

THE SELF: UNDERSTANDING AND HEALING THROUGH NARRATIVES

*A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts*

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“THE SELF: UNDERSTANDING AND HEALING THROUGH NARRATIVES”

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PREFACE

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. The phrase ‘know thyself’ is attributed to Socrates and is inscribed at the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Similar theme echoes if we compare with the Eastern counterpart, in philosophies that borne out of India and China. 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.

■ A Little Back-story

How many of us have heard that life is not a bed of roses and how many of us have experienced it to be true? With passing time I realized that probably all, at some point or other in their lives have faced difficult situations to varying degrees. But as a child and as I was growing up, I would ask myself, ‘why me?’ I would find myself in situations that I imagined my peers have not faced and they are blessed with a ‘good life’. During my formative years, I have been exposed to several adverse situations, from witnessing death to being a silent spectator of violence, cruelty, deception, facing uncertainties, having feelings of helplessness, experiencing vulnerabilities and passing through prolonged emotional turbulences. 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. My mother would keep saying, ‘this shall pass’, and would often narrate stories of how people (real and fictional) overcame difficulties, attained success and how one can achieve anything in life if he or she strongly believes in it and strives sincerely to attain it. 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. The acceptance, appreciation and acknowledgement received from my teachers and my friends over the years contributed significantly to strengthen this belief and they became important characters in my life story.

A lot was happening all at once as I left high school and entered the University. After getting over the initial shakiness while adjusting in a bigger universe, I tried exploring the myriad possibilities that the institute had to offer. These phases are called ‘turning points’ in autobiographical narratives, which I will be discussing in the thesis. The training in Philosophy was something that I was perhaps looking for all through my life but did not realize; raise doubts, understand problems, analyze critically, argue logically and never stop questioning. I

also got the opportunity to take up Film Studies as a course, learn the Philosophy of Cognitive Science, and to enroll in an 'Inter-personal Conflict-Management Course' at the Counselling Centre of the University.

Film Studies opened the doors of world cinema to me and triggered the love for stories and story-telling once again in me. Whatever little I could learn from film-theories and the basics of film-making helped me understand how stories are conceived, created and conveyed to make an impact on the audience within a short span of time. Visual depiction is a very powerful and seductive medium which consumes the viewer if it can establish its narrative. We were shown films from different parts of the world that depicted the pathos of human existence: wars, the holocaust, trauma, broken relationships, and validated my struggles in a way.

Being part of the 'Inter-personal Conflict-Management' Course and learning the basics of counselling gave me the much needed self-reflective tools to re-view the past, interpret the present and give a new meaning to my life, evaluate my self-worth while being more patient and forgiving towards people and incidents. It also allowed me to listen to the life-stories of other participants and the people that they know of, their struggles and the overcoming, in an empathic environment. People do face a lot of emotional challenges and/or physical abuse resulting from estranged relationships, broken families, death of loved ones, traumatic incidents, and discrimination based on caste, colour, religion, socio-economic status, gender or sexuality. This kind of sharing in groups in a therapeutic set up can be beneficial in restructuring the idea of one's self by creating new narratives and by incorporating new aims, goals or values.

Simultaneously, I was studying the philosophy of cognitive science and was trying to understand how the problems of the mind can be approached empirically, beyond the theoretical discourses. It was the first time I was introduced to and was taught to appreciate the

infinite possibilities of interdisciplinary research. While all these were happening in and around me, 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.

■ The Research Idea

I, therefore, embarked on the journey to understand the self, which, I hoped, would bring more clarity to understand my ‘self’ in turn. During 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 skeptical, 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 on 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 centers. I had to seize the moment!

The objectives with which I proceeded to work with was to understand the problematic, 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 will be discussing the detailed structure of the thesis in the ‘Introduction’.

■ Future Research Scope

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, personal grieves and losses, and 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 will talk about some of these things in my conclusion.

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. The research exercise makes one more humble, I believe. Life is an eternal quest for truth and I hope to keep sailing in this ocean of knowledge, dreaming of reaching the shore sometime.

*“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both...
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by”*

— Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

INTRODUCTION

I have been introduced to the mind-body problem during the early years of Undergraduate studies and since then I have been fascinated about the mind. Studying Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science during the Postgraduate years deepened the passion and the insatiable urge to know more about the various problems of the mind: the problem of intentionality, the hard problem of consciousness, the problem of other minds, the problems of personal identity, etc. I decided to take up research on the Problems of the self, in order to have a better understanding of the problem and to gain more insights into the contemporary studies and interdisciplinary works that are being undertaken around the world. But the amount of work that has already been done in this area is colossal, so it is important to chalk out a specific area of research, for PhD is a time-bound work. I have pinpointed my work on the constructivist approaches, specifically, the narrative views of self, which marks a radical shift from the traditional western foundationalist views of self. The narrative views of self is a comparatively new approach that started gaining prominence during the latter half of the 20th century, in the writings of postmodern, poststructuralist and hermeneutic philosophers and also made its mark in psychology and linguistics. My aim is to highlight the narrative views of self by discussing some of the theoretical and empirical or applicative approaches and also to provide a defence of the narrativist views of self. I have also mentioned some of the areas where the narrative views of self have to provide stronger arguments in order to become a full-bodied and a more acceptable view of the self. I have put forward the explanatory advantages of the narrative views of self over its contending theories. In the limited purview of my research, I have made a humble attempt to explore the idea that the self could be constructed as opposed to something given and unchangeable, for this view appreciates and validates experientiality and is not grounded on speculations. I do not boast of providing an ultimate solution or key to the age-old puzzle-box named self. However, it has been extremely enlightening to discover the endless

possibilities of research, to feel the unquenchable thirst to know more while also appreciating our limitations as humans. As for myself, I believe I have gained better clarity and a deeper understanding of the self through the research exercise.

■ The Focal Point

We aim at discovering the self someday because it's a common-sense idea that the self is 'given' and 'discoverable'. We think we can reach at the self'; we just have to discover the correct path. A complete game-changer will be to think in an entirely different track. What if, the self does not exist (there are indeed 'no-self' views in both Eastern and Western philosophies)? Or what if the self is simply not there waiting to be discovered, but waiting to be created or weaved or narrated? What if we ourselves are the makers and interpreters of our "selves"? This might come as a shock to those who were holding onto the idea of a more static, tangible and discoverable self, waiting to reveal itself someday. Think of someone planning to go on a vacation to "Utopia" for a long time and then comes to know that Utopia is a figment of imagination; that we ourselves have created the idea of it and that it does not exist in geographical space. Well, I do not imply that the self is fictional; it is as real as a building that is constructed. The self, according to the constructivists, is a construct. The next logical question would be to ask what is the self made or constructed of? Some say it is a social construct, some say it is a narrative construct. I will discuss what is meant by narrative construction or how selves are created through narratives elaborately in my work. But to give a rough idea about narratives, it can safely be used synonymously with stories. So basically it comes down to saying that we create selves out of stories, or that the self is nothing but the stories that is collectively weaved in and through the society. Needless to say, narratives or stories weigh heavily on the remarkable feat that humans have achieved through language.

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.

A very pertinent and ongoing debate in the philosophy of the self is whether to think of the self as a given, an unchangeable core, the locus of all our experiences, or in short, the phenomenological view of the self. On the other hand, some views consider the self as a construct, specifically as a narrative construct. I would like to argue for the social constructivist account of the self. From the traditionalist Western foundationalist and reductionist perspective, the self was conceived as autonomous, given and discoverable. Postmodernism challenges the idea of a single, fixed, core self that we can reveal if we peel away the layers. Rather, it marks a shift from a modernist understanding (verifiable reality) of self to a narrative social understanding (constructed reality) of self. This is a linguistic view in which the self becomes a narrative self and identities exist in relation to a perspective.

■ Chapterization

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). Given below is a brief overview of all the chapters in the thesis.

Chapter 1- The Narrative Self: Putting into Perspective: In the opening chapter I will talk very briefly about the various notions of self that we have had in Philosophy for some thousands of years and will try to put my research work in a historical perspective as well as draw the boundaries of my enquiry. I will be giving a very detailed view of the narrative self as understood from various perspectives, the problems that it deals with and the implications and applications of narrative self views. I will also be discussing the postmodern and the hermeneutical context or the background in which construing the self as a dynamic, ever-changing construct gained popularity.

Chapter 2- Linguistic Foundations of Narrative Self: As narrativity is a linguistic feat, it is crucial to understand the basis of the narrative self views, which is anchored in language. Linguistic philosophers, social scientists, developmental psychologists and literary theorists have emphasized the language acquisition, socio-psychological development of children, the mastering of story-telling capacities, and the form of autobiographical narratives, amongst many other issues in details. The forerunner among them is American psychologist and linguist Jerome S. Bruner and I have mostly discussed his views in this chapter along with the works of Dan P. McAdams.

