STRUCTURES OF SELFHOOD

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Abstract

Women's self-exploration leads her to the discovery that she is the product if a culture in the making of which or in its making of her she has no part. Her true identity is smothered by the patriarchal culture pushing her to the margins of existence. To salvage the self, to find out who she is and what she has lost, it becomes imperative that she should redeem and retrieve her experience as a woman, within which she alone can acquire autonomy over her being. This realisation triggers off a journey into the recesses of her being and like a phoenix she is reborn.

Key Words: selfhood, self-exploration, woman identity

The woman as quester finds herself trapped between two worlds, one external and regressive, of which she is a passive object, the other inner yet dynamic, struggling to break through. Her task is two-fold. She has to break through the encapsulating and circumscribing self-linked taboos to deconstruct the identity she has received from the patriarchal culture, risking an existential conflict between the self and the social and cultural structural hierarchies.

Simultaneously, she has to engage in the process of unravelling what she understands to be her real self, relative to her social role she explores the possibility of a new self not in denial of the self-moulded by the patriarchal society, but through an affirmation of positive values that have been ignored.

The continuous process of evolution which starts at the birth of a human being remarks Erich Fromm is nothing but "the process of giving birth to herself (1956:26)". In the case of a woman, a parallel process of birth into full personhood involves not one, but several stages of development, each of which could be viewed as beginning with a birth, followed by a process of maturation. However, the crucial take off point is the moment of the woman's arrival at an awareness of her having been deprived of her rightful inheritance as a human being.

The girl child grows up under the supervision of the agents of patriarchy, working through domestic, social and cultural institutions, including the immediate family. With their help and ideological structure is built up around the growing child imprisoning her forever in a protective and regressive enclosure. The reason for abundance of images of circumscription and enclosure in women's writing is not far to seek. Their writings show how major images of enclosure convey their creator's individualised reactions to a collectively suffered social malaise. Mary Daly traces this to certain processes, embedded within the culture, and imposing their silent will on the growing girl. She terms it as sex role socialisation:

...a conditioning process which begins the moment we are born, and which is enforced by most institutions. Parents, friends, teachers, text book and illustrators, advertisers, to those who control the mass media, toy and cloth manufacturers, professional such as doctors and psychologists – all contribute to the socialization process. This happens through dynamics that are largely uncalculated and unconscious, yet, which reinforce the assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangement of a sexually hierarchical society (1973:2).

Carl Jung traces these imperceptible yet rumbling forces to their ideological roots. In an *Aspects of the Feminine*, he shows how the worship of Mary, a vestige of paganism, has affected the psychic culture of man resulting in a declaration of the woman:

Since the psychic relation to woman was express in the collective worship of Mary, the image of woman lost a value to which human beings had a natural right. This value could find its natural expression only through individual choice, and it sank into the unconscious when the individual form of expression was replaced by a collective one (1982:20).

This ideological bias is found reflected in every three field from psychology to literature, and to common sense. Women are viewed by Western social scientists as passive sexual objects, devoted mothers and dutiful wives. Anthropologists also have treated women as relatively enviable and turned their attention on the activities of men mainly. In her book *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly shows how the entire conceptual system of theology and ethics, with its masculine symbolism for God reinforces the sexual hierarchy (1973:20). However, the most irritating to the feminist thinkers have been the contribution of psychoanalysis to this pervasive inegalitarean sexual ideology. The corner-stone of the theory propounded by Freud, the most influential of the clinical theorists, was the masculine conviction of woman is a castrated man (1950: 191-960. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan bases his theory of language on the phallus as the most important symbol of difference. According to him, language and culture are dominated by the law of phallus, which causes of women's negative entry into the symbolic order (1977:8).

Women contribute their share in bringing about this state of affairs, by willingly internalizing the derogatory and constraining image of themselves, projected by patriarchy. Judith Fetterly finds that conclusion from the woman is managed by a deliberate confusing of her consciousness:

Yet, worse even than the loss is the confusion of consciousness which obscures the nature of the less and often the fact of loss itself. Hemmed about with myths and images and dogmas and definitions and laws and strictures and God and Man, and fear and fear and fear, she is deceived into believing the theory about the bit of flesh and the bite of apple and is kept from knowing what she is bereft (1978:IX).

These calculated moves have met, not infrequently, with resistance from sensitive women. But most feminist critics, who have attempted to analyze the reactions of women to victimization have arrived at situations where the woman is inevitably the loser. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, describes the emotions related to such a situation as: "Frustration and the bewilderment born out of the conflict between believing what one is told about one's nature and destiny as a woman and desiring yet resenting the prerogatives assumed by men (1979:274)". These emotional states when undergone for a long period of time creates in a woman what R D Laing calls, an ontologically insecure kind of personality whose basic experience is a confusion about one's identity together with a feeling that one's being is quantitatively weaker than the outside world (1960:40-41).

