

THE SELF: UNDERSTANDING AND HEALING THROUGH **NARRATIVES**

An Abstract

Talking about self is not new to Philosophy but the term is so equivocal that a consensus is yet to be attained regarding its meaning, definition, nature or function. The self has been variedly understood as the subject, identity, ego, mind, soul, person, individual, agent, and we have volumes of work dedicated to each of these perspectives. The desire to know oneself is an irresistible drive that has stirred the human minds since times immemorial. Wisdom from all ages points to the importance of knowing one's self. Interestingly, talk about the self eludes the same enigma at present as it used to be in the past. We have got pictures from the Mars but have not pictured the self in its entirety, although it is supposedly the closest to us. One does not need to be a philosopher or a psychologist to worry about these questions. At some point in our lives, we do seek an answer to the question 'who am I?' This quest is at once private and universal and has been followed for some thousands of years, both in academia and beyond. All religions, for example, have something to say about the self or soul as it is inseparably linked to the rules of conduct, penance, after-life or rebirth. All schools of Indian Philosophy have discussed at length about self and consciousness, even if they endorse the no-self view (like the Buddhists), for it is pivotal in framing their philosophical systems and to explain the concepts such as Puruṣa, Ātmā (Jīvātmā or Paramātmā), Manas, Brahma, Īśwar, Cetanā, Citta, Cittavṛtti, Yoga, the Law of Karma, Ṛta or the Cosmic Moral Order, Re-birth, Mokṣa or Nirvāṇa, etc. However, in the thesis, I will restrict myself within the boundaries of Western Philosophy, although it is my future plan

to compare and contrast the Western views with the Indian counterpart, to have a better understanding of the problem and to appreciate the beauty of discovering the underlying similarities and differences.

During my formative years, I have been through several adverse situations that gave rise to uncertainties, feelings of helplessness, vulnerabilities and prolonged emotional turbulences, which I eventually overcame. I found solace in stories and novels; they momentarily detached me from the present as I got engrossed in the characters, and also provided immense hope in a future which can be weaved through one's action, agency and free-will, however adverse the situation might become. But the questions that kept coming back was: 'Am I still the same me? Or have I changed completely? Or have there been a series of interconnected me-s? What is the common link that connects all the me-s? What defines me as a person?' Of course, I was not the first one to ask these questions but knowing the answers seemed urgent to me. This research is almost therapeutic; it is a quest to explore myself, to know more about the self, to attain a better understanding of the self. I, therefore, embarked on the journey to understand the self, which, I hoped, would bring more clarity to understand my 'self' in turn.

While conducting the literature survey, I came across the narrative views of self, or the idea that self is a construct. Well, I was aware of the idea that gender is a social construct, but that the self that is so seemingly close to us, is a construct, was difficult to digest initially. Also, I was intrigued to know what the nature of this construction is or who is constructing it. Is it a metaphysical claim? Can this view of self address the problems of personal identity? The basic idea is that the self is a narrative construct which is dynamic in nature and is pinned onto one's socio-cultural-historical context. This is a postmodernist view of self that gained prominence

during the late 20th century and is pitched as a contesting view of self against the modernist understanding of self as an unchangeable given. I realized that all the years of training in analytic philosophy, the predominance of the traditional western foundationalist ideas is probably acting as a hindrance to accept or even consider the constructivist idea of self. The self is probably ingrained in our thoughts and imaginations as real entities like livers or kidneys; but not discovered yet, waiting to be discovered. So giving up this idea can make one sceptical, uncomfortable or even insecure to begin with. But my love for stories and story-telling attracted me towards the possibility of understanding the self as a story. And once I started looking for the works done in this area, I was amazed at how deeply it percolated into various disciplines and the number of interdisciplinary works being carried out all around the world, at dedicated research centres. I had to seize the moment!

I take an immense interest in story-telling, be it in literature or films. So when I crossed this idea understanding the self through narratives or construing the self as narrative constructs, it immediately had my attention. The objective of this research is to understand the self as a narrative construct and weigh its explanatory advantages over the contesting views of self. In other words, my humble attempt is to explore whether the narrative self-views have any better chance of providing us with a comprehensive understanding of self, that we perhaps lacked so far.