Chapter 3- Ethical Dimensions of Narrative Self: It is extremely interesting to note that for a concept that developed through a postmodern understanding of self, how or what role does ethics, especially teleological ethics can play. One of the main proponents of the narrative views of self is Alasdair MacIntyre, who also aimed at reviving the pre-modern concept of ethics, specifically the Virtue Ethics of Aristotle. He not only proposes that our identity is constituted by our socio-cultural-historical narratives, but also that we should be narrative in

our approach and lifestyle, to lead a meaningful life. Thus, he provides a prescriptive approach to ethics, known as the ethical narrativity thesis. I will also talk about the works of Paul Ricoeur, Martha Nussbaum and Marya Schechtman in this context.

Chapter 4- Making & Remaking of the Self through Narratives: A Feminist Perspective:

In this chapter, I will discuss the feminist views of self that shuns the Cartesian idea of the pure ego or consciousness and rather construes the self as embodied. A self that is embodied is not merely a rational entity but is dynamic, experiential, and also vulnerable to the changes in the external world. This view emphasized the role of narratives in shaping the identity of a person and also how narratives can heal when applied properly. I will be talking about trauma and how telling and retelling of traumatic incidents help in healing and regaining control over one's body and life-narratives.

Chapter 5- The Dialogical Self Theory: Expanding the Ideas of Narrative Self: The Dialogical Self Research Institute in the Netherlands is one of its kind and is attributed to Hubert J. M. Hermans and his team, where they are successfully implementing the view of the self as a dialogue and as that having a multiplicity of voices. They derive impetus from the works of psychologist William James and that of Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin. When our life-narratives are ruptured due to conflicts or experiences of shock or grief, it can be re-weaved through narratives. The dialogical self view is being successfully implemented in psychological counselling and therapy. This shows the applicability and the extension of the narrative self views.

Chapter 6- Narrative Self Views vis-à-vis Cognitive Sciences: In this chapter, I mainly draw from the positive results of the cognitive modelling of narrative self in cognitive science researches. The empirical success is promising in showing both the benefits of cross-disciplinary research and also a prospective and unanimous view of self in the near future. In a way, the narrative self views are getting validated via these researches.

Chapter 7- Objections & Replies: The narrative self views, however, are not free from shortcomings and although nobody outrightly denies the possibility of the narrative self, the metaphysical proposition of self as narrative does not go down well especially with the phenomenologists, who demand a minimal sense of self, that is the seat of our conscious experiences and which is more primitive than the idea of a narrative view of self, as it can explain the experiences of children, patients, and even animals. I have tried to acknowledge the position of the phenomenologists while defending the narrative views.

Chapter 8- Concluding Reflections: In my conclusion, I have provided a full-bodied defense of the narrative self views, reviewing its explanatory advantages and applicative benefits. I have also taken the current pandemic scenario as a case to argue for the vulnerability and the dynamicity of our selves, which can be explained much better by the narrative accounts of the self.

Let us now proceed onto the first chapter of the thesis.

PART I

UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVE SELF

CHAPTER 1

THE NARRATIVE SELF: PUTTING INTO PERSPECTIVE

As the title of my research suggests, I will be focussing on the idea of the self, as seen or conceptualized from a constructivist perspective, specifically a narrative one. How the self is constituted of and constructed by narratives is an extraordinarily engrossing area of investigation, which I will be discussing in much details throughout this work. But to put my research in perspective it is necessary, I believe, to talk a little bit about the various ways in which the self has been understood for thousands of years. This will help to locate the work both historically and conceptually and would also chalk out the boundaries within which I have been working. I do not make any tall claims of giving a holistic idea of self in general that would cover all major approaches within the purview of this chapter, but the outlines would set the pace of my further discussion. Let's say, it's a conversation starter!

First and foremost, there is no general consensus among philosophers and psychologists regarding the definition of self. Therefore, we can happily agree to disagree. But how can there be a debate when the topic of the debate itself is not well-defined? There should be some common grounds for a debate to start off. Suppose you like coffee and I love cinema; what is there to debate about? Fascinatingly, such is not the case with self. The phenomenological and ontological status and nature of the self is extremely crucial in understanding subjectivity, personhood, self-consciousness, self-awareness, personal identity, decision-making, etc. and have serious implications for moral philosophy as well. So even if the problem is age-old and controversial, it is not deserted but is studied with greater enthusiasm and with a multi-disciplinary approach in a variety of fields like psychiatry, developmental psychology, cultural studies, social theory, cognitive neuroscience and philosophy of mind. It might be safe to say that when we talk of the self, we are talking about humans. Although animals with higher

intelligence like dogs, cats, badgers, dolphins, elephants, primates and other mammals, and even cephalopods like octopuses show remarkable cognitive abilities, we are yet to know about whether they have an idea of the self. Humans, as we know for sure, have the ability to reflect upon and evaluate their thoughts, feelings, and actions. So most people believe in the reality of self because they have a distinct sense or experience of it although they are not sure what it means to be a self or what constitutes the self.

1.1 The Self as Variedly Understood in Philosophy

While we embark upon the voyage of life, quite often we encounter the question, “who am I?”, and wonder why something so seemingly close as the “self”, pose a mystery to us. The concept of the self slips away like sand as much as we try to grip it tighter. Wondering about the self or trying to understand it perhaps dates back to the dawn of civilization, yet the notion of the self is equivocal. The “self” has been a recurrent theme of study in a wide range of disciplines, including, of course, Philosophy. The idea of a self plays a central role in Western philosophy as well as in the Indian and other major traditions. In the Western philosophical literature, the discussions relating to the self is found in early Greek and Roman traditions, in the works of early and later modern thinkers, in the writings of analytic and continental philosophers, post-modernists, post-structuralists, feminists and also cognitive scientists in recent times.

Admitting that there are different ways of understanding the self or different approaches to studying the self, we can settle for a workable definition of self as provided by Jerrold Seigel. “By “self” we commonly mean the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be. From knowledge of what the self truly is people have hoped to gain greater happiness, deeper fulfilment,

liberation from fetters or restraints, better relations with other people, or ways to achieve power over them. Selfhood thus matters to us both as individuals and as social creatures, shaping our personal existence and our relations with those whose lives we somehow share.”¹

The nature and meaning of selfhood have been timeless questions, implicitly and explicitly, in every known human civilization. The best way to validate the problem of the self is to perhaps appreciate and understand the diversity and the disparity among its usages. Galen Strawson enlists twenty-six usages of the self, namely: *the cognitive self, the conceptual self, the contextualized self, the core self, the dialogical self, the ecological self, the embodied self, the emergent self, the empirical self, the existential self, the extended self, the fictional self, the full-grown self, the interpersonal self, the material self, the narrative self, the philosophical self, the physical self, the private self, the representational self, the rock bottom essential self, the semiotic self, the social self, the transparent self, the verbal self, and the short-lived or successive selves*.² Dan Zahavi characterizes eighteen different ways in which the self has been used in prolific ways. Following the works of William James, he enlists *material self, social self, spiritual self*; from Ulrich Neisser’s work he categorises the self as *ecological, interpersonal, extended, private and conceptual*; and following Galen Strawson and D. Damasio, he lists the self as *autobiographical, cognitive, contextualized, core, dialogic, embodied, empirical, fictional, minimal, and neural*.³

I think the list is endless, but thankfully these views are not mutually exclusive. All these might make one more confused, but there is some method to this madness. There are various ways in which the different notions of the self can be broadly categorized. We can construe the self as given, as posited or as constructed. Also, we can talk about pre-modern,

¹ Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century*, 2005, p. 3.

² Shaun Gallagher & Jonathan Shear (eds), *Models of the Self*, 2000, p. 484. (Italics mine).

³ Shaun Gallagher & Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 2nd ed., 2012, pp. 219-220. (Italics mine).

modern and the postmodern self. In their book, *The Phenomenological Mind*, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi have divided the notions of the self as a pure identity pole, a narrative construction, as an experiential dimension, apart from the no-self doctrine.⁴

1.2 Four Thousand Years of the Study of Self: A Kaleidoscopic View

In this section, I will take a journey back in time to visit the origin and development of the study of the self in the Western culture, religion and philosophical traditions and take a peek into some landmark ideas that have shaped and directed the future course of understanding the self. Do not charge me of any favouritism, since I will only be mentioning some, and have to exclude most in order not to deviate much from the main research area. I found solace in the words of M. R. Zedek, “Any effort to summarize a 4000-year history and tradition cannot help but prove inadequate.”⁵

1.2.1 Excerpts from Classical Analytic & Continental Philosophy

René Descartes (1596-1650) has been attributed the credits of bringing the subject and subjectivity to the centre stage of philosophical discourse during the modern era. Although, centuries earlier it was St. Augustine who talked about the importance of “*interior homine*” or the “inner man”.⁶ But Descartes’ lineage of grounding the first-person perspective of the self-conscious “I” in the traditional philosophical values of truth and certainty, would continue to invite criticisms and draw admirations alike for the next 400 years of philosophy and cognitive

⁴ Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012, pp. 220-224.

