilege ideological purity over human complexity.

**Keywords :** Identity Politics, Faction System, Individual Identity

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* occupies a central position within contemporary young adult dystopian literature because it transforms adolescent questions of identity into larger political debates concerning ideology, surveillance, conformity, and social control. Published in 2011, the novel imagines a post-apocalyptic Chicago divided into five factions- Abnegation, Dauntless, Erudite, Candor, and Amity- each devoted to a single moral virtue. Citizens are required to choose one faction at the age of sixteen, and this choice determines not only their social role but also their entire identity. Those who fail to conform become "Factionless," politically invisible individuals excluded from social participation. At the center of this world stands Beatrice Prior, later known as Tris, whose aptitude test reveals that she does not fit neatly into one category. Her condition, called "Divergence," marks her as dangerous because she resists ideological classification.

The novel's central conflict emerges from the tension between factional belonging and individual selfhood. Roth uses the dystopian framework to interrogate how societies impose rigid identities upon individuals in order to maintain political order. The faction system appears to provide social harmony, but beneath its structure lies a deeply authoritarian ideology that reduces complex human beings into singular personality types. Through Tris's journey, *Divergent* critiques systems that demand conformity and suppress individuality while simultaneously arguing for multiplicity, contradiction, and freedom of self-definition. The novel therefore functions not merely as adolescent fiction but as a political meditation on identity formation and the dangers of ideological totalitarianism.

The politics of identity in *Divergent* become especially relevant within the context of contemporary society, where political polarization, cultural tribalism, and algorithmic categorization increasingly shape personal and social identities. Roth's dystopia reflects a world in which people are encouraged to define themselves through rigid ideological affiliations. In this sense, the faction system serves as a metaphor for modern identity politics, exposing how collective belonging can both empower and oppress individuals. The conflict between "faction" and "self" therefore becomes the central thematic concern of the novel.

Scholarly discussions of *Divergent* frequently emphasize the relationship between ideology and social division. Muhammad Kiki Wardana and Sumita Roy argue that the faction system imposes dominant traits upon individuals in order to maintain political stability, creating a society in which citizens are reduced to ideological categories rather than recognized as multidimensional human beings. Their interpretation highlights the novel's critique of systems that organize social life according to rigid classifications. Similarly, recent research describing *Divergent* as a "realistic dystopia" notes that the faction system reflects contemporary anxieties regarding authoritarianism, tribalism, and the illusion of free choice. These interpretations suggest that Roth's dystopia is deeply connected to real-world political structures.

The faction system in *Divergent* operates as an ideological mechanism that transforms moral virtues into political identities. Each faction demands total commitment to a single defining characteristic. Abnegation values selflessness, Dauntless values bravery, Erudite values intelligence, Candor values honesty, and Amity values peace. The simplification of human identity into isolated virtues reflects a dangerous form of ideological essentialism. Roth demonstrates that no human being can be fully reduced to one characteristic without losing part of their humanity.

The faction structure also resembles political systems that rely upon categorization in order to maintain social order. Citizens internalize faction ideology from childhood onward, learning to perceive factional belonging as natural and morally necessary. The slogan "Faction before blood" reveals the extent to which ideology replaces personal relationships with political loyalty. Familial bonds become secondary to faction identity, illustrating how ideological systems demand total allegiance.

Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power provides an important framework for understanding how the faction system regulates behaviour. Foucault argues that modern societies maintain control not simply through violence but through surveillance, normalization, and discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, he explains that institutions produce "docile bodies" by encouraging individuals to internalize social norms. The faction system functions similarly because citizens monitor their own behavior according to faction expectations. The aptitude test, faction rituals, and initiation processes all operate as disciplinary technologies designed to shape individuals into ideologically compliant subjects.

The Dauntless faction especially illustrates Foucauldian discipline. Initiates are subjected to constant surveillance, competitive ranking, fear conditioning, and physical punishment. Their identities are formed through repetitive performances of courage and aggression. Fear simulations become mechanisms of psychological control because they expose private anxieties and condition initiates to associate vulnerability with weakness. Tris's success within these simulations reflects her resistance to ideological conditioning. Unlike ordinary citizens, she remains conscious during simulations, symbolizing her refusal to become fully subjected to disciplinary power.

Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses further clarifies how faction ideology functions politically. Althusser argues that institutions such as schools, families, and cultural systems reproduce dominant ideology by shaping individuals into obedient subjects. Citizens internalize ideology so deeply that they perceive it as natural truth rather than constructed belief. In *Divergent*, faction ideology permeates every aspect of social life. Educational systems, family structures, public ceremonies, and social rituals all reinforce the belief that factional categorization is necessary for peace.

The Choosing Ceremony appears to offer personal freedom because citizens can select their faction. However, this freedom is largely illusory. Individuals are raised within faction culture from birth, meaning that their choices are already shaped by ideological conditioning. The ceremony therefore conceals coercion beneath the appearance of autonomy. Citizens willingly submit to the system because they have been taught to believe that social stability depends upon faction loyalty.

