

Who Am I: Outlining the Topoi of Self, Subject and Subjectivity

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Abstract

The contemporary philosophical, intellectual and literary plenitudes aver the fact that The questions like 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', 'How did the objects around me form?', 'who created it and why?' etcetera begins to interrupt the inadequate and unsatisfactory answers in the culture. The answers to these forms the discursive discourses serving many purposes. travel literature deals with the discourse of identity. The dialectic of self has given birth to a plethora of thinkers and their thoughts concerning the reality of a sutured self of a human being. The dialectics of self, subject, and object is rooted in their historic development which sprouts through various schools of thought. The serious examination and prime idea of self is visited through the entire trajectory, beginning from Empiricism, Cognitivism, and Pragmatism to the contemporary schools of Structuralism and Poststructuralism. The Present Research Paper aims to analyse all these schools of thought who unravels the structure of subject that is constructed on the culturally entangled structure of self.

Keywords: Cognitivism; Empiricism; Pragmatism; Self; Subject.

The questions like 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', 'How did the objects around me form?', 'who created it and why?' etcetera begins to interrupt the inadequate and unsatisfactory answers in the culture. The answers to these forms the discursive discourses serving many purposes. Firstly, outlining various traditions in which the topoi of self has been discussed, secondly, describing an account of how the self is perennially a moving subject as is seen through numerous lenses, for instance, gender, family, ethnicity, nationality, materialism, consciousness, etcetera. Even with all these resolved-unresolved queries the projection of selfhood since

the beginning of thoughts has been in a perpetual crisis, even today. In the research paper the intention is to magnify the intensification of the self as the quintessential site of human understanding. The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (2006) defines self as "the elusive 'I' that shows an alarming tendency to disappear when we try to introspect it." (332). Self becomes the subject of introspection because of the differences that situate one distinct from another. The dialectics of self has given birth to a plethora of thinkers and their thoughts concerning the reality of a sutured self of a human being. The dialectics of self, subject, and object is rooted in their historic development which sprouts through various schools of thought. The serious examination and prime idea of self is visited through the entire trajectory, beginning from Empiricism, Cognitivism, and Pragmatism to the contemporary schools of Structuralism and Poststructuralism. All these schools of thought unravel the structure of subject that is constructed on the culturally entangled structure of self.

The intellectual tradition assists in scrutinizing the development or the process of becoming, that is the journey of self to subject rather the subject itself. In the literary criticism the analysis of any character is studied with its relation to layers of social, economic, political, cultural, linguistic, and psychological realities in order to unravel the subjected self. Loosening or rather untying the sutured and cardinal concept of Self necessitates arduous exercise. The contemporary reality of the self and subject is analyzed through the Poststructuralist and Postmodernist standpoint which is in constant flux as A.N. Whitehead asserts in his *Process and Reality* (1978), "All things flow . . . and the flux of things is one ultimate generalization" (208). The key point here is that all the discourses associated with the changing realities of the culture intersect with the simultaneous changing paradigm of self. This profound prominence of self is also remarked by Michel Foucault in *Knowledge/Power* (1980) where he says that "The goal of my work during the last twenty years has not been to analyze the phenomenon of power, or to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subject" (07). Thus, contemporary criticism documents these 'modes' which assist in the shaping and reshaping of self. However, the traditional understand-

ing of self begins with a religious sensibility.

Lawrence M. Friedman, social historian, construes the gradual shift of self to subject in his book, *The Horizontal Society* (1999). He says that it is a result of an unmeasured movement from a vertical to a more horizontal method of perceiving an individual. Originally in the religiously dominated world the application of reason in understanding self was considered to be a sin and thus the phase then was motivated by the verticality of a being which could not be questioned or negotiated and was inflexible in contrast with the postmodern take on subject which is motivated by the non-hierarchical, flexible, and agency driven horizontal existence of a subjected self. Friedman states that the modern age "in which traditions seem to be breaking down- forms and traditions that trapped the individual in a cage of ascription; that fixed human beings in definite social roles, pinned them to given position in the world, no matter how they might wriggle and fight" (vii-viii). This breakdown is highly essential in the understanding of self in the contemporary age that is expressed by the terms like rupture, fracture, bricolage, parody, contingency, aporia, lacuna, difference, rhizome, pastiche, multiplicity, slippage, fragmentation, and etcetera. He further concludes that "one even chooses (within limits) a race, a gender, a form of sexuality. One can also choose not to be counted as part of any particular group . . ." (240). This as an onset puts forward the basic difference between the current condition of the previously pious and autonomous self which today enjoys the freedom of choice.