⁵ M.R. Zedek, 1998. (Referred from: Louis Hoffman et. al., “Toward a Sustainable Myth of Self: An Existential Response to the Postmodern Condition”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 135, 2009, p. 137.)

⁶ Kim Atkins (ed.), *Self and Subjectivity*, 2005, p. 7.

science. “Descartes is both fascinating and deservedly famous for the ways in which he attempts, unsuccessfully, to delineate the mental from the physical in the context of the human body, but also for the numerous ambiguities he continually uncovers in that domain.”⁷

According to *John Locke* (1623-1704), a “person” can be defined as “a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.”⁸ Identity, for him, was the continued existence of the “same consciousness”, a view which received numerous criticisms from various corners. But the psychological approach that Locke introduced, helped in resolving some of the issues that Descartes encountered.

David Hume (1711-1756) approached the question of self by refuting the introspective method of Descartes and following in the empiricist footsteps of John Locke, which states that all knowledge must be founded in some sense perception. However, an impression of self can never be had in introspection, as Hume contends. He observes, “I never catch myself at any time without a perception.”⁹ All that we can ever find in our introspections are a series of constantly changing perceptions of something or other, but not of any idea or knowledge of an inner entity or the self. Hume’s account has been referred to as the “bundle-theory of self” by later commentators on his work, as there is no referent of the word “I” other than the bundle of perceptions that comprise a single mind. The unity of perception is effected through the mind’s habit of association. But it is superfluous to claim that there is an unchangeable self underlying our perceptions. Therefore our identities are also changeable, and not something that is fixed.

⁷ Atkins, 2005, p. 7.

⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Roger Woolhouse (ed.), 1997, p. 9.

⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book One, ed. D.G.C. Macnabb (London: Fontana/Collins), 1962, p. 301-302.

According to *Immanuel Kant* (1724-1804), the concept of “I” is a formal or logical feature of the unity of consciousness rather than a thinking thing or substance. He argues for a purely logical notion of the “I” in apperception (a principle of unity in consciousness according to which all representations in a single consciousness must have a single logical subject), which involves no intuitions and therefore, no claims of knowledge can be made about it. Also, the “I” is not an enduring entity but the awareness of it arises from the spontaneous a priori unity of consciousness.¹⁰

For *Jean-Paul Sartre* (1905-1980), pre-reflective consciousness does not express a particular “I”, but simply a general consciousness of something. The “I” or “me” or “ego” is formed when pre-reflective consciousness is reflected upon by itself and becomes explicit consciousness. When reflection occurs, consciousness becomes aware of its objects as being related according to an ideal unity, which is termed as “Ego” by Sartre. “For Sartre, there is no “self” in the Cartesian sense; there is only consciousness, which is comprised of the ideal unity of the Ego constituted through the particular reflective activity of a prereflective consciousness.”¹¹

As for *Bernard Williams* (1929-2003), it is important to understand human life as a whole and to acknowledge the role of embodiment in the construal of human identity. According to him, moral philosophy is not a matter of logical and ahistorical concepts; rather, moral values and beliefs are embedded in history, culture, and to our emotions and desires. Williams’ account of personal identity in terms of historical enquiry influenced later philosophers from both analytic and continental traditions, such as Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre and Marya Schechtman.¹²

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, 1990, pp. 131-132.

¹¹ Atkins, 2005, pp. 87-88.

¹² Atkins, 2005, pp.163-166.

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) emphasizes on the notion of temporality to explain personal identity. In his view, the continuity and coherence of a person's life are centred on two orders of time, namely the cosmological and the phenomenological. But personal identity is a complex phenomenon that needs to account for permanence in time that can express the different temporal senses of "same", like numerical identity, qualitative identity, and uninterrupted continuity. The coherence and meaning in our lives are derived from "narratives", which, "is said to provide the means for creating a temporally continuous conceptual whole out of the heterogeneous elements of a life by bringing those elements into relations of emplotment."¹³ According to this account, narrative employs a moral and critical capacity to reflect upon and evaluate one's character, actions, or life as a whole.

1.2.2 The Pre-Modern, Modern & Postmodern Selves

The pre-modern self, that could be said to have originated in Platonism, promoted a dualism between the material self, namely, the body, and the spiritual self or the soul. The soul which was thought to be non-material was held in high esteem while the physical body with its material needs was denigrated. This view of self having roots in religious thoughts, especially that of Christianity, mostly considered bodily needs as sinful and encouraged its denial in order to realize the ultimate reality: God and the soul. Modern views of self can be broadly classified into two major approaches: (i) reductionist materialism or physicalism, and (ii) a rectified or refined view of Platonic dualism. With scientific advances and its predominance in academia, dualism took a backseat and was replaced by all forms of materialism leading to metaphors of machines and subsequently computers that proposed a prospective understanding of the functioning of the humankind, and in turn, the self. Postmodernism flourished as a critic of

¹³ Atkins, 2005, p. 222.

modernist idealism and with a “reactionary pessimism that, over time, opened doors toward a theory able to integrate hopeful optimism with tempered pessimism.”¹⁴ Postmodernism challenged modernist epistemologies and methodologies and suggested that “multiple epistemologies and methodologies should be utilized regardless of the assumption of whether or not ultimate truth exists.”¹⁵

1.3 Postmodernity & the Self

From a postmodern and hermeneutical perspective, the self is viewed as a narrative construction, the likes of which became popular during the late 20th century. Although a comparatively recent development, it has percolated a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology political theory, literary studies, religious studies, film theory, psychotherapy and medicine. The basic idea is that the self is not something fixed or unchangeable, but rather something evolving. “The postmodern self is a more holistic, complex, nuanced, and adaptive self that is actively engaged in the world.”¹⁶

Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen writes, “The traditional views fail to appreciate the individual’s understanding of him or herself as a historically emerging being...one’s view of self in a given moment is fundamentally nonsensical unless it can be linked in some fashion with his or her past. Suddenly and momentarily to see oneself as “fat,” “poetic,” or “male,” for example, might seem mere whimsy unless such concepts could be attached to a temporal context revealing their genesis.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Louis Hoffman et. al., “Toward a Sustainable Myth of Self: An Existential Response to the Postmodern Condition”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 135, 2009, p. 141.

¹⁵ Atkins, 2005, p. 142.

¹⁶ Atkins, 2005, 143.

¹⁷ Kenneth J. Gergen & Mary M. Gergen, “Narratives of the Self”, in Theodore R. Sarbin and Karl E. Scheibe (eds), *Studies in Social Identity*, 1983, p. 255.

Postmodernism proposes that the self is neither an entity nor a single being. There's no sole, core "I", no fixed tangible thing inside someone that can be arrived at by peeling away layers. Even though it can be argued that the self is made up of many experiences, many relationships, these do not add up to or constitute a single self or core self. Rather self (and other) is a created concept, a created narrative linguistically constructed and existing in dialogue and in relationship.

The self in this postmodern narrative view is not a stable and enduring entity that is situated in a fixed geographical place or time, nor is it the mere accumulation of experience or an expression of neurophysiological characteristics. Identity, therefore, is not based on some kind of psychological continuity of selfhood but on the constancy of an ongoing narrative. According to Richard Rorty, humans are the continuing generators of new descriptions and new narratives rather than beings one can describe accurately in a fixed fashion. The self is an ongoing autobiography; or, to be more exact, it is a self-other, multifaceted biography that we constantly pen and edit.¹⁸ The self is an ever-changing expression of our narratives, a being and becoming through language and story-telling as we continually attempt to make sense of the world and ourselves. Self, therefore, is always engaged in conversational becoming, constructed and reconstructed through continuous interactions, through relationships.¹⁹ Kenneth Gergen echoes the importance of language concerning the making of a narrative self, "Language holds a critical place in constructivist theory in that selfhood and reality are said to be co-constructed through shared language."²⁰ In this linguistic view, the self "becomes a *narrative self* and identities exist in relation to a perspective, to a point of view that is related

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1979 (From Harlene Anderson, *Conversations, Language and Possibilities: A Postmodern Approach to Therapy*, 1997, p. 216).

¹⁹ Harlene Anderson, 1997, p. 216.

²⁰ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, 1991, p. 151.

to our purposes. Postmodernism does not suggest that we give up trying to understand self, but that self can be described and understood in an infinite variety of ways.”²¹

1.4 The Meaning of Narratives

According to Daniel D. Hutto, “Our world is replete with narratives- narratives of our making that are uniquely appreciated by us...Our capacity to create, enjoy and benefit from narratives...be they factual or fictive-surely sets us apart from other creatures.”²² But what do we mean by narratives? It means to narrate or to tell something. Narratives are synonymous with stories. But when we talk about the narrative self, we take the word ‘narrative’ metaphorically. The self, in this view, is a construction; contrary to the view that the self is a given. So the self, according to the narrativists, are constructed through narratives or stories that we tell about ourselves when confronted with the question- ‘who am I?’ This is a strong metaphysical claim. But here the actual construction of story is not meant by narratives. We need not always tell or narrate our stories, but we can, if and when needed, because we perceive the world through narratives, and also express them through narratives. Suppose I am asked to share my last holiday experience, I will do so narratively with the help of language either written or verbal, or I may even arrange an audio-visual screening by making collages from photos of my holiday trip. But whatever be the mode of expression, it will follow the form of a story- having a beginning, middle and an end. Also, when narrating, just as in stories, we tend to highlight the significant events and skip the mundane incidents, e.g., one is very unlikely to say that “I woke up in the morning, brushed my teeth and washed my face...,” unless it led to something important or is crucial in linking the parts of his experience in some special way.

