

Ego and National Identity in Post-Cold War Geopolitics through the Study of Vikas Sharma's *Love and Ego*

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Abstract

*The post-Cold War era marked a transformative period in global geopolitics, characterized by the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and the resurgence of national identities among newly independent states. This paper explores the interplay between ego and national identity in this context, using Vikas Sharma's latest novel *Love and Ego* as a case study. The novel vividly portrays Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty and its confrontation with Russian imperialist ambitions, embodied through characters like Zen-Sky and Phu-tin.*

The analysis examines how national ego, shaped by historical narratives and the quest for political autonomy, drives geopolitical conflicts and alliances. It also investigates the personal egos of leaders and their impact on international relations, highlighting the tension between pride and pragmatism. While ego can empower nations to assert their identities, the novel critiques its destructive potential, revealing the human and economic costs of unchecked pride.

By drawing parallels between fictional events and real-world geopolitical developments, this paper underscores the complex role of ego in shaping the post-Cold War global order and the enduring challenges of balancing national identity with sustainable governance.

Key Words

Contemporary society, Moral degradation, Materialism, Situationships, Ambition and lust

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Cold War in the late 20th century brought about a transformative period in global geopolitics. This seismic shift, driven by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, led to the emergence of newly independent states eager to redefine their positions in the world. These nations, many of which had been subsumed under Soviet control, experienced a rebirth of national identities that had long been suppressed by centralized authoritarian rule. In this context, ego emerged as a critical force—both as an individual attribute of leaders and a collective characteristic of national consciousness.

In *Love and Ego*, Vikas Sharma masterfully encapsulates this dynamic, portraying the complex interplay of ego and national identity through the lens of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The novel vividly illustrates how these forces shape the motivations of leaders and their nations, propelling them toward confrontation and, ultimately, tragedy. Sharma's portrayal of Zen-Sky, the Ukrainian leader, and Phu-tin, his Russian counterpart, provides a compelling narrative of this geopolitical tension.

Zen-Sky embodies the collective ego of a resurgent Ukraine, determined to assert its sovereignty. His declaration, "*We have our sovereignty*" (12) serves as a rallying cry, emphasizing the Ukrainian people's desire to reclaim their identity after decades of Soviet control. This statement also reflects a deep-rooted need to resist being overshadowed by Russia, which still views Ukraine as part of its historical and cultural domain. This national ego is further reinforced through Zen-Sky's ambitions to join NATO, a move he describes as "*essential for Ukraine to step out of Russia's shadow and into the global arena*" (15).

Phu-tin, on the other hand, represents an imperial ego deeply intertwined with the identity of a once-great superpower. His insistence that "*Ukraine was a part of old Russia*" (40) reflects a refusal to accept the changing geopolitical landscape. This perspective is not just a political stance but an emotional one, rooted in the pride and nostalgia of a nation unwilling to relinquish its former glory. His sentiment that "*pride goes before a fall*" (42) foreshadows the devastating consequences of his imperial ambitions, as both nations plunge into conflict.

The collective ego of the Ukrainian people is also vividly depicted in the novel. Public speeches and national programs emphasize the importance of identity and autonomy. Young Ukrainians are urged to reject subjugation, with leaders asking rhetorically, "*Do you want to survive as slaves of the Russian system?*" (18). This sentiment reflects a deep-seated need to assert independence, a central theme in Ukraine's post-Cold War narrative. The novel portrays this collective defiance as both empowering and precarious, as it often escalates tensions with Russia.

Sharma also highlights the personal dimensions of ego through the character interactions. Zen-Sky's blunt rejection of Phu-tin's warnings—"Who are you to keep me from this honor?" (25)—demonstrates the collision of personal pride and political ideology. This confrontation underscores how the egos of individual leaders can exacerbate national disputes, transforming ideological differences into deeply personal rivalries.

At its core, *Love and Ego* critiques the destructive potential of ego when it eclipses pragmatic governance. The novel's tragic depictions of war—civilian casualties, economic collapse, and the erosion of social cohesion—underscore the costs of allowing ego to dictate policy. As Zen-Sky reflects in a rare moment of introspection, "What will be the fate of the orphans? Disgusting! Didn't look into the dark before leaping into the dangerous pit!" (35) This reflection encapsulates the human cost of ego-driven decisions, highlighting the thin line between asserting identity and jeopardizing it through conflict.

