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Exploring Nuances of Self in Select Works of Existential Literature

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Abstract: The paper deals with exploring the various nuances of *Self* and its interpretation through various discourses. The paper analyses the concept of *self* through the lens of scientific, cultural and legal discourses concluding that the concept is dynamic in nature and has a real time character. *Self* in the paper has been scrutinized as both individual and collective entity drawing from prevalent conceptions and shaped by dominant discourses. To achieve the same, steady trend has been introduced where the discussion shifts from the essential realm to the existential to delineate the evolution of the concept. The paper takes into account select fictions of Georges Bataille, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Pierre Klossowski to explore the innovative models of *self* explored by them.

Keywords: Self, Existentialism, Dasein, Klossowski, Schopenhauer.

The concept of *self* is the most ambiguous and diffused of ideas that have occupied the intellectual pursuits of humanity since time immemorial. The complexity involved in formulating a unanimous definition of the *self* is highlighted by the manner in which diverse disciplines, namely socio-historical, scientific, legal, philosophical, psychological, or literary present their respective observations on the same based on varied factors. Therefore, *self* instead of representing a unified, individual entity manifests an amalgamation of multifarious human enterprises and bodies of knowledge constituted in this regard. *Self* hence assumes a dynamic elusiveness empowering it for rendering itself in a diversity of forms based on the nature of discourses and their resultant interaction at the diachronic level. This does not however, imply that it can be studied as a causal outcome of the mutually interacting discourses but reinforces the practice of understanding *self* as the unifying, neutralising dimension and the source of all humanitarian outputs directed towards the production of knowledge. *Self*, hence in the most rudimentary terms can be understood on the lines



of time, the measurement of which is usually undertaken through several digital and analog chronometers. Despite the precision guaranteed by such devices, the accuracy of the time measured remains questionable perpetually, owing to various geographical and cultural premises mutually decided and accepted. These discrepancies in the measurement of precise time, however fails to deter the practice of measuring time and allowing it to dictate the general functions of individuals. Similar is the case of *self* where various modes of discursive practices in spite of producing myriad interconnected, often uncertain conclusions, have been unsuccessful in suppressing the desire to explore, understand, and interpret the intricacies of *self*.

Scientific and legal discourses on *self* are highly mechanized bodies of knowledge with stress majorly laid on the anatomical reality of human existence. Scientific studies and legal structures equate *self* with body of the individual consequently negating the subjective existence of the thinking *self*. The scientific discourses can be problematised for the absence of a consolidated methodology and for their operation, founded on bifurcation of human body into life sustaining systems the efficacy of which is marked by several characteristics such as pulse, heartbeats, breathing patterns, locomotion, and so on. Distinguished by other social discourses and based on a concrete set of written mandates, legal discourses target the human body for the infliction of corrective, punitive measures of discipline and punishment. The *self* considered synonymous with anatomical fabric of the convicted human can be observed in the corporal punishment judicially awarded to the convict. This in extension can also involve the suspension of human rights and an enforcement of highly routine, meaningless existence under extreme surveillance as a means of depriving the *self* from avenues for effective realisation.

Owing to its political alignments, the above interpretations of *self* is seemingly problematic, exponentially accentuated by the nature of the methodologies adopted in the determination of the distinct attributes of *self*. Operating largely on regressive differential and chronological models, the socio-historically constructed *self* is largely an outcome of exchanges involving teleological progression of select events. Holding time to be the cardinal factor socio-historical *self* is a collective entity as opposed to individual. Striving to engender a grand narrative of the achievements of a class through an era, this *self* is materialised through the subsuming of several



unacknowledged little narratives of individual contributions and experiences. Thus, the *self* as realized through means stated above, functions as propaganda machinery endeavouring to embrace and further preferred narratives conforming to the hegemonic agenda of the concerned class. Socio-historical *self* claiming to be instituted on facts alone reflects extreme disregard for humanitarian attributes and accounts of personal experience, on grounds of objectivity. This method thriving on the politics of misappropriations and representations governed by vested interests, stifles individual subaltern voices thereby denying selfhood to the otherwise unprivileged sections which may have contributed constructively in the realization of the collective *self* of the class. Depicting the voice of few against numerous undocumented silences, the collective nature of socio-historical *self* is beguiling and dehumanizing in nature which can be observed in the demigod portrayals of a select personages on one hand, and a sheer rejection of an array of individuals on the other. Construction of socio-historical narratives of *self* are limited with little space designated for individuals to perform as speaking subjects. The purpose of the *self* lies in the generation of consent favourable for the perpetuation of the hegemony under which the aforesaid *self* is manufactured and disseminated for general assimilation. Another aspect of such delusionary methodology of *self* and the consequent hegemony is the capacity to initiate incessant classifications which effectively imbibe in the layers of the grand narrative, any effort undertaken by the subaltern sections to break away from the collective, unitary *self* by introducing themselves as speaking subjects. The technique of assimilation, being subtle, leads to an unconscious normalization of errant factions into the permissible ranges of dissent, eventually generating a consensual agreement to the propagation of the falsehood of presumed concept of *self*. Hence, this idea of *self*, nourished by an overt agenda of aggrandizement of the hegemonic class, curtailing asymbiotic variants cannot be deemed empowering for the units comprising it and thus, should be renounced as an instrument of mass deception.