²¹ Anderson, 1997, p. 212.

²² Daniel D. Hutto, “Narrative and Understanding Persons”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Vol. 60, 2007, p. 1.

Likewise, when we narrate events from our lives or tend to describe who we are, we focus on the relevant details, trimming away the obvious or repetitive details, thereby mimicking a form that's only comparable to a story. The self is nothing but these stories we tell or can tell.

A narrative or story is an account that presents connected events and may be organized into various categories: non-fiction like biographies, fictionalized accounts of historical events like myths, legends, anecdotes, and fiction proper like literature, novel, drama and visual arts. The word 'narrative' derives from the Latin verb 'narrate', which means 'to tell', and is related to the adjective 'gaurus', 'knowing', or 'skilled'. The word 'story' may be used as a synonym for narrative. It can also be used to refer to the sequence of events described in a narrative. An important part of narration is the narrative mode, the set of methods used to communicate the narrative through a process of narration. Along with exposition, argumentation and description, narration broadly defined, is one of the four rhetorical modes of discourse. More narrowly defined, it is the fiction-writing mode whereby the narrator communicates directly to the reader. A narrative or story is any account that presents connected events. Stories are important aspects of culture. Many works of art and most works of literature tell stories; indeed most of the humanities involve stories. Stories are of ancient origin, existing in ancient Indian, Egyptian, Chinese, ancient Greek cultures and their mythologies. Stories are also ubiquitous components of human communication, used as parables and fables as examples to illustrate points, e.g., Aesop's fables. Story-telling was probably one of the earliest forms of entertainment.

1.5 Human Civilization & Narratives

We are not just rational, social and political beings, but also talking beings or beings with language. It would not be an exaggeration to say that our civilizations and advancement as a race will not have been the same without language. It is through language that we have been

able to transmit the vast amount of knowledge through ages; have depicted events, documented history, preserved discoveries and inventions. Language has also been important in entertaining, soothing, pacifying and healing. Story-telling is one of the oldest forms of entertainment; lullabies pacify babies, consulting wise and enlightened people would soothe people in confusion and distress and might heal those in emotional crisis or at least help overcome, in some extent, the sense of despair and desolation.

Narratives are important from cultural and historical perspectives. The Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia, in modern-day Iraq, is known as the cradle of human civilization. It is arguably the oldest documented civilization, about ten thousand years old. That does not mean it was the oldest, but that it is the oldest to have preserved its history in a written form, making it much convenient for historians and archaeologists to understand how they lived in ancient times. The Sumerians used the “cuneiform” scripts and preserved them in baked clay tablets that have survived the test of time. We have not only discovered the elaborate and impressive epic of *Gilgamesh* but have also found the religious ideas, details of the trade, warfare and even some secret recipes from those tablets, beautifully preserved in time. This tells us as much about the human ability to narrate, as it tells us about the human desire to preserve its stories in time, through the use of language.

Indian civilization is allegedly older than the Mesopotamian civilizations, but they began to write down much later since India had the famous oral tradition called ‘Śruti’, which is preserving wisdom by listening, remembering and passing it on orally through generations and through the system of Guru-śiṣya paramparā (teachers passing on knowledge to disciples). That’s how we get the Vedas, Purāṇas, Upaniṣads, Saṃhitā, etc. While it is a very heated debate whether to consider the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, the two great epics from India, as historical accounts or mythologies, the point I want to make is that, if human beings did not feel the power of narratives, they would not have taken the pain of documenting such volumes

of work in a time when writing was not an easy affair and not everyone knew how to read or write.

Oral transmission of values is also found in African traditions, that propagated important historical events, religious beliefs, the origin of human existence, the meaning of life, the significance of practising virtues through storytelling. So, narratives do not work merely as a form of art, but as an essential tool for teaching values to generations to come and playing a major role in shaping their identity. Greek mythologies have used narratives to weave splendid stories, understand the ethics that guide human life and the interaction between the divine and the human.

This inherent nature of mankind to tell stories, to understand events through stories and to propagate and preserve knowledge through stories, is a key feature displayed across all cultures and civilizations. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, “a man is always a storyteller, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, sees everything that happens to him through them; and tries to live his life as if narrating it.”²³ And thanks to this narrative inclination of humans that we have the most priceless epics from around the world and also marvel at the scientific and technological advancements from a time which we considered primitive. One who keeps track of recent archaeological findings would know how modern-day scientists are amazed at the precision of knowledge and skills that the ancient civilizations bear testimony to; be it India, Egypt, China, Greece or the middle-east. Astronomy, architecture, mathematics, medical science, trade and war strategies reached their pinnacle in all these civilizations which are thousands of years old. The power of narration can never be undermined.

²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, Llyod Alexander (trans.), 1964, p. 48.

1.6 The Narrative Self

Jerrold Seigel has drawn our attention to the fact that, "...questions about the self are not about whether any one term best names what is essential to it, but about the ways, people seek and find to establish operative and meaningful relations between the various constituents of their lives. Concern about the self is concern about how we put the diverse parts of our personal being together into some kind of whole."²⁴ This view resonates in the narrative approaches to self. From the traditionalist Western foundationalist and reductionist perspective, the self was conceived as autonomous, given and discoverable. Postmodernism marks a shift from a modernist understanding (verifiable reality) of self to a narrative social understanding (constructed reality) of self. According to Charles Taylor, one is not a self in the same way as one is a living organism. Having a self is not the same as having a heart or a kidney. He asserts, "To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be any answer."²⁵

In a narrative view of self, our descriptions, vocabularies, and stories constitute our understanding of human nature and behaviour. Narrative is a dynamic process involving the way we organize the events and experiences of our lives to make sense of them, as well as ourselves. "Our stories form, inform, and reform our sources of knowledge and our views of reality."²⁶ Narrative is more than a story-telling metaphor, as it constructs our experiences, and in turn, is used to understand our experiences. Language is the vehicle of this process and the limits of language constrain what can be expressed. As discursive practices, our narratives are in a flux of evolution and change. Stories are thus not concrete facts but are entities in the process of being made. Narratives become the way we imagine alternatives and possibilities

²⁴ Jerrold Seigel, 2005, p. 15.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 1989, p.34.

²⁶ Harlene Anderson, 1997, p. 212-213.

and the way we actualize these options. “A self without a story contracts into the thinness of its personal pronoun.”²⁷

Jerome S. Bruner suggested that children learn at an early age to organize their experiences narratively through the stories they hear and learn to tell.²⁸ Linguistic scholar Émile Benveniste was one of the earliest to challenge the traditional Western philosophical notion of self. He argued that the self is constructed and understood in language; language is responsible for the notion of self and language without personal pronouns is inconceivable. He proposed that the “I” does not exist outside language, outside discourse. In other words, it is in and through language that a person constructs a personal account of the self. Who we believe ourselves to be, is a linguistic construction.²⁹ According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the “I” is not a pre-existing subject or substance in the epistemological or metaphysical sense; it is a speaking subject.³⁰

Narratives are created, told, and heard against a contextual and cultural schema. Therefore, narratives must be comprehensible, coherent and connected. Stories, again, are always situated in history, without which our lives would be unintelligible. For example, the lives of many Bengalis still in some ways or other bear the mark of the partition of Bengal (1905), which shapes their choices; food habits, hobbies, etc., and in turn their life stories. This will not have the same meaning for people of other culture or community and might probably be meaningless. We share ourselves and our lives with others by assembling the bits and pieces of our lives with others by assembling the bits and pieces of our narratives into viable storied versions influenced by memory, context and intention. In this narrative view, a

²⁷ S. Crites, “Storytime: Recollecting the past and projecting the future”, in T. R. Sarbin (ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 152-173), New York: Praeger, p. 172.

²⁸ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 68.

²⁹ Émile Benveniste, Subjectivity in Language, in Mary Elizabeth Meek & Coral Gables (trans.), *Problems in General Linguistics*, 1974, pp. 223-230.

³⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, revised edition, 2004, p. 57.

postmodern self is considered an expression of one's capacity in language and narration; the self telling the story is, through the story-telling process, being formed, informed and reformed. As human beings, we have always related to each other by telling and listening to stories about ourselves and others. Jean-François Lyotard said narratives are our 'social bonds'.³¹ Our ongoing narratives are embedded within and intertwined with other narratives. Both self-and-other stories determine who we are. We are one of the multi-authors of the constantly changing narrative that becomes our and are always embedded in the local and universal multiple historical pasts and cultural, social, and political contexts of our narrative making. A similar view is echoed in Jerome Bruner's words when he says, "Life as led is inseparable from a life as told-or more bluntly, a life is not "how it was" but how I is interpreted or reinterpreted, told and retold."³²

According to these views, the self is assumed to be a construction; precisely a narrative construction. "Social constructivists argue that an individual's identity is constructed by social interaction, but the person actively constructs that identity...What is perceived as the self is actually a configuration of positions taken within a social network."³³ In other words, selfhood or identity is constituted by the narratives that we tell about ourselves. The narrative identity theory postulates that individuals form an identity by integrating their life experiences into an internalized evolving story of the self, which provides the individual with a sense of unity and purpose in life. This life narrative has characters, episodes, imagery, a setting, plots, themes and often follows the traditional model of a story, having a beginning (initiating event), a middle (an attempt and consequence), and an end (denouement). When confronted with the question "who am I", we will tell a certain story and emphasize aspects that we consider to be

³¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoffrey Bennington & Brian Massumi (trans.), 1984, p. 79.

³² Jerome Bruner, Life as Narrative, *Social Research*, Vol. 71, No. 3, 2004, p. 694.

³³ Atkins, 2005, p. 144.

of special significance, that which constitutes a recurrent theme in our lives, that which defines who we are and what we present to others for recognition and approval.³⁴ This narrative, however, is not merely a way of gaining insight into the nature of an already existing self. On the contrary, the self is first constructed in and through the narration. Who we are, depends on the story we and others tell about ourselves. The stories can be more or less coherent, and the same holds true for our self-identity. For the narrative self is an open-ended construction that is under constant revision. Owen Flanagan mentions that this construction is pinned on culturally relative hooks and organized around a set of aims, ideals, and aspirations.³⁵ Who one is depends on the values, ideals and goals one has; it is a question of what has significance and meaning for one, and this, of course, is conditioned by the community of which one is a part. Thus, as has often been claimed, one cannot be a self on one's own, but only together with others, as part of a linguistic community. As Charles Taylor puts it, "there is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language."³⁶

Dan Zahavi observes that the self is something that is realized through one's projects, and it, therefore, cannot be understood independently of one's own self-interpretation.³⁷ Any consideration of narrative identity entails a reference to others since there is a clear social dimension to the achievement of narrative self-understanding. Narrative self-understanding requires maturation and socialization and the ability to access and issue reports about states, traits, and dispositions that make one the person one is. I come to know what I am and what I want to do with my life by participating in a community.³⁸ When I interpret myself in terms of a life story, I might be both the narrator and the main character, but I am not the sole author. Our narrative self is multiple-authored and under constant revision. The story of any individual

³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time & Narrative*, Vol. 1. , Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer (trans.), 1984, pp. 442-443.

³⁵ Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered*, MIT Press, 1992, p. 206.

³⁶ Taylor, 1989, p.35.

³⁷ Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, 2005, p. 108.

³⁸ Zahavi, 2005, p. 109.

life is not only interwoven with the stories of others (parents, siblings, friends, etc.), it is also embedded in a larger historical and communal meaning-giving structures.³⁹

Given the narrative structure of the self, the best possible way to understand the self will be provided by the narratives themselves. But the emphasis on narratives, as Zahavi points out, is not only on an epistemological level. The reason why narratives provide clues to obtaining knowledge about the self is precisely because they constitute it. Samantha Vice observes that the claim about selfhood being constituted by narratives is usually conjoined with a transcendental claim which says that we necessarily impose a narrative structure upon the world. Narrative is the “lens” through which our lives are experienced. Experience, therefore, is narrative in form.⁴⁰ Galen Strawson has made a distinction between the psychological narrativity thesis and the ethical narrativity thesis. The first one tells that human beings typically see, live or experience their lives as a story or a collection of stories; the second one states that experiencing or conceiving of one’s life as a narrative is a good thing.⁴¹ According to Marya Schechtman, a richly narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life and to true or full personhood. “Some but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives and it is their doing so which makes them persons.”⁴²

In this narrative perspective, the self, the narrator, is many “I”s, occupies many positions and has many voices. In the view of Hubert J. M. Hermans and his colleagues, “The voices function like interacting characters in a story. Once a character is set in motion in a story, the character takes on a life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As different voices

³⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 1984, pp.221.

⁴⁰ Samantha Vice, “Literature and the Narrative Self”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 78, No. 303, p. 94.

⁴¹ Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity”, *Ratio*, Vol. 17, p. 430.

⁴² Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 1996, p. 64.

these characters exchange information about their respective me-s and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self.”⁴³

It is through self-narratives that we become actors, performers, or agents and we also derive a sense of social or self-agency. Self-agency here refers to a personal perception of competency for action. Theodore R. Sarbin suggests that to act or to take action indicates intentionality. Having self-agency or a sense of it means having the ability to behave, feel, think and choose in a way that is liberating, that opens up new possibilities or simply allows us to see that new possibilities exist. Agency refers not only to making choices but to participate in the creation of the expansion of possible choices. The concept of agency can be likened to having a voice and being free to use that voice or not to use it.⁴⁴

According to Donald E. Polkinghorne, viewing the self as a narrative or story, rather than as a substance, emphasizes the temporal and developmental dimension of human existence and narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot. But when the operating plot disintegrates, one loses the unity of his or her identity. Polkinghorne writes, “Under stressful conditions, a self-narrative may decompose, producing the anxiety and depression of meaninglessness. One function of psychotherapy is to assist in the reconstruction of a meaning-giving narrative of self-identity.”⁴⁵

Critics of postmodernism, of social constructionism in particular, often fear that in these views, the individual is lost; the person loses individual rights and becomes the puppet of a society that threatens to take away human rights. Therefore a person is no longer responsible for his choices and actions. However, that is not the case. The individual and individual

⁴³ Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, “The Dialogical Self: Beyond individualism and rationalism”, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1992, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁴ Theodore R. Sarbin, “The narrative quality of action”, *Theoretical & Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Narrative and Self-Concept”, *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, Vol. 1, No. 2 & 3, 1991, p. 135.

responsibilities have a position of primary importance; the difference is in how the individual and responsibilities are conceived. As individuals absorbed in others and as relational beings, we are confronted even more, not less, with issues of responsibility, for, responsibility becomes shared.

Another criticism is that the view of socially constructed multiple selves results in a fragmented self. The response of Hermans and others to this is that “the multiplicity of the self does not result in fragmentation, because it is the same “I that is moving back and forth between several positions. Thanks to this identity...variance and invariance or continuity and discontinuity, coexist in the functioning self.”⁴⁶

Identifying the self as construction does not take away from it the revered position that it has enjoyed so far, nor does it imply that the self is something unreal or unimportant. I rather believe that we are beginning to appreciate its enigmatic nature and making room for broader, flexible and fuller conceptions of self. “Referring to the self as socially constructed and as a myth in no way is intended to suggest that there is not a real self or that this real self cannot be experienced. Rather it indicates that the self is something that cannot be definitively known; it cannot be isolated from its surroundings and studied in a reductionist manner...Indeed, the self is so complex that it is unknowable in the ultimate sense, which is part of why different cultures and individuals experience the self so differently. Even if it is our life mission to study the self, in the end, we will fall short of complete understanding. It comprises us, yet is undeniably beyond us.”⁴⁷

In this chapter, I have tried to give a brief overview of the implications and applications of the narrative self, while situating the problem historically as well. I attempted to provide an

⁴⁶ Hermans, et. al., 1992, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁷ Louis Hoffman et. al., “Toward a Sustainable Myth of Self: An Existential Response to the Postmodern Condition”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 135, 2009, p. 168.

idea of the vastness and depth, as well the multi-disciplinary nature, and the applicative aspects of narrative self views. In my subsequent chapters, I will elaborate on some of the important dimensions of the narrative self, such as its linguistic foundations, ethical implications, therapeutic applications and research findings from the cognitive sciences.

In the next chapter, I will be discussing the linguistic foundations of the narrative views of self.

CHAPTER 2

LINGUISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF NARRATIVE SELF

In the previous chapter I have tried to elaborate on the concept of the narrative self and how it has a multi-disciplinary flavour to it. The narrative self views are impossibly entangled within the scope of postmodernism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, literary studies, social and cognitive psychology, feminism, philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences. But I believe, language anchors our understanding of the self as narratives. Since we are talking about narratives or the act of narration, and narrativity being a linguistic feat of humans, language, therefore, is pivotal in understanding the concept of the narrative self, and in turn, the functioning of the human mind. Linguistic philosophers, social scientists, developmental psychologists and literary theorists have emphasized on language acquisition, socio-psychological development of children, the mastering of story-telling capacities, and the form of autobiographical narratives, amongst many other issues in details. The forerunner among them is American psychologist and linguist Jerome Seymour Bruner (1915-2016), whose works I will be mainly focussing on in this chapter, along with the works of Dan P. McAdams who is presently Professor in the Department of Psychology at Northwestern University, Illinois. Jerome S. Bruner, an American psychologist and educator, is considered as one of the most eminent psychologists of the 20th Century who made significant contributions in the fields of human cognitive psychology. His theories on perception, learning, memory, language acquisition and other psychological aspects of development in young children have influenced the American educational system and have inspired cross-disciplinary researches. He is one of the main proponents of the narrative self views in psychology and his works are invaluable and indispensable in providing a starting point in understanding the complexities of the self as narrated.