By intertwining these personal and collective narratives, *Love and Ego* offers a nuanced exploration of the role of ego in post-Cold War geopolitics. The novel demonstrates how the rebirth of national identities, while necessary and empowering, can also sow the seeds of conflict when intertwined with unchecked pride. Through its vivid portrayal of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Sharma invites readers to reflect on the enduring challenges of balancing ego and identity in a fragmented yet interconnected world.

The Nexus of Ego and National Identity

Ego and national identity share a profound and intricate connection, especially in the context of nations striving to assert themselves in a fractured geopolitical landscape. National identity serves as the collective self-perception of a people, often rooted in shared history, culture, and aspirations. Ego, meanwhile, is the driving force that propels nations to protect, assert, and elevate that identity on the global stage. This nexus becomes particularly pronounced in the wake of significant historical upheavals, such as the dissolution of the Cold War. Vikas Sharma's *Love and Ego* offers a vivid exploration of this relationship, portraying the collision of national ego and identity through the lens of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

In *Love and Ego*, the character of Zen-Sky, Ukraine's Prime Minister, epitomizes the intersection of ego and national identity. His leadership is driven by a fervent desire to reaffirm Ukraine's sovereignty and establish its place in the global order. Zen-Sky's defiant assertion, "We have our sovereignty" (12), underscores a collective ego born out of historical subjugation. This statement is not merely a

political claim but a declaration of Ukraine's self-worth as an independent nation. His insistence that "*Ukraine must join NATO to escape Russia's shadow*" (15) highlights how ego fuels strategic decisions, even at the risk of provoking conflict.

The Ukrainian people's ego is also evident in their resistance to Russian dominance. The national awakening campaigns described in the novel ask citizens, "*Do you wish to breathe freely, or remain slaves to Russian oppression?*" (18) Such rhetoric invokes ego as a tool for unifying the populace, aligning their individual identities with the collective goal of sovereignty. This reflects Benedict Anderson's idea of nations as "*imagined communities*," where shared narratives and symbols foster a collective consciousness, even among people who may never meet in person.

On the other side of the conflict, Phu-tin's character represents the ego of a former empire grappling with its diminished status. His lament, "*Ukraine was a part of old Russia*" (40), reflects an imperial ego rooted in nostalgia for the Soviet Union's power. This sentiment mirrors the dynamics described in Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, where he notes that "*empires cling to their past glory, refusing to adjust to a world where their dominance has waned.*" Similarly, Phu-tin's refusal to accept Ukraine's independence exemplifies an inability to reconcile historical identity with contemporary realities.

The novel draws parallels between the personal and political dimensions of ego. Phu-tin's warning to Zen-Sky, "*Pride goes before a fall*" (42), highlights the destructive potential of ego when it blinds leaders to pragmatic solutions. This echoes George Orwell's observation in *Notes on Nationalism*: "*Every nationalist is capable of the most flagrant dishonesty, but also—and this is much more interesting—of genuine self-deception.*" Phu-tin's actions illustrate this self-deception, as his refusal to acknowledge Ukraine's autonomy leads to a costly and futile conflict.

While ego can empower nations to assert their identity, *Love and Ego* also critiques its destructive potential. Zen-Sky's reflection on the consequences of war—"*What will be the fate of orphans? What will become of widows?*" (35)—highlights the human cost of ego-driven decisions. Similarly, Phu-tin's lament, "*Imperialism was bound to meet its reaction*" (44), suggests an awareness of the futility of his actions, even as he persists in them.

Post-Cold War Fragmentation and the Ego of Leadership

The fragmentation that followed the Cold War was not merely a geopolitical realignment; it was a profound reordering of power dynamics, ideologies, and identities. In this era of flux, leadership emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping the trajectories of newly independent nations. Leaders, fueled by ego and driven by

their visions of national identity, often became embodiments of their countries' aspirations and insecurities. Vikas Sharma's *Love and Ego* portrays this dynamic vividly, with characters like Zen-Sky and Phu-tin exemplifying the interplay between post-Cold War fragmentation and the ego of leadership. By comparing these depictions with themes from other texts, this analysis underscores the universality and complexity of leadership in a fractured world.