As regressive and incarcerating the above interpretations may seem an equal amount of autonomy is provided by the philosophical inquiry of *self* that in its all accommodating nature includes all those factors, in entirety, which have either been held constant or evaded in the purview of the analysis above. From Immanuel Kant's metaphysics concerning with the interaction of the



referent *I* with *substance* leading to the formation of *self* to Albert Camus' concept of *absurd*, continental philosophy has evolved from experiential, essential to an existential frame in its investigation of the building blocks of *self*. In the words of G.W.F.Hegel as can be read in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it becomes crucially important for the realization of *self*, that a victory on the overwhelming grasp of *other* is established and the process is reiterated incessantly for the continued expression of the same in concrete terms. A failure to persevere would lead to the annihilation of *self* which need not necessarily correspond to the clinical death of the individual in question. *Other* being comprised of multitudinous repressive institutional components and sensory experiences pervades both internal and external realms of the *self*. Thus, *self* can be read not as an eventual outcome of an arbitrary struggle but a continuous dynamic conflict for securing a space in an otherwise chaotic gulf intervening physical birth and death. Following this it can be assumed that *self* instead of being a unified, unalterable truth becomes a loosely held conglomerate of simultaneous manifestations of the concurrent conflicts between multiple disruptive forces and the thinking being. It can be concluded from the above propositions that the aspect generally upheld as *self* is a derivative of an absolute *Self*, a unified symbolic receptacle of original, objective psychic states, capable of infinite replications transcending temporal, socio-cultural, behavioral, or ethical deterrents. Therefore, *Self* attains a status of myth on the lines of the Real making all endeavours of the thinking subject a palimpsest of diverse interpretations of the *self*, which though experienced in completeness is seldom truthfully expressed owing to linguistic and behavioural constraints. In extension, it can also be maintained that schizophrenia other than being a corrective measure adopted by human brain to address traumatic formative episodes is a usual state of immediate human *self*. Considering the replicating properties of *Self*, it and its corollary *self* can be termed as material realities conditioned for a purpose, rather than illusory metaphysical constructs. On Bergsonian terms, in replicating itself on the physical realm, *Self* occupies space which is reinforced corresponding to the number of times *self* is invoked.

A disagreement, at this point can be proposed to the postulations of Arthur Schopenhauer as can be found in his work *The World as Representation and Will* where he examines the idea of clinical death and through concepts drawn from various theological and philosophical sources



establishes the futility of life as compared to the nobility conferred by death to *self*. He posits the idea of the presence of an Original source of all observable material forms on the terrestrial frame to which all forms must return after the completion of the cycle of life. In the same work he contends that the objective of the soul, divested of its physical frame, is reunion with the primordial protoplasm to ensure that the cycle of births and death is continued unhindered. A similar view on psychological lines has been submitted by Sigmund Freud in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he asserts the presence of rudimentary protoplasm which through circumstantial stimulus metamorphosed into extremely complex organisms, in this case human. Prior to the inevitable response to external stimuli, following the instinctual codes the rudimentary protoplasm repeated its course of existence complacently deflecting any impulse to assume higher orders of life in their respective kingdoms, till such behaviour was viable no more. The surroundings and factors sustaining life altered their courses which had corresponding effects on the protoplasm, forcing it to grow and shed appendages in order to sustain the cycle of life. The changes were long drawn and took eons to attain the current form of human anatomy. This however, had little bearing on the traces of memory constituting the subconscious which strives to reach the primordial state of simplistic existence. This, according to Freud was the function of death drive which sought to restore the *self* to the state of non-existence or oneness with matter. It has to be unanimously accepted that theological doctrines of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity amongst many others do promote the theory of amalgamation of human *self* with that of a superior Being as the solitary, ideal aspiration for a thinking subject, thereby moulding the *self* into a vessel spiritually prepared to receive divine inspiration from an external, undeterminable source. In a situation as this, the lofty ideals associated to the conception of *free will* are rendered superfluous for the apparently independent *self*, capable of incredible feats is reduced to a mere receiver of hallucinatory inspiration from an indeterminable, practically non-existent chaotic mass. This is further problematised by the fact that such selfless abnegation of *self* results in a cessation of manifold constructive efforts that could have enriched knowledge and the experience of life in general. Following this, it can be assumed that the magnificence attached to the human *self* is misleading at best for the distinguishing element that demarcates lower life forms from the thinking subject are