2.1 The Problem of Narrative Coherence

The idea that human life might resemble a story is novel and has a great deal of intuitive appeal. “The most fundamental property of stories is that they exist to be told.”⁴⁸ However, it is only in recent times, say in the last twenty-five years, psychologists, therapists and practitioners, social philosophers and social scientists in the West have recognized the power of stories or narratives and have been exploring the story-telling practices critically and systematically. This also led to the emergence of new approaches to counselling and psychotherapy, under the name of “narrative therapy”, which is gaining an exponential prominence. I will be discussing one of the approaches to narrative therapy based on the Dialogical Self Theory, in Chapter-5 of the thesis.

There is a considerable difference between literary narratives and life narratives. Literary narratives are created coherently; they follow a sequence of plots, development of characters where the beginnings, the middles and the ends are connected. “In a well-developed literary production we are told only what is necessary to “further the plot.”⁴⁹ The problem with life stories is that incidents or experiences do not happen to us in a linear order, whereas literary productions follow a much simpler plot, incorporating only interesting and important events that are part of that plot and leaving out the irrelevant happenings. “Perhaps our lives resemble novels, but bad ones, cluttered and undisciplined ones.”⁵⁰ Stories are structured in a way as to capture the audience’s attention and to elicit certain emotional responses from them. “The plot structure needs to articulate a deviation from the course of humdrum, everyday life in order to create suspense and elicit the audience’s curiosity.”⁵¹ In the case of life narratives the narrator

⁴⁸ Dan P. McAdams, “The Problem of Narrative Coherence”, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, Vol. 19, 2006, p. 110.

⁴⁹ Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 146.

⁵⁰ David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 1986, p. 115.

⁵¹ Bruner, 1990, p. 43.

narrates or performs a story in a social context, or in front of an audience in order to entertain, instruct, warn, inspire, console or might just be to overcome boredom. Whatever be the motive behind this story-telling function, the most important thing is that the audience can make sense of what the narrator is trying to convey. Otherwise, the entire exercise of narrating falls flat and there will be no point in telling the story at all.

So the narrator is always confronted with the question of whether his or her story is being understood in their respective social contexts. This is known as the problem of narrative coherence. “In the most basic sense, the problem of narrative coherence is the problem of being understood in a social context.”⁵² Coherence refers to both the form and structure of narratives, as well as its contents. A story which is told in a foreign language to a native audience or in which the events are depicted in a whimsical and random order, defies the expectations of the listener(s), and are deemed incoherent. I am reminded of the 1994 Hollywood movie *Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino, which, among other things, plays with the notion of temporal sequence and narrative coherence, leaving its audience bewildered, although in an amusing way. The structural form, as Philip Parker puts it, is “an episodic narrative with circular events adding a beginning and end and allowing references to elements of each separate episode to be made throughout the narrative.”⁵³ The narrative is told out of the sequential order which strikes as unconventional and difficult to comprehend, offering an alternative and experimental mode of story-telling. Usually, stories that defy the structural expectations about time, intention, logic, causality, or closure strikes the audience as incoherent, incomprehensible or incomplete, and leaves them scratching their heads in confusion and dismay.

I would like to share a personal experience in this context. While I was taking a course on counselling skills in conflict management (based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), we

⁵²McAdams, 2006, p. 111.

⁵³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulp_Fiction#cite_note-11 (accessed on 13 September, 2020).

were given the task of writing down our feelings and experiences, our “stories” in a way, to track how we were responding to the training. We were also frequently asked to share some of our life experiences with our fellow learners in class and the need to “get in touch” with our emotions were always emphasized upon. While writing down or narrating events of my life, I realized that writing needs conscious and rational effort, in contrast, to simply experiencing which is mostly spontaneous. “Life is messier and more complex than the stories we tell about it. Yet the stories need to convey some of that complexity if they are to be viewed, by the self and by others, as credible and life-affirming.”⁵⁴ Also pinning down the exact emotions in words is a challenging task in itself, for I am not James Joyce, Charles Dickens or Jane Austen! I had to constantly think where to begin from, what to write and what to omit, how to express, where to stop, which incidents are absolutely important to narrate, what are the life-defining moments, which are the redundant or mundane facts, etc. While going through this exercise, I was able to look at past incidents with a certain kind of objectivity that helped me find coherence and give new meaning to my experiences, by connecting the past, present and the yet to happen future. In writing this thesis as well, I am repeatedly bugged by the question of coherence; whether what I am writing is following a comprehensible sequence, whether my words will connect with the reader, whether I will be understood, and so on.

According to Paul Ricoeur and Jerome Bruner, “stories convey the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time. A character wants something or intends to accomplish something and the story chronicles that effort over time.”⁵⁵ People construct stories to give meaning to their lives or to make sense of their lives, but life does not always move according to plans. Accidents, untoward events, traumatic experiences, prolonged diseases, and many other factors alter the plot of our ongoing life-stories. Therapists help their clients to co-

⁵⁴ McAdams, 2006, p. 118.

⁵⁵ McAdams, 2006, p. 111.

construct new narratives to replace disorganized or incoherent stories, to make sense of their lives and have a more meaningful existence. It is important therefore to understand how a coherent narrative is achieved in the first place.

2.2 Requisites of Narrative Coherence

Bruner distinguishes between two modes of human thinking: paradigmatic and narrative. While the paradigmatic mode is the rational and material-cause logic that is best suited to explain the workings of the physical world, the narrative mode which consists of a range of plots, characters, and stories is best in giving an account of human behaviour and experiences. “Narrators cast themselves as protagonists in the stories they tell to explain their lives and to make meaning of their own thoughts, feelings, desires, and behaviours extended over time. If a life story is to make psychological sense, then, it must explain how a person came to be (and who a person may be in the future). It must provide a causal account of how, for example, a young woman decided to become a physician or why a middle-age man regrets not having married his high-school sweetheart.”⁵⁶ The stories that narrators provide of their lives cannot be proven to be true or false in the same way as paradigmatic arguments are. But stories should be coherent and convincing. According to Bruner, stories ultimately seek verisimilitude- the life-likeness with human subjective experience.⁵⁷

Dan P. McAdams and many other theorists have talked about four kinds of coherence, namely, *temporal*, *autobiographical*, *causal* and *thematic*. T. Habermas and S. Bluck⁵⁸ have come up with the proposal that the full expression of narrative identity awaits the consolidation

⁵⁶ McAdams, 2006, p. 114.

⁵⁷ J. S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986. (From Dan P. McAdams, 2006, p. 118).

⁵⁸ T. Habermas and S. Bluck, “Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence.” *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 126, pp. 748-769. (From McAdams, 2006, pp. 115-116).

of four different cognitive skills- temporal coherence, autobiographical coherence, causal coherence and thematic coherence, each linked to a form of narrative coherence. *Temporal coherence* refers to the ability to organize a single event into a sensible order. Temporal coherence usually emerges before the age of five, as children learn to recall and recite single events in their lives as little stories with beginnings, middles and endings. As children grow up, they internalize their respective societal expectations and assumptions about human life course, which provides one with a sense of autobiographical coherence. One develops an implicit understanding of the typical events and their temporal order that goes into the construction of a typical life story and may come to see his or her own life as a variation of a general autobiographical script. This is known as *autobiographical coherence*. *Causal coherence* emerges in adolescence as people can link separate events into causal chains. Adolescents and young adults are also able to derive an overarching theme or general message from a series of narrative events, which Habermas and Bluck refer to as *thematic coherence*. Someone might say, for example, that he or she tends to have a problem with the issue of commitment, which he or she derives from several events in his or her life. In both causal and thematic coherence, the narrator justifies a conclusion about the self in terms of an explanatory narrative.

2.3 Autobiographical Narratives

Jerome Bruner undertakes an empirical study to make some hypothesis as to what people do when they give an account of themselves or set forth an autobiography.⁵⁹ In an autobiography, we present a view of our self. Bruner has been collecting databases within a group, which were

⁵⁹ Jerome S. Bruner, "Self-Making and World-Making", *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1991, pp. 67-78.

involved in collecting spontaneous autobiographies from ordinary people. In course they interviewed six members of the same family individually. In the process, Bruner finds out how people construct “a self” and “a life”.

Most of the writers on autobiography until the end of the nineteenth century conceived of autobiography as writing about an “essential self”, and as writing about a “life”, although some of them were aware of the constructivist problem. So writing an autobiography was just about writing down one’s life, and it was independent of the process of construction. The post-modernists, however, have come to reject the view that a “life” is anything in itself. Rather they believe that it is all in the constructing, in the text, or in the text making. Constructionist writers on autobiography are more concerned with the literary-historical invention with form and with the depiction of reality. Bruner, as well, is concerned with the literary forces that shape autobiography. Autobiographies are shaped through genres but also through certain organizing metaphors. Bruner delves deep into the question, what role does a genre or a metaphoric theme serve in a life account.