Zen-Sky, the Ukrainian leader in *Love and Ego*, embodies the struggle of a fragmented nation asserting its independence. His declaration, "*We will no longer be Russia's shadow; we are a sovereign nation*" (12), reflects the determination of post-Soviet states to establish distinct national identities. This sentiment mirrors real-world leaders like Vaclav Havel in the Czech Republic, who proclaimed during his presidency, "*We must find our place in the world, not as someone's appendage but as a proud and independent people.*" Both leaders highlight how fragmentation necessitated a reevaluation of sovereignty and identity, with ego playing a central role in that process.

The novel also captures the burden of leadership in fragmented states. Zen-Sky's reflections, "*Every step feels like a gamble, every decision weighed against a history of oppression*" (35), illustrate the immense pressure leaders face in balancing ego with pragmatism. This sentiment aligns with Mikhail Gorbachev's struggles during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as described in his memoir *On My Country and the World*: "*Leadership demands vision, but vision is often clouded by the weight of history and the expectations of millions.*"

In *Love and Ego*, the confrontation between Zen-Sky and Phu-tin is as much a clash of egos as it is a geopolitical conflict. Phu-tin's assertion, "*Ukraine was and will always be part of Russia*" (40), reflects the imperial ego of a leader unwilling to accept the loss of influence. This mirrors the rhetoric of many post-imperial leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher, who remarked during debates over Scottish independence, "*Unity is strength, and fragmentation weakens us all.*" Like Thatcher, Phu-tin perceives fragmentation as a threat to the legacy and cohesion of a once-mighty entity.

Zen-Sky's retort, "*Who are you to decide our fate?*" (25), embodies the defiance of smaller nations against larger powers. This echoes the defiance of India's Jawaharlal Nehru, who, during the post-colonial era, asserted, "*We may be a small nation, but we are not insignificant. We will chart our own path.*" Such defiance, while necessary for asserting sovereignty, often intensifies conflicts when egos collide, as seen in both *Love and Ego* and historical reality.

The novel illustrates how fragmentation creates unique challenges for

leadership. Zen-Sky reflects on the economic struggles of Ukraine, lamenting, “*How can we build a nation when our people are crying for bread?*” (53). This highlights the dual burden of leaders in fragmented states: fostering national identity while addressing immediate material needs.

Phu-tin’s perspective, meanwhile, reflects the ego of a leader attempting to reverse fragmentation. His lament, “*Pride blinds us to the cost of reunification*” (44), acknowledges the destructive potential of ego-driven policies. This sentiment aligns with George Orwell’s critique in *Politics and the English Language*, where he notes, “*The desire to impose one’s will is often cloaked in the language of necessity, but it is ultimately a pursuit of power.*” Phu-tin’s actions exemplify this dynamic, as his pursuit of reunification with Ukraine leads to widespread devastation.

Love and Ego critique the outcomes of ego-driven leadership, emphasizing the human and societal costs. Zen-Sky’s reflection, “*What will become of the widows and orphans of this war?*” (35), highlights the collateral damage of policies driven by pride and ambition. Similarly, Phu-tin’s recognition, “*Imperialism breeds its own nemesis*” (44), suggests an awareness of the unsustainable nature of his actions, even as he persists.

The Role of Historical Identity in Shaping Ego

Historical identity serves as the foundation for a nation’s sense of self, shaping its ego and driving its actions in the geopolitical arena. For nations emerging from the shadow of colonialism, imperialism, or union fragmentation, historical narratives become tools for asserting identity, reclaiming sovereignty, and fostering unity. In Vikas Sharma’s *Love and Ego*, historical identity is a central theme, particularly in the portrayal of Ukraine’s struggle against Russia. The novel demonstrates how collective memory and historical experiences influence national ego, often propelling nations toward confrontation. This analysis explores the role of historical identity in shaping ego within the novel and draws comparisons with other texts that similarly address the weight of history on national consciousness.