Tris's Divergence disrupts this ideological structure because she embodies multiplicity rather than singularity. Her aptitude test reveals equal suitability for multiple factions, making her impossible to categorize. The state perceives Divergents as dangerous because they threaten the legitimacy of the faction system itself. If individuals cannot be reduced to singular identities, then the ideological foundation of society collapses.

The concept of Divergence therefore symbolizes resistance against authoritarian categorization. Tris's identity is fluid, contradictory, and evolving. She possesses qualities associated with multiple factions: selflessness from Abnegation, bravery from Dauntless, intelligence from Erudite, honesty from Candor, and compassion from Amity. Her existence challenges the assumption that human beings can be neatly divided into fixed categories.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers another useful lens for analyzing faction identity. Butler argues that identity is not innate but produced through repeated social performances. Gender, for example, becomes socially "real" because individuals repeatedly enact behaviors associated with masculinity or femininity. Similarly, faction identity in *Divergent* is performative rather than essential. Dauntless members repeatedly perform bravery through physical risk-taking and aggressive behavior. Abnegation members perform selflessness through modest dress and acts of sacrifice. Candor members perform honesty through blunt communication.

Tris disrupts faction performativity because she cannot consistently enact a single identity script. Her Divergence reveals the instability of faction categories by demonstrating that identity is not fixed but fluid. Roth thereby critiques essentialist understandings of identity and suggests that authentic selfhood requires multiplicity rather than purity.

The political significance of *Divergence* becomes particularly clear through the actions of Jeanine Matthews, the leader of Erudite. Jeanine seeks to eliminate Divergents because they resist simulation technology and therefore cannot be easily controlled. Her obsession with order reflects technocratic authoritarianism, in which intelligence and efficiency justify political domination. Jeanine believes that social stability requires predictability, and Divergents threaten this stability because they resist classification.

Erudite's use of simulation technology reflects contemporary anxieties regarding surveillance, data collection, and algorithmic governance. Citizens become data subjects whose psychological characteristics are measured, categorized, and manipulated. The aptitude test resembles modern forms of profiling that attempt to predict behaviour according to personality traits, consumer habits, or ideological affiliations. Roth's dystopia therefore mirrors contemporary societies in which technology increasingly shapes identity and social participation.

The politics of identity in *Divergent* also intersect with class hierarchy. Each faction performs specific economic and political functions within society. Abnegation governs, Erudite educates, Dauntless provides security, Candor manages legal affairs, and Amity produces food. These divisions create a rigid social structure in which labor and identity become inseparable.

The Factionless occupy the lowest social position because they lack institutional belonging. Excluded from faction society, they are denied economic opportunity, political representation, and social recognition. Their marginalization reveals the violence underlying systems of ideological purity. Societies that demand conformity inevitably produce populations deemed socially expendable.

Marxist analyses of the novel emphasize how faction ideology obscures structural inequality. Research concerning class conflict in *Divergent* argues that the factions represent competing power structures within a broader system of domination. Citizens believe that factions maintain social harmony, yet the system primarily benefits elite groups such as

Erudite and Dauntless. The faction structure therefore resembles class systems that disguise inequality through ideological narratives.

The existence of the Factionless also reflects contemporary concerns regarding poverty, homelessness, and political exclusion. Roth critiques societies that define human worth according to productivity and institutional belonging. Those who fail to conform become socially invisible.

Gender politics further complicate the novel's exploration of identity. Tris's transformation from a quiet Abnegation girl into a Dauntless initiate challenges traditional assumptions regarding femininity and power. Dauntless culture values aggression, physical strength, and fearlessness—qualities historically associated with masculinity. Tris's success destabilizes these gender norms by demonstrating that courage and leadership are not exclusively male traits.

At the same time, the novel reveals how female identity remains politicized within patriarchal structures. Tris frequently encounters assumptions that women are weaker or less capable than men. Her body becomes a site of ideological conflict because she must negotiate expectations surrounding vulnerability, sexuality, and strength.

Some feminist critics argue that despite presenting an empowered female protagonist, the novel still reproduces patriarchal assumptions. Tris's heroism is often connected to self-sacrifice and romantic attachment, potentially reinforcing traditional gender expectations. Nevertheless, her refusal to accept externally imposed definitions of femininity remains politically significant.

The relationship between fear and identity also occupies a central place in the novel. Dauntless ideology equates fearlessness with strength, encouraging initiates to suppress vulnerability. However, Roth ultimately rejects the idea that bravery requires the absence of fear. Instead, Tris learns that courage involves acknowledging fear while continuing to act.

This understanding of fear challenges authoritarian models of identity that demand emotional suppression and ideological certainty. Human beings are inherently vulnerable and contradictory, and attempts to eliminate these qualities produce violence and repression.

The novel's first-person narration reinforces its exploration of identity formation. Readers experience Tris's internal conflicts directly, observing her uncertainty regarding factional belonging and personal authenticity. Her narration reveals the instability of ideological identity because she continually questions whether she truly belongs within any faction.