An autobiography consists in, Bruner writes, “a narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and narrator becomes one person with a shared consciousness.”⁶⁰ To bring a protagonist from the past to the point where the original protagonist becomes the present narrator, one needs a theory of growth or of transformation. The person is of course an instrument in the telling of the story and his life becomes dedicated to the theory or story into which his destiny is fitted.

⁶⁰ Bruner, 1991, p. 69.

An important point to be noted here is that the theories or stories that one constructs about one's growth are not verifiable in the usual sense of the term. They can be checked against one's own memory, which is also fallible, or it can be checked against "culturally canonical accounts" of what growing up or what childhood is all about. Such checking is not guided by ordinary verification but by a criterion of verisimilitude or lifelikeness. So, the story of one's life is not composed of a set of testable propositions in the usual logical sense but is composed as a narrative. However, there are certain criteria for narratives. They must have at least two characteristics: (i) they should centre upon people and their intentional states, such as beliefs, desire, etc., and (ii) they should focus on how these intentional states led to certain kinds of activities. Such properties should also preserve a sequence or display coherence.⁶¹

We might think that autobiographies are always about the past but what Bruner found out from his studies and other literary autobiography samples is that although past-tense verbs constitute around 70 per cent verbs, 30 per cent of them are in the present tense. The present-tense aspect of autobiography has to do with the "evaluation", i.e., placing the sequential events in terms of a meaning-giving context. So narratives not only tell what happened coherently, but it must also justify why it is worth telling or what is interesting about those incidents that are being narrated. While narrating life stories, we do not tell all that has happened. We usually skip mundane details like waking up in the morning, taking a shower, catching a bus, etc., unless they lead to something interesting. So an added "why tell" function imposes great significance on the narrative. "Not only must a narrative be about a sequence of events over time, structured comprehensively in terms of cultural canonicity, it must also contain something that endows it with exceptionality."⁶² However, McAdams would like to put it

⁶¹ Bruner, 1991, p. 70.

⁶² Bruner, 1991, p. 71.

differently, “Life stories should resist dominant cultural narratives and strive instead to portray the rich diversity of lived experience.”⁶³

An autobiography serves a dual function. On the one hand, we wish to present ourselves to others, as well as ourselves as typical or “culture confirming” in some way. That is to say, our intentional states and actions are comprehensible in the light of the “folk psychology” that is intrinsic in our culture. But we do not simply wish to mirror our culture and restrict ourselves within a set of givens. To ensure individuality, we focus upon what is exceptional in our lives, and worthy of telling in the light of folk psychology. What makes something interesting is invariably a story that runs counter to expectancy. Expectancy, again, is controlled by the implicit folk psychology that prevails in a culture. So, a story in order to have tellability must violate canonical expectancy but do so in a way that is culturally comprehensible. Therefore a breach of convention must also be conventional.⁶⁴

2.4 Constraints of Narrative Coherence

Bruner offers the hypothesis that literary genres represent stylized forms of violations of the folk psychological canon. Just as folk psychology embodies and firmly establishes the canonical ways of people responding to the world, literature comes to invent and exemplify forms of deviation. The object of narratives, as Bruner suggests, is to demystify deviations. Narratives solve no problems but simply locate them in such a way to make them comprehensible. Narratives invoke the play of psychological states and of actions that operate

⁶³ McAdams, 2006, p. 120.

⁶⁴ Bruner, 1991, p. 71.

when human beings interact with each other and relate these to what can be usually expected to happen.⁶⁵

One feature of western autobiography to which Bruner draws our attention to is “turning points”.⁶⁶ Turning points are those episodes in which the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief or a conviction as if to underline the power of the agent’s intentional states. Turning points are crucial in individualizing a life, in setting it apart from folk-psychological canonicity. The construction of narrative “turning points” helps to distinguish what is ordinary and expectable (folk psychological) from that which is idiosyncratic and quintessentially individualistic. Bruner asserts his conviction through empirical data collected through the interviewing of ordinary individuals. “Turning points need more study. They represent a way in which people free themselves in their self-consciousness from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality.”⁶⁷ In most autobiographies, turning points are located where the culture gives more degrees of freedom. In America for example, high school graduation is one such point in life which also coincides with adolescence.

Bruner also points out that self-making is powerfully affected not by one’s own interpretation of himself or herself, but by the interpretation that others offer of his or her version of the story. The self after all is not the most “private” aspect of our being as traditional western philosophy advocates. Rather it is highly negotiable, sensitive to what one’s own reference group thinks or influences. Observing the process of self-formation makes it clear that the self is not locked up inside a person’s subjectivity. Rather it is also intersubjective or “distributed” in the same way that one’s knowledge is distributed beyond one’s head to include

⁶⁵ Bruner, 1991, p. 72.

⁶⁶ Bruner, 1991, p. 73.

⁶⁷ Bruner, 1991, p. 73.

the significant others to whom one has access, the notes and books and phones and computers that one has. In this sense, autobiography involves not only the construction of the self but also a construction of one's culture. There is no "essential" self which needs to be discovered by withdrawing oneself from the world and introspecting within, as the self is constructed. Self-construction begins at a very early age and it is a systematic process that is deeply enmeshed with the mastery of language itself; not just its syntax and lexicon, but its rhetoric and rules for constructing narratives.

Bruner focuses on the form of thought that goes into the construction of stories or narratives. His approach to narratives is a constructivist one, which views "world-making" as the principal function of the mind, whether in the sciences or the arts. Bruner wants to focus on the question: what do we do when we construct ourselves autobiographically. Answer to this will eventually throw some light on what we mean by such expressions as "a life". His arguments encompass two theses:

- (i) There is no other way of describing "lived time" except in the form of a narrative.
- (ii) Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. "Life" in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as a "narrative" is.

Telling about life is always a cognitive achievement and in the end a narrative achievement. At the very least it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, reconstructing one's life is an interpretative feat.⁶⁸

Self-narrative is reflexive because the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same. As Bruner puts it, "the reflexivity of self-narrative poses problems of a deep and serious order-problems beyond those of verification, beyond the issue of indeterminacy (that the very telling of the self-story distorts what we have in mind to tell), beyond

⁶⁸ Bruner, *Life as Narrative*, *Social Research*, Vol. 71, No. 3, 2004, p. 693.

‘rationalization’”.⁶⁹ Yet we can impose the criteria of rightness on the self-report of life, but those are internal criteria, like how one felt or what one intended, which are not subject to verification. Another criterion is coverage, i.e., whether a life story covers the events of life. However, omissions are also important in order to save the account from becoming painfully boring.

Many theorists are sceptical about the self’s power to create a coherent narrative. According to them, autobiographical accounts are “unstable”, which makes them vulnerable to cultural, interpersonal and linguistic influences. According to Kenneth J. Gergen, ‘For many people living in contemporary, post-industrial societies, lived experience is chaotic, confusing, even “multiphrenic”’.⁷⁰ Therefore, if life narratives are true to lived experience, they are likely to be unstable, indeterminate and incoherent.⁷¹ As for Sartre, either you “live” or you “tell”; too much telling comes in the way of living and seeking for a narrative coherence is what Sartre might call “bad faith”.⁷² It is also baffling to answer the question as to how life stories do or should relate to the social life itself. Some writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre argue that a coherent life story presupposes a clear moral perspective on the part of the narrator or protagonist. McAdams also voices the same concern when he writes, “for a life story to be considered coherent...it needs to be implicitly based on a recognizable set of human values, and it needs to be told from a recognizable moral perspective.”⁷³ It seems that the ultimately the issue of narrative coherence boils down to moral concerns. So it follows that good life stories should be coherent, but coherence is not enough. Life stories must also “inspire lives wherein protagonists love deeply and work effectively, lives in which people make positive

⁶⁹ Bruner, *Life as Narrative*, *Social Research*, Vol. 71, No. 3, p. 693.

⁷⁰ Gergen, 1991, p. 7.

⁷¹ McAdams, 2006, p. 120.

⁷² Sartre, 1964.

⁷³ McAdams, 2006, p. 120.

contributions to the world around them.”⁷⁴ Individual lives cannot escape the cultural expectations regarding what kinds of lives people should live. Because culture is the ultimate moral judge which decides “whether a life is worth living, and whether a life story is worth telling.”⁷⁵

This brings us to the ethical dimensions of the narrative self, which I will be discussing in the next chapter.

⁷⁴ McAdams, 2006, p. 120.

⁷⁵ McAdams, 2006, p. 120.