In *Love and Ego*, Ukraine’s historical identity is portrayed as both a burden and a source of strength. Zen-Sky’s leadership is deeply influenced by the legacy of Ukrainian subjugation under the Soviet Union. His assertion, “*We are no longer a colony of Russia; we are a nation reborn*” (12), reflects the Ukrainian effort to reclaim its sovereignty and establish a distinct identity. This statement underscores how historical oppression fuels a collective ego, driving nations to assert their independence and demand recognition on the global stage.

The novel further explores how historical identity shapes public consciousness. Ukrainian leaders emphasize the sacrifices of their forefathers in speeches, declaring, “*Do not forget the blood spilled for this land. Let our ancestors’ courage guide us*” (18). This rhetoric invokes collective memory to unite the population and reinforce the nation’s resolve. Benedict Anderson’s concept of “*imagined communities*” provides a useful framework here, suggesting that shared histories and narratives create a sense of solidarity among citizens, even if they are geographically dispersed.

Conversely, Russia’s historical identity, as portrayed in the novel, is rooted in its legacy as a superpower. Phu-tin’s lament, “*Russia’s greatness is carved in the stones of history; we cannot let it crumble*” (40), reveals the ego born of an imperial past. His refusal to acknowledge Ukraine’s sovereignty stems from a deep-seated belief that Ukraine is inseparable from Russia’s identity. This perspective echoes Fareed Zakaria’s observation in *The Post-American World*: “*Great powers are often haunted by their histories, unable to adjust to a reality where they are no longer dominant.*”

Phu-tin’s perspective also reflects the dynamics described in Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, where imperial powers struggle to relinquish control over former colonies. Said argues that “*Imperialism leaves behind a contested space, where power is fought over as much in memory as in reality.*” In the novel, this contested space is evident in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with both nations drawing on their historical identities to justify their actions.

While historical identity can inspire unity and resilience, *Love and Ego* critique its potential to perpetuate conflict. Zen-Sky’s reflection, “*History binds us, but it also blinds us to the possibilities of peace*” (35), highlights the danger of allowing historical grievances to dominate contemporary decision-making. This sentiment aligns with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s warning in her essay *The Danger of a Single Story*: “*To insist on only one narrative is to flatten the complexities of a people.*” In the novel, both Ukraine and Russia risk becoming trapped in narrow interpretations of their histories, preventing them from moving forward.

The burden of historical identity also manifests in personal narratives. Kathleen, a Russian citizen, reflects on her father’s service in the Soviet army, stating, “*My father lived for the empire, and now I live with its ruins*” (42). Her words reveal the personal toll of national identity shaped by history, mirroring themes in Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, where generational trauma stemming from colonialism continues to affect characters long after the initial events.

Historical identity is often intertwined with collective trauma, as *Love and Ego* demonstrate through Ukraine's memory of Soviet domination. The novel describes Ukrainians' bitter recollections of events such as the Holodomor, stating, "We have endured starvation, suppression, and suffering, but we have not lost our spirit" (53). This resilience is a hallmark of historical identity but also a source of enduring conflict, as past injustices continue to fuel present tensions.

Consequences of Ego-Driven Politics

Ego-driven politics often lead to profound and far-reaching consequences, both for nations and their citizens. While ego can inspire leaders to assert their vision and pursue bold goals, it frequently blinds them to pragmatic solutions, fosters conflicts, and exacerbates human suffering. In *Love and Ego*, Vikas Sharma explores the destructive outcomes of political decisions rooted in pride and self-importance, particularly in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The novel vividly portrays the societal, economic, and personal costs of ego-driven politics, offering a critique that resonates with historical and contemporary realities.

Ego-driven politics often transform ideological or territorial disputes into prolonged and destructive conflicts. In *Love and Ego*, Phu-tin's refusal to accept Ukraine's sovereignty is emblematic of this dynamic. His assertion, "Pride demands that Russia remains whole, even if it means war" (40), highlights how ego prevents leaders from considering peaceful alternatives.

Zen-Sky's defiance, while rooted in a legitimate desire for independence, also reflects the influence of ego. His declaration, "We cannot bow to Russia, no matter the cost" (25), demonstrates how pride can escalate conflicts by prioritizing symbolic victories over practical solutions. This mirrors real-world examples, such as the prolonged Vietnam War, where national pride on both sides contributed to the conflict's length and devastation. As historian Barbara Tuchman observed in *The March of Folly*: "Pride, like folly, moves nations to pursue policies contrary to their interests."