capricious and inconsequential. Annulling the arguments of Schopenhauer hence, it can be said that the will-to-live defining the animalistic existence of lower animals is a more honourable trait than the will-to-die exhibited by the most sentient thinking *self* ever ordained. This reasoning, moving further, clearly entails the paradox involved in the societal perception of *self* where a productive desire to live and create is derided as sacrilege and the depraved craving for random psychological ecstasy is extolled to the pedestals of divine. Collectively considering the instances of Schopenhauer and Freud, it can be concluded that their suppositions fall short in addressing the critical niches integral to the understanding of the *self* and the repetition constituting the cycle of births and deaths. If it is believed for an instant that the aim of progression of *self* in the linear temporal framework is the ultimate merger with the benevolent primordial mass, then the motive governing the interjection in the primal order in the form of life is unexplored in their respective treatises.

Owing to such conceptual shortfalls, and several socio-economic transformations the essential notion of *self* was found inadequate in satiating the relentless struggle for understanding the same in the face of a new world order characterized by political intrigues, sanguinary wars, unprecedented ethnic cleansings, and economic recessions. It led to a questioning of the immensely auspicious values associated with the essence of *self* and a complete renunciation of the same heralding an age of existentialism and absurd. Existentialism as a discursive practice prevailed by prioritizing the principle of existence over essence in which *self* was upheld as the center of existence. Following this stand existentialism freed the thinking subject from the prohibitive subtle or explicit institutional directives and restored the status of *free will* as an attribute characterized by extreme freedom and equally crucial to the determination of *self*. Under such a scheme of thought the notions of a congenial supreme consciousness, public interest, and benefic world order are repudiated in the favour of personal choices and experimentation with *self* for the formation of consciousness. The existential *self* observes the world as an array of indifferent, irrational forces not necessarily acting in the best interest of the individual concerned. In a world order as thus, he is obliged to define the parameters of his own nature based on the enormous range of choices available to him which also makes him solely responsible for the outcomes of such choices. The



existential *self* permitting no exit discards the established notions of good vs. evil and in turn accepts the arbitrariness of the social structures which restrict the exploration of the possibilities of *self* by constantly striving to rise above them. It should not be understood that existential *self* in the process of self-recognition refutes the contemplation of death but musings on death extensively influence the choices undertaken by the existential *self* during his course of life on earth as has been effectively explored by Martin Heidegger in work *Being and Time*. Heidegger in terms of Hegel considers *self* as a cumulative entity torn between the individual thinking subject and the world outside, the conflict between which is crucial for shaping the individual experience of the *self* or Dasein. In this context, death is regarded as a closure of spatio-temporal reality of *self* beyond which lies a realm of non-existence or simply *nothingness*. However, existential or absurd theories preach individual action and the exercise of free will to combat the finality spelled by death, for *nothingness* and merger into it is regarded as the inevitable course in the evolution of *self*. In the discourses of existentialism and absurd death is constructed as the all neutralizing, apathetic *other* which has to be, on Hegelian terms incessantly thwarted for the optimum realization of *self*.

This intense ordeal of existential domain of nothingness, death, and the struggle to exist in an erratic, unmoved universe has fed the literary imagination effecting the production of works on the continent that have comprehensively explored the subject. Albert Camus' *The Plague* is an account of the Algerian city of Oran reeling under the pandemic of bubonic plague where Dr.Rieux, Jean Tarrou, and Joseph Grand choose humanitarianism and tending to victims of the disease over escaping with their lives. The existential concepts are subtly masked in the course of the novel where the struggle of the Dasein of Dr.Rieux against external institutions is brought to fore. Arbitrary institutional structures randomly constricting freedom and the complete realization of *self* is depicted in the portrayals of Father Paneloux and the Prefect who illustrate the administrative and the religious state apparatus respectively. In the novel, Raymond Rambert, epitomising a probable counter-discourse to existentialism, leaves no stone unturned in his attempts to escape and join his wife in Paris. His efforts however, are ineffectual vindicating that the universe as erstwhile perceived is not an embodiment of munificence, but is a prototype of impassiveness and callousness which throws individuals in the midst of the world to see them suffer and surrender to the throes of



existence.