The more sensitive the woman, the more intense her reactions, as well as her frustrations, causing the distortion of psychic energy. Women's alienation, anger, madness, all demonstrate the break within an otherwise self-perpetuating and self-conforming system, created by the tension between her illuminating inner experiences and the public expectations about her. If the woman is strong enough to withstand the pressure on her own person, she finds that she has to contend with a society strong enough to dictate her fate.

Failing to deceive her into submission by conferring upon her the identity of an angel, the society now stamps her as a hysteric or a sorceress to be thrown into protected spaces like hospital, asylums and prisons. The role of religion in supporting the sexual caste system has been transferred to psychiatry in the post-Freudian society. Cixous and Clement paint a familiar scene in today's society: "history of the hysteric... takes place in half-confinement, the hysteric dolefully reclining, tended and surrounded by doctors and worried family, is a prisoner inside the family; or else, in crisis, she bears the brunt of producing a medical spectacle (1986:8)."

Whether she succeeds in her mission or not, the identity crisis which is a major preoccupation of the poetry of women in the 60s and after, is a sure sign of the woman's optimism about the

possibility of her fuller participation in being. Betty Friedan finds the woman's awareness of an identity crisis, the prelude to a general awakening: "In a sense that goes beyond any woman's life, I think this is the crisis of women growing up – a turning point from an immaturity that has been called femininity to full human identity (1974:79)."

What distinguishes the woman writer is the additional dimension of power involved in the act of writing through which the interior world finds expression. As an attempt to the appropriation of an exclusively male domain, the woman's ambition to be a writer is an act of defiance of another kind, deviant and punishable by patriarchal law. "Traditionally, the poet is a man, and 'poetry' is the poems that men write ... It is men who make art, who make books, women make babies (1978:1)." Suzanne Juhasz shows how the women writer, as a result, gets caught in a "double bind" trying to accommodate the prerogatives enjoyed by a writer into her concept of herself as the "feminine", who is nurturing and giving and admitted to interpersonal relationships.

This not only creates conscious tension, alienation and dissonance in women's work, but also leads to a tendency to project themselves in split personalities. A vagueness about the sense of self, the constant presence of the 'other' the simultaneous presence of two opposing selves, which constantly appears in the work of women, are all related manifestations of the peculiar psychological oppression, the "double bind" effects on them. Together with the variety of alter egos there also exist a number of suggestive thematic contrasts like retreat and escape, prison and freedom, safety and exposure etc.

An analysis of the role that a woman plays within the patriarchal construct of the family serves to perpetuate the original and androcentric bias by assuming the centrality of the phallocentric order and examining women as the other and her contribution to it. Women have been the marginalised sect in a society that ruthlessly promotes the phallocentric hegemonic ideology, while considering Man as the primary principle relativizing woman as the other, the object of men's wishes and desires. The gatekeepers of civilisation have consistently thwarted every move that she has initiated to break free from this objectification of her personhood and attain self-realisation. Needless to say, women have been socially conditioned to confirm to this code that exalts in the patriarchal order, and any attempt to upset the status quo has been met with stiff resistance. Patriarchal institutions such as Law, Religion, the Academy and others have endeavoured to snuff out the very core of the female consciousness and the family as an agent of the larger society has succeeded in carrying this patriarchal oppression in the most personal and intimate sphere of social existence. Feminism questions the viability of the application of male-determined traditions, attitudes and examines its damaging consequences within the context of the family which when magnified portrays the societal condition. To understand the

nature of the oppression of women in the private sphere, it is necessary to examine the institutions of marriage, family and motherhood and their demands on women.

The notion of the family has been inevitably an important consideration for all schools of feminists. Questions that are often being raised are – what is meant by family? Who defines the notion of family and sex-roles or the roles to be played by the members in a society. The consensus has been arrived at is that the family as a unit becomes part of the patriarchal arsenal for the subjugation of women. Kate Millet in her incisive treatise *Sexual Politics*, called the family, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal social formation. It was her contention that the family was a microcosm of the larger society that contained within all the ideological assumptions of the institution of patriarchy. When feminists attack the institution of the family they are discounting the importance and validity of filial bonds. The family that they object to is the rigidity that defined nuclear family consisting of one male who is the head of the family, one female, who is his wife, and their children. This typically forms the scenario for the domination – subjugation pattern evinced in the broader context. Etymologically, the word 'family' can be traced to the Latin word 'famulus' connoting servants. By implication, the members of the household, women and children were the property of man who was its head. It is he who demarcates the rights and responsibilities of each member and lays down the guidelines for housekeeping and rearing, while the actual onus falls on the lot on the woman, that is, his wife. The employer-employee, master-slave, husband-wife nexus is what underlines the centrality of the institution of the family.