The growth of self is seen to be addressed through the two most important aspect of philosophy: Epistemology and Ontology. Epistemology, on one hand, emphasizes the process of knowledge construction and Ontology, on other hand, refers to the being or structure of the subject. Both the epistemic and ontological development of self can be traced back to Plato's concept of mimesis which resonates with John Locke's idea of *tabula rasa*. Republic (1973) by Plato describes mimesis as a process of knowledge formation. In addition to this, Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) agrees with the play of mimesis as impressions on the blank slate of human being. The seeds of Empiricism along with structuralism is evident in Locke's assessment of self. The empiricist view of self

is a condition that is stimulated with the consistent interaction between mind and the exterior realities of the culture and society. The epistemic construction, according to Locke, is based on imperative components of external realities like society, economy, culture, and politics which individually or combine together to alter the formation of one's self. This directly or indirectly causes self to undergo change through imprints that reflects on the blank slate through a course of time, as Locke registers, "These simple ideas, when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter when they are imprinted, nor blot them out and make new one itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it does therein produce. As the bodies that surround us do diversely affect our organs, the mind is forced to receive the impressions; and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas that are annexed to them" (45). Thus, the empirical self is a conglomeration of imprints, experiences, impressions, feelings, and sensations that one encounters and reflects.

At the same time Locke also presents the idea of "punctual self" which concentrates on the faith that it may take multiple impressions to form a self yet a one can always avert and shudder away from the imprints. Donald E. Hall, who talks about the early modern era and enlightenment in his book *Subjectivity* (2004) says that "Locke and his contemporaries advanced the idea, still pervasive today, that through 'disengagement and rational control' the self is fully within our power to perfect" (24). Locke as an empiricist writes against the doctrine of innate ideas, attacking the religious doctrine. According to him the God given authoritarian ideas that couldn't be argued against are invalid rather ideas are something that are derived through sensory perception or experience. He validates his view by comparing human mind with a white paper, *tabula rasa*, which is blank at the time of birth and is seen to receive ideas through experiments in daily life. Therefore, Locke is known today to be the founder of empiricism as he says that experience contributes in the formation of knowledge as Veerendra Kumar Mishra in his *Modern Novels and Poetics of Self: Reading Modernist Bildungsromane* (2014) ascribes:

The physical realities of stimulus, response, and the process of reinforcement, construe the realm of human's epistemic existence. The existence of epistemic realities impinges deeply upon the formation of one's self, subject, and identity. The matrix of a posteriori realities shape and reshape the phenomenological existence of one's subjectivity and identity and it also allows the self to experience several changes, which are implicitly or explicitly caused by the complex but inescapable vortex of social, economic, political, and cultural realities, which have conspicuously and copiously been registered by John Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). (26)

The empirical dictum by Locke was inspired by his opposing observations against Rene Descartes who is till date famous as mentioned by Tom Sorell in *Descartes: A Very Short Introduction* (1987) "as the man who said 'Cogito, ergo sum' - 'I am thinking therefore I am'". Descartes in *Discourse on Method* (1637) lays foundation for the inception of Cognitivism which unlike Empiricism does not trace the route of reality in the exteriority of mind or the physical or material world rather it has its foci in the interiority of mind, in the psychological and cognitive realities. Descartes declares that the mind is the substance whose spirit is to be 'conscious' or to think. Locke on the other hand concludes according to Garrett Thompson in *On Locke* (2001) "that thinking is not the essence of the mind, but only one of its operations" (52). The three layers of human mind, the conscious, unconscious, and the subconscious for Locke do not suffice to provide the proof for the existence of a 'personal identity' or the construction of subjectivity. And thus, empiricism rejects the notion of non-material essence of mind and soul over material substance. George Berkeley, influenced by Locke's assessment of external realities analysing the texture of self, also adds his dimension of *esse est percipi* and *esse est percipere* in his book *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). He here challenges Locke's view on perception and regards a new realm of empirical idealism or subjective idealism which says that one exists only if one is perceivable by human mind. David Hume, Scottish Enlightenment Philosopher and Empiricist, delineates further the ideas of Berkeley in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) stating that, "men are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which suc-