Rising above all socio-cultural constructs and asserting freedom in the most unimpaired form imaginable, existential *self* discredits the notions of reality to indulge in a simulacrum of Real. This can be observed in Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and the Margarita*, written on the lines of Fyodor Dostoyevsky where two disparate historical epochs are invoked to evaluate the concerns of freedom and the corresponding existence of *self*. The narrative moves unhindered between the contemporary literary society of Moscow and Jerusalem during the trial of Jesus by Pontius Pilate depicting the invalidity of linear time in tactlessly seeking to restrain the expanse of *self*. Dispensing with the socially accepted notions of good and evil, the author portrays Satan, in the form of Professor Woland, a discerning and a levelheaded character inspiring the protagonist Berlioz to experiment with *self*, in place of a blind adherence to the contemporary fashionable trends of thought. The novel adopts various innovative narrative techniques and characterization that appear as a sequence of troubled, uncohesive dreams defying a unified plot structure and thus disorienting the usual reading patterns. The goal of all the initiatives as can be found in the novel is to dilute the sacredness associated with historical figures and in extension with life. Additionally, the novel can be assumed to be driven by the spirit of inculcating the quest to discern true *self* from pretence, and necessity of making choices and facing the consequences of the same.

A more profound utilization of simulacra than the above text can be observed in Pierre Klossowski's *Diana at her Bath: The Women of Rome*. Following the above techniques the authors transfers the readers to a Roman setup which in essence is French. The essay consists of the antics of Diana, the Roman goddess of wilderness and fecundity, and Actaeon, a mortal hunter. The tale forms a part of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where captivated by the former, Actaeon secretly watches the rituals of her bath. Being surprised by the intrusion, Diana accidentally changes him into an antelope by splashing the waters of the stream on him. The essay however, drifting from traditional lines, focuses on Klossowski's *tableaux vivant* where the author perilously constructs innovatively artistic, improbable, erotic situations devoid of emotional intensity. This aspect, too profane to explore in mainstream literature, does not serve to titillate the readers into fantasies but enables them to investigate the politics of eroticism within the accepted socio-cultural, legal mores.



Exploring the sacred and mythic erotic practices of the Roman women, the author establishes the manner in which the evolution of contemporary sexual behavior is regressive being determined by its associations with sacred religious practices. It is not to say that Klossowski as an author sought to commend licentiousness and unrestrained sexuality pervading the French social milieu but his goal consisted of exposing the techniques of religion which in place of liberating the *self* places insurmountable fetters and prefers certain forms of freedom at the cost of obliterating others. It has been stated earlier that the hegemonic setup dictating socio-religious practices upheld the desire for annihilation and self-inflicted pain sacred as compared to the desire to create new forms. Therefore, deviating from the popular norms of acceptable and the contrary, the author examines and presents on literary terms another aspect of the freedom of *self* which though crucial would perpetually be undermined.

The most unfamiliar approach in the exploration of erotic instincts has perhaps been adopted by Georges Bataille in his novellas *My Mother* and *Madam Edwarda*. Seeking to explore the divine through transgression Bataille demolishes the insubstantial rubric of ethical erotic conduct reducing it to a mere set of confutable statutory directives. The solitary desire dominating the narrative structure is an unrestrained wish to discover the pleasures of union with the all-embracing nothingness after death as the ultimate expression of *self*. Death for the author, as depicted in the novellas has more complex connotations than the clinical closure of life exhibited in the absence of instincts, or sensory experiences that structures the world around *self*, providing it a ground for action. Unlike Klossowski, Bataille does not provide graphical details of erotic encounters but engages in a distancing, thoroughly objective narrative discourse potent enough to disturb the foundations of all apparent truths and held sacred by the readers¹ (Mishima 4). The aforementioned works encapsulate Bataille's conception of *self* which is comprised of deliberate actions towards simultaneously seeking and staving off a power greater than the human conception. This power though capable of being emotionally realized elides the intellectual grasp therefore diffusing the

¹ In the words of Yukio Mishima, " ... image of the mother overlaps with that of Edwarda, and with it a vision of defilement, of incest which violates the sanctity of the Sacred Mother. But, in these works, the Sacred Mother does not suffer passively as a victim of trespass; she herself spurs others on and forces them into an experience, filled with terror, repulsion and ecstasy which leads them to witness God." (4)



lines demarcating the sacred from the profane and anarchy from order aiming at a wholesome experience of *self* devoid of any fetters whatsoever.

From the above discussion it can be deduced that *self* is a macrocosm which encloses the superstructural discursive practices regulating human action on the spatio-temporal frame. Other than being a tangible reality, it is a subject-in-process which defines the human person dynamically depending upon diverse situations of existence. The expression of *self* calls for immense courage to court non-existence, accept the sacred and profane alike renouncing the ethical concerns in seeking union with nothingness alone. A discerning individual must be able to distinguish between true *self* and its false manifestations for strong as the desire to achieve complete *self* may be, equally injurious is the tendency of institutions to standardize the construction of *self* which can be deceiving for many. The essence of *self* is probably non-existent for a presence of that would regulate and restrict certain actions thereby contradicting the agency of *free will*. The truth of *self*, if any, lies in the material existence, and in the efforts to surpass that state of causal relationships with the functions existing outside it. The realization and construction of *self* lies in dictating existence, and not being dictated by it for it is liberation in truest sense.

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