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Conflict between Inner Freedom and Socially Constructed of Female Destiny in Toni Morrison's Chosen Novels

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Abstract

The concept of 'self' is closely related to the idea of identity. Self is just what makes us who we are. In the modern context, emergence of self refers to freeing it from hierarchy and dependence. The self becomes responsible for itself, for maintaining its own image, which happens through social interactions. According to the psychologist, William James, self is essentially a social structure and it arises in social experiences. 'Selfhood' is formed from experiences. It changes not only over a period, but also emerges as what we experience as the 'self' in a particular period. Human beings have the unique quality of reflecting upon and evaluating their thoughts, feelings and actions. By understanding oneself, one can hope to achieve greater happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment, liberation and also foster better relations with people around. Selfhood is important to us, both as individuals and as social creatures, as it shapes our personal existence and our relations with those whom we bond.

Keywords: Inner Freedom, Socially Destiny, Indian culture, Western culture, Toni Morrison

In Western culture, right from the time of Descartes and Locke, the basis of selfhood has manifested in three dimensions- the bodily or material, which is about the physical existence of individuals, their needs and requirements. Our 'selves' in this level, are housed in our bodies and are shaped by the requirements of our body. The second dimension springs from social and cultural interactions and our selves are molded based on what our relations with society and with others, allow us to be. The third dimension, that of, reflectivity, involves looking at oneself objectively and the self becomes an active agent working towards its own realization, establishing order among its attitudes and beliefs and giving direction to its actions. The dimension or dimensions chosen and the ways they are understood, are crucial in determining the character and implications of any given conception of the self. Based on this, selves could be generated from within one's own being or can be fabricated based on influences from outside. Selves can be stable or fluid, autonomous or dependent, self-governing or servile to some superior power, which the self might not even be aware.

From ancient times, the nature of self has been a topic of debate in the East and West and it still continues into the present. The nature of selfhood is explored in the Upanishads, which are philosophical treatises, composed in India, around 1500- 600 BC. For centuries, philosophers and psychologists have been contributing to the vast knowledge on this topic.

But it still continues to be an enigma. The result was the emergence of two mutually opposing views from the East and West. While one emphasizes on the unchallengeable basis for selfhood, the other, with equal vehemence, opposes this. Philosophies in the East itself differ in their understanding of selfhood. While the School of Advaita Vedanta, which falls under the Upanishadic tradition, has claimed experiences in one's life as the basis for self, numerous Schools of Buddhism have denied any such basis.

The two great Greek philosophers, Pythagoras and Democritus too, differed in their views on this. While the former believed in the immortality of the soul, the latter, denied its existence. Hume, in the 18th C, claimed that the self was not permanent and observable, while Kant spoke about the unchanging, transcendental ego. In the 20th C, Erik Erikson has interpreted the self in a way that is similar to that of Kant. On the other hand, B.F. Skinner, like Hume, criticizes the concept of self. The discovery of one's own true selfhood becomes an important issue in life, as the problem of identity relates to the most profound personal and ideological dilemmas. This concern is clearly the emphasis in almost all philosophical concerns across the globe. Just as, the sage Yajnavalkya, in ancient India, highlighted the need to understand and meditate upon the self, a similar exhortation, 'Know Thyself', had much significance in Greece. Individuals are not entities that are static, without prospects for growth. As biological organisms, it is imperative that human beings grow and adapt to an environment that is changing continuously, based on the variety of roles that they are called upon to play in life. Situations and circumstances can arise in one's life that even the strongest self could break or feel threatened. The vastness of discourse available on this topic in the East and West, has forced the researcher to confine to certain prominent ideas emerging out of these cultures. The differing socio-cultural contexts of these theories seem to have systematically shaped them in different ways. The 'self' has been an area of interest for disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, Psychiatry, Philosophy and Psychology. The researcher will be confining to the ideas expressed by prominent philosophers and psychologists about

self and identity, in order to limit the purview of research.

According to Indian Philosophical thought, the 'Law of Karma' is supposed to be that cosmic principle, by which, each individual, has to face the consequences of his action, good or bad. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna asks Arjuna to recognize that an individual himself, is one's friend and enemy, and exhorts him to uplift himself by his own effort, rather than waiting for somebody else to do it for him. As per the Indian Tradition, Karma is something that is personal and is attached to an individual or his life process. Celie, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, is able to redefine her 'self', in almost similar terms, by negotiating through all obstacles in her life, by her own effort.

In Western thought, one of the oldest statements that affirm the existence of the 'Self', is St. Augustine's statement "For if I am undeceived, so I am". It has its origins in ideas borrowed from ancient Greece, Rome and Christianity. It was Europe's seventeenth Century that developed two incompatible conceptions of the Self - a Cartesian and a Lockean one, which later merged with utilitarian rationality. Until the seventeenth century, it was the concept of self put forward by Aristotle and Plato that the West followed. The self has a central position in western thought, as it distinguishes between rational and individualistic societies and less rational and more collectivist ones. Plato distinguished the rational part of the soul as the part with which it calculates, and the other part of the soul, which is the seat of desires and explained how there is a constant 'civil war' between the two. To reason and desire, Plato adds another factor- thumos, which may be translated as 'passion' or 'spirit'.

Individuals find perfection not by specializing in an activity, but by developing all their capabilities. Modern society is more complicated than closed ones and there is no guarantee that individuals will not be torn apart by the challenges that one comes across in life. For any individual, the question "Who am I", has deep existential implications. There are unlimited ways by which one can interpret, define and mold one's own self - Individuals could either commit suicide or hurt oneself or on the other hand, work toward some form of gratification,

contentment, self-actualization, self-realization, or even one's own emancipation. In Indian and Western thought, the 'self' has been conceptualized in diverse ways. In spite of the diversities, human beings in any society, develop a variety of concepts of who they are, and these concepts are formed by the joint influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Erikson's idea that identity is an evolving pattern of roles and his analysis of the commonly experienced challenges, problems and ways of coping hold great promise for universal applicability, in this context. It becomes clear that flexibility is the key to a meaningful and successful life. The researcher, in the succeeding chapters will try to examine the nature of the self of the characters in Morrison's and Walker's novels, and try to understand them, based on some of these theories.

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