ceed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement" (12), here he brings into being the bundle theory (emphasis mine). The theory emphasizes upon the fact that the self is nothing but a bundle of certain perceptions, characteristics, or qualities which classifies and distinguish it from anything else. John Stuart Mill in *System of Logic* (1843) revivifies Hume's theory and claims that the ego is an inductive compilation of sensation and feelings. Empiricism for Mill held that the epistemic formation of any kind is derived through inductive inference rather than direct experience. Henceforth, Empiricism as a school of thought strictly dispenses the intuitive or deductive thesis on innate ideas which are independent of experience i.e. a priori and maintains that the formation of knowledge is dependent upon experience and experimentation i.e. a posteriori. Thus, according to empiricists the growth and development of the episteme of a self into a subject achieves its subjectivity through the source of external experience.

In response to behaviourism, Cognitivism or Rationalism came as a theoretical framework that gained weightage halfway through the twentieth century that brought a paradigm shift in the course of defining subjectivities or the process formation of a subject in a society. Cognitivists stress on the core principles of psychoanalysis and assesses and explores the quizzically complicated essence, existence, and establishment of self and subject. The cognitive reality is the state of mind that concentrates on uncovering and peeling the three layers of mind: unconscious, subconscious, and conscious. These layers and the way they function become the topic of enquiry that regulate and determine the nature of reality that constitute a self. As mentioned earlier, the cognitive paradigm can be traced back to the seventeenth century thinker Rene Descartes' famous maxim *Cogito ergo sum* 'I think therefore I am' which established the indisputable supremacy of cognitive reality in the formation of truth that further helps in creating the existence of a self. According to Descartes the pursuit of truth involves sceptical action which produces an interplay of doubt and reason. The strive to achieve truth goes through scepticism, doubt, and reason which in itself give rise to a subjective decision. In other words, the search of truth induces the process of subjectivity, which constitute the foundation of a self.

Both Empiricism and Cognitivism as schools of philosophical and intellectual thoughts define in their own manner the formation of what self is and how self becomes. There has been a myriad of contribution made by thinkers and philosophers diverging to find place in these two schools through the distinguishing streams of thoughts with and within time for example: Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis, Queer Theory, Feminism, Cultural Studies, Existentialism, Deconstruction, Cultural Materialism, Postcolonialism, etcetera which believe in, as Veerendra Kumar Mishra (2015) avers, "Derrida's Difference, Bhaktin's 'Dialogism', or 'Polyphony', Kristeva's Chora and Jouissance, Lacan's 'infinite chain of signification', Foucault's 'Power', and 'Knowledge', Hegel's 'Dialectics', and Kant's 'Antinomy' which are inextricably intertwined into the complex texture of self, subject, and subjectivity" (56-57). As a result, the thinkers and their theories reverberate the institution of self and observe the orientation of sovereign self into a subject by discovering the subject between fractures, voids, and lacuna. The Pragmatists recognize the need to evaluate the pre-established theories and institute an integrated model for identifying both the socio-pragmatic and aesthetic-spiritual existence of self and subject. They analyze the practicing philosophy of empiricists guided by the principle understanding that all outer experiences constitute the reality, existence, and consciousness of a subject and the cognitivists philosophy that deviate from the former's thought and reinstates that it is the mind that operates internally as the leading factor in the constitution of subject and subjectivity.

But the analysis breaks down to expose the incompleteness of both the theories. It isn't viable to approve and prefer one when it is in their combination where the cumulative reality persists. Pragmatists explain that both behaviourists and rationalists portray only a fractional and biased reality of self and the subject, and thus, a clear and complete idea of the same can only be assured when, both empiricism and cognitivism philosophies are compositionally combined together. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), Henry Bergson summarizes that it is the link between the inner and the outer world that integrates to represent the true essence of the self with constant interpenetration of meanings.

Thus, through varied discourses and dialogues the meta narrative encapsulating the genesis, growth, and progress of self comes to an apex arrangement that subject is nothing but a congregation of his inner and outer world, which in turn fashions subjectivity of the subject and becomes responsible for all other relationships that work around it.

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