The objectives with which I proceeded to work with was to understand the problematics, explore the various approaches to the idea of the narrative self, how far they intersect or deviate from each other, what are the explanatory advantages that these views have over their opponents, and finally what are the questions that still needs to be addressed by the narrativists, in order to

become a full-bodied theory of the self. The narrative view of self, I must clarify at the outset, is an umbrella term and is dealt with by different disciplines like psychology, psychotherapy, film theory, religious studies, literary studies, linguistics, gender studies, subaltern studies, political theories, medical sciences, bio-ethics, cognitive sciences, and of course philosophy, among many others. This is a relatively new approach of understanding the self and is as revolutionary as the linguistic or the mentalistic turn in Philosophy. It is extremely difficult to keep track of all that is happening across various disciplines, but I have tried to give a glimpse of the vastness and depth of the narrative self-views in my work and also discussed the applicative benefits of this approach, where I talk about the healing ‘powers’ of narratives that are being successfully implemented in psychotherapies. I have consulted the major seminal works that have been done in this field, mostly primary resources and also some secondary literature, works translated in English mostly from German and French and cited from empirical researches that are being done in linguistics, psychotherapy and psychology.

I have divided my thesis into three distinct sections- Part I (Understanding the Narrative Self), Part-II (Healing through Narratives), and Part-III (Reviewing Explanatory Advantages), consisting of eight chapters in total. Before beginning these sections I have added the Preface and the Introduction. The Preface gives the background idea of how and why the research idea was conceived. In my thesis, I aim to defend the constructivist views of self, although I have pointed some of its shortcomings where more research is needed. I have listed some of the areas that can be taken up as future research works.

I have been trying to understand and analyze the narrative self-views in the backdrop of the emotionally and physically paralyzing pandemic that has gripped the entire world for the past

eleven months. Nothing that we ever read, heard or experienced has prepared us for this day. I had watched the movie *Contagion* (2011), which depicts a similar scenario of a virus outbreak causing severe respiratory illnesses and spreading like wildfire, while entire medical facilities collapsed in combating and containing the disease. I watched it with a cinematic thrill and chuckled to myself, “this is just a movie”.

The pandemic has challenged our technological supremacy, exposed our vulnerabilities, fragilities, triggered our fear of death, changed our life plans, and made us re-think what is of more value and importance in life, thereby contributing to major changes in our selves or rather the stories that our selves are. I want to propose that the pandemic situation might be considered as a strong case for arguing for the narrative views of the self in philosophy, which construes the self as a narrative construct, as opposed to a core, fixed and given idea of the self.

The narrative self-view is an umbrella term to understand the self in a new light, making a radical shift from the traditional western views of the self. As we have seen that several disciplines have made use of the concept of self as a construct, rather than a given, a lot of interdisciplinary works are going on and there is a wide range of research ideas that can be put to test. The narrative self can be studied from the perspectives of literary theories, linguistics, anthropology, psychotherapy, psychology, philosophy, gender studies, film studies, subaltern studies, sociology, cognitive science, religious studies, and also in the backdrop of war, natural calamities and trauma studies, to name just a few.

The most important advantage of the narrative self views is that they have an edge over both the physicalists and the dualists in explaining the persistence problem of personal identity. Our identity is pinned in the narratives that we and others tell about ourselves. The constructivist

views, therefore, are not speculative in nature, but something experiential and appeals more to common sense. It appreciates the embodiment, dynamicity, growth, changeability, experientiality, and the relational aspects of the self therefore have more accountability in explaining different problems relating to the self and mind. The narrative self-views have applicative advantages. This view of the self is being successfully used in psychotherapy by DST researchers, trauma therapists, and others around the world and it is also yielding positive results in cognitive science researches. Therefore, these views of self have opened up avenues for empirical research. The narrative self views being a new research trend and due to its multi-disciplinary approach, we should make the most of it and hope to gain new insights as the problem is being dealt with from different approaches.

The PhD work for me was not just a means to attain a higher degree for academic or career advancement, but an internal journey that would validate my existence and give meaning to my life-story by connecting the dots. The road has not been easy, with several changes in the external world to which I had to adapt myself to; different jobs, different locations, different people and situations, countering moments of self-doubt, confusions and feelings of incompetency which many researchers face, and finally, the pandemic which challenged our complacency about medical and technological supremacy, leaving us emotionally and physically paralyzed for months. But the voyage has been extremely rewarding. I could track the gradual transformation that I was having with passing time; gaining new insights, understanding novel concepts, contradicting past beliefs, reshaping former ideas and being able to dissociate and observe the totality from a distance. I have not been able to convey all the thoughts and ideas that I have encountered, many of them are shelved for future research works, preferably collaborative ones, in the areas concerning literature, film theory, gender studies and psychotherapy. I also

want to explore the idea of a hybrid view of the self which can merge the phenomenological or experiential views of the self with the narrative views, although they seem to have locked horns. But whether and how these two ideas can exist in unison is also an engrossing and lucrative research project, that some thinkers have just started exploring.

I began the research work and had continued it with a kind of personal urgency, believing that I might find an answer, but I am left with more questions than answers. Life is an eternal quest for truth and I hope to keep sailing in this ocean of knowledge, dreaming of reaching the shore sometime.