Motherhood is yet another institution created by patriarchy to violate the free choice of women. Motherhood should be the outcome of the genuine choice made by the woman, and not the inevitable destiny of women or worst still, the by-product of rape, marital or otherwise, underlying the view that motherhood should not be an oppressive experience but the outcome of free choice Myra Ferr and Beth Hess maintain: "Compulsory motherhood, whether due to the absence of birth control or any other meaningful life's work is not acceptable. A woman's right to make that decision by herself, unimpeded by government policy or by social pressure for or against child bearing is crucial to freedom of all women ... The distinction of motherhood as the biological experience and mothering as the social experience of caring for small children is a crucial element in feminist analysis (1985:40)." Motherhood as an institution is a patriarchal imposition to keep the social hierarchy and political matters. These three institutions have survived by controlling woman's bodies and making the biological function of the bodies an accomplice in their oppression.

The violence done to the body and mind of the woman with the support of culture, religion, politics and behavioural sciences has been a major field of study by female researchers. With the tools of feminist criticism it is possible to detect in the works of women writers the influence of feminist consciousness. A deep and honest understanding of woman's situation in the patriarchal culture gets reflected in many works by women.

Lasch defines the minimal self as "a self-uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union (1984:19)." This uncertainty is the result of certain political and socio-economic changes that followed industrialization. The chief source of these changes was – technology, which in its progress brought about division between ownership and labour, between political and social classes, and finally, changing the concept of reality itself. Technology hastened of incorporation that institutionalized these divisions. Industry became fragmented into a managerial elite, a specialist class of scientists and technicians, and a class of manual labourers. The incorporation of industry, in other words, verified human beings into objects or into non-human stereotypes or roles .In the post-industrial society of mass production and mass consumption which, as Lasch writes, tends "to discourage initiative and self-reliance and to promote dependence passivity, and a spectatorial state of mind both at work and at play (1984:27)." Mass consumption creates a world of transient objects which are interchangeable thus undermining the sense of a stable reality and altering "perceptions not just of the self but of the world outside the self" (Ibid:30). Narcissism, which signifies "a loss of selfhood ... a self-threatened with disintegration and by a sense of inner emptiness," is the result of several factors. Mass production and consumption, mass media, the popularization of culture, and the decline of authority and its replacement by a "pluralistic" and "non-judgemental" political discipline together with these broad social and political changes were change in family structure, parent-child relationship and the feminist revolt. Lasch traces the emergence of the culture of narcissism to three important changes affecting the family, the concept of "egalitarian" family, the presence of other socializing agencies, and the effect of mass culture (185-86). By creating a sense of equality between of parent and children, by reducing the role of the father and enhancing that of the mother, and by urging the child into premature adulthood, contemporary society has only increased the individual's narcissistic sense of alienation and helplessness. This has been further intensified by psychoanalytic concepts of self-hood derived from inadequate political ideologies, the conservative "Party of the superego" the liberal Ego Psychology and the Neo-Freudian left.

While Lasch's account of one of the causes of minimalization and narcissism may be open to debate, what is important is the profile of the narcissistic personality. According to him, there are three important dimensions of this personality: loss of selfhood or identity, dependence and

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passivity, and a survival mentality. The loss of selfhood is the result of improper adjustment between the self and not self, encouraging "regressive solutions ... to the problem of separation" between the two. He traces this ultimately to contemporary culture's child rearing practices, which increase Oedipal conflicts in the child. The regressive behaviour initiated in childhood is further accentuated in later life when the individual is confronted with a world of transience and instability created by the post-industrial economics of mass production, consumption and mass culture. "Identity has become uncertain and problematical not because people no longer occupy fixed social positions ... but because they no longer inhabit a world that exists independently of themselves" (Ibid:32). Dependence and passivity are a direct consequence of the uncertainty of selfhood. Lash defines this mentality as "a restriction of perspective to the immediate demands of survival, ironic self-observation, protean selfhood, emotional anaesthesia (Ibid:94)." The survivor has no concern for the past or future, his only concern is to survive the immediate moment, to adapt himself to the crisis at hand.

With modernization, the quest of knowledge to know oneself has become a major preoccupation for many thinkers. "Who am I", "Know Thyself" and "Unto Thine Own self be true" – such are the themes of wall plaques, self-help manuals and religious maxims. The sense of identity is important to both sociology and human psychology.

Ironically, although the concept of self is one of the oldest and most enduring of psychological depictions of human nature, social scientists have yet to arrive at a consensus precisely on what the self is about following the psychoanalytic perspective, we do understand that personality is a cause of behaviour and following behaviourist, we do understand that personality as the effect of behaviour. Is the self-something that you have, or is it something you aspire to be? Is it no more than a set of unique, identifying characteristics and, if so, from whom perspective? Can, indeed others know one's self better than the individual knows himself or herself? Or might it be that identity is determined not on the basis of who one thinks one is, but rather on the basis of one who is not what he/she is? In other words, selfhood is a matter of exclusion rather than inclusion.