Importantly, Tris never fully resolves these contradictions. Even after joining Dauntless, she retains elements of Abnegation and develops connections with other factions. Her identity remains fragmented and evolving throughout the novel. Roth therefore rejects the idea of a stable, unified self and instead portrays identity as a continuous process of negotiation.

This emphasis on fluidity aligns with postmodern theories of subjectivity, which reject essentialist understandings of identity. Postmodern thinkers argue that identity is fragmented,

socially constructed, and constantly changing. Tris embodies this postmodern subjectivity because she cannot be confined within fixed ideological categories.

The novel's popularity reflects broader cultural anxieties concerning identity politics and social polarization. Contemporary societies increasingly encourage individuals to define themselves through rigid ideological affiliations. Political discourse often reduces people to simplified labels such as conservative, liberal, nationalist, feminist, or activist. Social media intensifies this process by rewarding conformity within ideological communities and discouraging nuance.

Roth's faction system mirrors these dynamics. Factions encourage tribalism by promoting loyalty to collective identity over individual complexity. Citizens are taught to perceive members of other factions according to stereotypes rather than recognizing shared humanity. This tribalism resembles contemporary political polarization, in which ideological groups treat one another as enemies rather than participants in democratic discourse. Roth warns that societies become dangerous when collective identity overrides individuality and empathy.

The novel also reflects concerns regarding surveillance capitalism and algorithmic categorization. Modern institutions increasingly collect personal data in order to predict behaviour and shape consumer choices. Individuals are classified according to demographic information, psychological profiles, and online activity. Roth's aptitude tests and simulations resemble these systems of classification because they attempt to define individuals according to measurable traits.

Jeanine Matthews's desire to eliminate Divergents parallels real-world efforts to control unpredictability through surveillance and technological management. Divergents threaten the system because they resist algorithmic categorization and maintain independent consciousness.

Within the broader tradition of dystopian literature, *Divergent* distinguishes itself through its emphasis on psychological identity. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* examines how authoritarian regimes control language and truth, while Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* critiques biological engineering and technological conditioning. Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* focuses on economic exploitation and political spectacle.

*Divergent*, however, centers specifically upon the politics of identity. The faction system does not merely organize labor or governance; it defines personhood itself. Roth therefore expands dystopian critique into the realm of psychological and ideological categorization.

The novel also engages with the cultural significance of adolescence. Young adulthood represents a period of identity formation in which individuals negotiate social expectations, personal desires, and institutional pressures. Roth transforms these developmental struggles into political allegory. The Choosing Ceremony symbolizes the pressure adolescents face when constructing identities within societies that demand conformity.

Tris's refusal to accept singular identity reflects broader adolescent experiences of uncertainty and experimentation. Her Divergence becomes empowering because it validates complexity rather than demanding ideological purity. At the same time, the novel contains certain limitations. The faction system itself is psychologically implausible because human beings cannot realistically be reduced to single virtues. Critics frequently observe that the factions oversimplify personality and social behavior. Roth intentionally exaggerates these categories in order to critique essentialism, yet the simplicity of the system can weaken its realism.

Additionally, the narrative risks reproducing exceptionalist hierarchies by portraying Divergents as uniquely superior. Although the novel critiques factional purity, it may unintentionally replace one hierarchy with another in which Divergents become inherently more valuable than ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the significance of Roth's broader political critique. The novel remains a powerful exploration of identity, conformity, and resistance within contemporary society.

Ultimately, *Divergent* argues that authentic humanity cannot be confined within rigid ideological categories. Through the conflict between faction and self, Veronica Roth critiques systems that reduce individuals to singular identities in the name of social order. The faction system functions as a mechanism of ideological control, shaping citizens through surveillance, discipline, and hegemonic conditioning. Tris's Divergence symbolizes resistance against these structures by affirming multiplicity, contradiction, and self-determination.

The politics of identity in *Divergent* remain profoundly relevant in an era defined by polarization, surveillance, and algorithmic categorization. Roth's dystopia warns against societies that prioritize ideological purity over human complexity. The novel suggests that freedom begins with the refusal to accept reductive definitions of selfhood.

Rather than embracing singular identity, *Divergent* celebrates plurality and transformation. Human beings are contradictory, evolving, and multifaceted. Attempts to eliminate these contradictions produce authoritarianism and exclusion. Through Tris Prior's journey, Roth ultimately argues that individuality is not a threat to society but a necessary condition for genuine humanity.

### Works Cited

1. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press, 1971.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
3. Cronshaw, Darren. "Beyond Divisive Categorization in Young Adult Fiction: Lessons from *Divergent*." *International Journal of Public Theology*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2021, pp. 426–45.
4. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1977.
5. Lodhi, Muhammad Arfan, et al. "Elements of Neocolonialism in the *Divergent* by Veronica Roth." *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 82–88.
6. Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2011.

7. Wardana, Muhammad Kiki, and Sumita Roy. "Ideology and Class Division in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*." *International Journal of Culture and Art Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2019, pp. 30–37.
8. Zisk, Alyssa Hillary. "Pulling the Rug Out From Under (Neuro)Divergence in the Divergent Universe." *Critical Disability Discourses*, vol. 9, 2019.