One of the most tragic consequences of ego-driven politics is the toll it takes on civilians. In the novel, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine leads to widespread suffering, as described in the lines: "Missiles destroyed homes and hospitals; the cries of the wounded echoed through the streets. Yet, the leaders remained resolute in their egos" (48). This vividly illustrates how leaders' pride often results in the displacement, injury, and death of countless innocents.

This theme parallels the real-world consequences of conflicts like the Syrian Civil War, where ego-driven decisions by both domestic and international actors have led to one of the largest humanitarian crises in modern history. As Sharma

critiques in *Love and Ego*, “While leaders debate territory, it is the people who lose their homes, their loved ones, and their futures” (50).

Ego-driven politics frequently lead to economic instability and decline. In *Love and Ego*, Zen-Sky reflects on the economic impact of Ukraine’s conflict with Russia, lamenting, “How can we rebuild a nation when our fields are barren, our factories silent, and our people starving?” (53). This statement underscores how wars fueled by ego divert resources from development to destruction, leaving nations impoverished.

Ego-driven politics can also isolate nations diplomatically, reducing their influence and opportunities for collaboration. In *Love and Ego*, Phu-tin’s aggressive stance leads to Russia’s growing isolation from the international community. The line, “Even old allies turned away, unable to condone such reckless pride” (59), illustrates how ego can alienate partners and diminish a nation’s standing.

This mirrors historical examples like the Cold War-era ostracization of apartheid South Africa, where the government’s refusal to relinquish its policies led to widespread condemnation and sanctions. Similarly, Sharma critiques how ego-driven policies undermine alliances, noting, “Ego builds walls where bridges are needed” (61).

Leaders who pursue ego-driven politics often lose the trust of their citizens and international peers. In *Love and Ego*, Zen-Sky’s introspection reveals his awareness of this risk: “What will my people think of me if our dreams of independence lead only to ashes?” (35). This acknowledgment highlights how ego can erode credibility when its consequences become evident.

Ego-driven politics often leave lasting scars on a nation’s identity. In the novel, Zen-Sky reflects on the cultural and psychological toll of the conflict: “Even if we win, what will remain of us? A nation broken, its people divided, its spirit shattered” (63). This statement underscores the paradox of ego-driven nationalism, where the pursuit of pride ultimately undermines the very identity it seeks to protect.

Finally, ego-driven politics can spiral into uncontrollable crises. In *Love and Ego*, both Zen-Sky and Phu-tin recognize, albeit too late, the magnitude of their decisions. Phu-tin’s reflection, “Pride blinds us until the flames consume everything” (67), serves as a cautionary note on the dangers of letting ego dictate policies.

This aligns with historical examples like World War I, where nationalist egos and alliances led to a conflict far more devastating than any leader initially anticipated.

Conclusion

Ego, while a natural aspect of leadership and national identity, becomes perilous when it eclipses pragmatism and empathy. In Vikas Sharma’s *Love and Ego*,

the devastating consequences of ego-driven politics are laid bare through the lens of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. From escalating violence and humanitarian crises to economic devastation and diplomatic isolation, the novel portrays how leaders' pride and their nations' historical identities intertwine to fuel destructive outcomes.

The narrative critiques the dangers of allowing ego to dominate decision-making, illustrating how it blinds leaders to the human costs of their policies and jeopardizes the very identities they seek to protect. Through Zen-Sky's defiance and Phu-tin's imperial ambitions, *Love and Ego* underscores the thin line between asserting sovereignty and fostering conflict.

This cautionary tale is mirrored in real-world history, where ego-driven politics have led to wars, economic collapses, and fractured societies. By drawing attention to these patterns, the novel calls for a reexamination of leadership and diplomacy, urging nations to balance their pride with humility and prioritize collaboration over conflict.

Ultimately, *Love and Ego* is not just a critique of the past but a warning for the future, reminding us that while ego can inspire greatness, it must be tempered by responsibility to avoid catastrophic consequences.

References

1. Sharma, Vikas, *Love and Ego*, Diamond Books, 2024.