One way to conceptualize the self is to consider the extent it is based on principle s of exclusion. Freud believes that the infant conceives its self to be all compassing and, with time, comes to see his/her self as distinctive and unique. However, this process varies cross-culturally and historically, with, for instance, the self-boundary contraction stopping at one's tribe or family in collectivist cultures, or contracting to the logic limit of a singular entity in individualistic cultures. With the development of language comes the boundary between one's body self and one's

symbolic self. The mind/body duality forces a woman to complaint that "he only wants me for my body".

With broadening of contacts with primary, secondary groups and strangers, boundaries are defined between the self and the other. One learns, for instance, that to hug's one family and not strangers is to maintain various spatial boundaries with various types of others.

Adolescence brings increasing differentiation of self from parents, featuring battles for one's privacy and rights having the distinctive marker as individual, while making their break from their parents. Adulthood marks boundaries between one's public and private selves, such as those between one's work and familial roles.

Developing further on the exclusionary aspect of selfhood, Hartmann in *Boundaries in the Mind* classifies individuals in terms of their self-boundaries. There are thin or porous boundaries, for the realities of dream and wakefulness are blurry. In those feelings and thoughts run high empathy with others, sometimes make one unsure about the identities of others. With "thick boundaries" on the other hand, people rarely confuse feeling with thought, having few close relationships, can "tune out" sights and sounds, and awake instantly in the mornings. It would be interesting to see how Hartmann's typology correlates with Eniatar Zerubavel's notion of fuzzy Vs rigid mindedness and Carl Jung's distinction between introverted and extroverted personalities.

There are two facets of selfhood that cannot be doubted: its uniqueness and its innate tendency to preserve its integrity. The body self, for instance, is like no other, each individual's DNA and fingerprints are unique. To protect its integrity, it has a built-in defense system that destroys viral invaders and rejects transplanted organs. Analogously, there is the self that is experienced psychologically as one's own and likes no other. And there is the social self, the self that can be identified by others owing to its distinctive attributes.

What distinguishes sociological form from psychological approaches to the self is the former's focus on the ways in which identity is negotiated with others. As Charles Cooley observed, self-feelings are profoundly shaped by the imagined appraisals of one's self of significant order –*the looking glass self*. The foundations of this sociological approach are largely built on the philosophical ideas of George Herbert Mead, who argued that society precedes symbolic thought, which in turn, precedes the development of the selves. Mead further adds that by studying role taking, one can see how the rise of self is dependent upon the ability of an individual to become an object of himself or herself. In other words, one comes to act towards one's self as one act towards others. In this view, the self is a dynamic process within an individual.

While considering the ways in which individuals generally conform to the demands of various social settings, human behaviour should be better predicted by understanding the role people think they play. Personality factors may simply add style to one's basic role performances. In the extreme case, the self can be conceptualised to be no more than the roles it plays.

Of interest to sociologically inclined social psychologists is the social distribution of different self-types: how particular socio-historical climate can give rise to a preponderance of a given self-type in a society and how in turn, this can affect a society's collective attitude and its religious, political and economic systems. On the other hand, such collective transformation of attitudes and selves is also a function of structural change. Behaviour often precedes its ideological justification and thus new social arrangements lead to new actions that lead to new attitudes and types of people. In anthropology, *cultural determinists* like Margaret Mead, understands that the plasticity of the human organism is shaped by different cultures to create distinctive personality types.

In attempting to categorise the types if elves cross-culturally, researchers often focus on the extent to which selves are collectivist or individualistic. For instance, *In Search of Self in India and Japan* (1988), Alan Roland writes:

Compared to Americans, there's much less of a sense of an individual self among Asians. They experience themselves as far as more embedded in a net of extremely close emotional relationships. They have what might be called a familial self, one that includes their close relationships in their own sense of who they are. This kind of self simply does not exist in the West to nearly the same degree (1988;23).

In a number of ways identity is essentially a temporal concept. Our encounters with time are separately and affected by biological, psychological, social and historical timetables, which mould our biographies in distinctive fashion. For instance, in addition to physical and psychological maturational factors, identity is shape by one's roles within the social system as well as by the historical context within which one lives.

The tendency in psychological approaches to the life cycle is to look for and identify invariant, innate development agenda. Indeed, all societies recognize the existence of some regularity as a criterion for allocating social roles. In an overarching assumption of the sociological identity theorist hold that with age, social dynamics play an increasing role in shaping the concept of the self and identity.

Identity and self-hood constitute the bedrock of the feminist discourse. Feminist across the world have variously theorized the concept of self-hood, in the context of its socio-historic

development. The experiencing self has been the marker of identity. While identity is a social construct woman's own experience constitutes the very essence of selfhood.

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