CHAPTER 3

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVE SELF

As one road leads to another, our journey for understanding the self has led us into the purview of ethics. We started by viewing the self from a postmodern perspective but now we have travelled back in time to the modern and pre-modern genre of ethics, specifically teleological ethics. This riveting journey back and forth in time reminds us of the complexity of the notion of self and also assures us that we are not leaving any stones unturned in our quest for knowing the self. In this chapter, I will be talking about the ethical narrativity thesis that is mostly endorsed by the French philosopher *Paul Ricoeur* (1913-2005; best known for his works on hermeneutic phenomenology), Scottish philosopher *Alasdair MacIntyre* (1929---; best known for his works on the revival of virtue ethics), Canadian philosopher *Charles Taylor* (1931---; best known for his work on modern identity based on contemporary moral values), and American philosopher *Marya Schechtman* (Professor in the Department of Philosophy, the University of Illinois at Chicago; best known for her work on the constitution of selves following a Lockean approach to personal identity).

The ethical narrativity thesis or narrative ethics explores the intersections between the domain of stories and that of moral values. Galen Strawson has made a distinction between the psychological narrativity thesis and the ethical narrativity thesis while being critical about both of these. The first one tells that human beings typically see, live, or experience their lives as a story or a collection of stories. The second one states that experiencing or conceiving of one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life and to true or full personhood. I will discuss the objections in Chapter- 7 of my thesis. As for now, let us understand the relation between narrative selves and ethics.

3.1 Ethical Narrativity

Narrative ethics explores the intersections between the domain of stories and storytelling and that of moral values. Narrative ethics regards moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling because narratives themselves implicitly or explicitly ask the question, “How should one think, judge, and act-as author, narrator, character, or audience-for the greater good?” Broadly speaking, narrative ethics focus on one or more of these following issues: (i) the ethics of the told, (ii) the ethics of the telling, (iii) the ethics of writing or producing, and (iv) the ethics of reading or reception. It is important to distinguish between literary ethics and narrative ethics at the outset, to avoid confusion. Literary ethics is mainly concerned with the relationship between literature and moral values, whereas narrative ethics is specifically concerned with the intersection between various formal aspects of narrative and moral values. Narrative ethics has taken two main directions since the 1980s, in the form of poststructuralist ethics and the other in the form of humanistic ethics. While these two streams have their own differences, both emphasize the importance of acknowledging the position of the ‘Other’. It is interesting to see how literary ethics made its way into narrative ethics, which encompasses personal identity, construed in terms of narratives of the self. Literary ethics transpired into the domain of identity through the works of many philosophers and psychologists like Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Marya Schechtman, Martha Nussbaum and Jerome S. Bruner among others.

According to Kim Atkins, “The narrative approach to identity has developed as a sophisticated philosophical response to the complexities and ambiguities of the human, lived situation, and is not...the imposition of a generic form of life or the attempt to imitate a fictional character...the narrative model of identity provides a more inclusive and exhaustive account

of identity than the causal models employed by mainstream theorists of personal identity.”⁷⁶ The narrative approach values the need for meaning in the lives of real, embodied practical beings who exists within the constraints of a temporal world. Paul Ricoeur suggests that selfhood is concerned with the activity constitutive of reflective self-awareness over time. He places the synthetic powers of imagination at the core of the narrative process through which self-understanding and identity are articulated. To put things into perspective, Kim Atkins writes, “The narrative view comes down to the claim that human understanding takes a narrative form. As self-understanding beings, persons have narrative identities. The narrative model is not simply a first-person report of an individual’s subjective experiences and point of view, it is a complex model that interweaves the first-person subjective perspective with the second-person perspective of the communicative situation of social existence, along with a generalizable or third-person perspective presupposed by a shared world of meanings with public standards of objectivity.”⁷⁷ In the preceding sections, I will be discussing the views of Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre and Marya Schechtman.

3.2 Paul Ricoeur on Narrative Identity

Paul Ricoeur has drawn a parallel between ‘narrative understanding’ and ‘the practical wisdom of moral judgment’. According to him, narratives synthesise the heterogeneous, that is, narratives can re-describe reality by combining elements that are dispersed in space and time into some kind of a coherent whole. Ricoeur traces back this practice of productive synthesis to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. “While ethics, from the Greeks to the present day, speaks of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness in largely universal terms, it is the task of narrative,

⁷⁶ Kim Atkins, “Narrative identity, practical identity and ethical subjectivity”, *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 37, 2004, p. 341.

⁷⁷ Atkins, 2004, p. 343.

in its ‘poetic’ forms, to provide us with specific ways of imagining how moral aspects of human behaviour may be linked with happiness or unhappiness.”⁷⁸ Narratives furnish us with multiple imaginary variations and the causes and consequences of human action and conduct, that we familiarise ourselves with from our culture. Epics and mythologies provide us with exemplary as well as cautionary tales of pride, bravery, lust, jealousy, etc. and give us a fair notion about the virtues and vices. The Bhagavad-Gītā which is the core teachings from the Hindu epic Mahabharata prescribe appropriate human conduct and the law of karma attached to our actions. Similarly, every culture provides with moral guidelines, preserved in the form of narratives, for ages to follow. Ricoeur summarizes the Aristotelian model of narrative ethics into three categories: (i) persuasion: the narrative pact between the narrator and the reader which follows some evaluative charge; (ii) vision: narrative enables us to imaginatively explore and foresee the connections between our actions and ends; (iii) initiative: envisioning our existence in terms of such possibilities helps us in better identifying our goals and motives, and to plan a new beginning.⁷⁹

Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre demonstrate a preference for Aristotelian ethics over the Kantian one or a teleological approach over a deontological one. Because the narrative approach considers ethics in terms of human desires and fallibilities, rather than a commitment to stringent rules. “It favours teleology over deontology and seeks to extend our understanding of ethical philosophy beyond formalist categories to include the ‘exemplary’ persuasiveness of literary and oral stories.”⁸⁰ Martha Nussbaum is committed to developing ethics on the Aristotelian model, taking cues from Greek tragedy and exploring the emotional structure and values of fictional narratives.⁸¹ Narratives act as agencies to transmit ethical

⁷⁸ Richard Kearney & James Williams, “Narrative & Ethics”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 70, 1996, pp. 30.

⁷⁹ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 31.

⁸⁰ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 31.

⁸¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 1986.

empathy. They help us to rise beyond our judgements and limitations to see a human being as a human being, irrespective of their caste, creed, character or appearance. That is why we can even connect with a murderer or a criminal in a narrative and become concerned about their fates in stories. “Narratives, in brief, enable each one of us to relate to the other as another self and to oneself as another.”⁸²

Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory arises out of a philosophical methodology both in the Aristotelian and Kantian tradition. Richard Kearney, following Ricoeur, remarks that narratives understood from an Aristotelian perspective or even from a Kantian perspective, can serve as an indispensable function of ethical responsibility. “By recounting the story of one’s life in response to the other’s question---who are you?---the narrative self constitutes itself as a perduring identity over time, capable of sustaining commitments and pledges, that is, of keeping one’s promise to the other.”⁸³ Narrative identity is both subjective and intersubjective. It is subjective as it encompasses the ongoing narrative of a person: his/her designated proper name which provides with the conviction that it is the same subject who performs and endures diverse acts and commitments between birth and death. The story that is told is an answer to the question “who you are” and the identity of this “who” is pinned onto the narratives of his/her life. Narrative identity is intersubjective as narrative involves the process of articulating something to someone, by someone. The narrative model of intersubjective identity has been developed by Ricoeur, MacIntyre, Taylor, Nussbaum and Seyla Benhabib. Despite their differences, all of them agree so far in denying the Cartesian view of the disembodied cogito, which is a mere metaphysical illusion of a substance-like self, which ignores the essentially narrative process of socialization. Socialization is the process through which the self acquires its identity to a large extent by engaging in narratives with its others. Self-identity involves this

⁸² Kearney & James, 1996, pp. 33.

⁸³ Kearney & James, 1996, pp. 35.

transaction of projecting a narrative into a world in which one is both the creator and the actor. “The narrative model of identity thus revives the age-old virtue of self-knowledge, not as some self-regarding ego but as an examined life freed from narcissism and solipsism through a recognition of our dialogical interdependence vis-à-vis others. The subject of narrative self-knowledge may then be solicited, from an ethical point of view, as a ‘responsible’ self, educated by the cathartic effects of historical or fictional stories conveyed by intersubjective culture.”⁸⁴

The recognition of the intersubjective character of narrative extends beyond purely novelistic narratives to non-literary ones, such as psychotherapy and communal identity, as proposed by Ricoeur in his book *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 3)⁸⁵. Psychoanalysis or psychotherapy involves an intersubjective process where a self (that of the client or the analysand) undertakes the process of knowing itself better by narrating itself to another (the therapist or the analyst), more truthfully than it has narrated itself before. In the therapeutic environment, one is more relaxed and are able to shed the inhibitions of being judged. So the analyst and analysand make a pact of working together in connecting the fragments of existence to constitute some kind of a coherent narrative configuration. “The scattered bits and pieces of suppressed or unintelligible experience are shaped by a narrative telling which enables the self to acknowledge a certain self-constancy in and through change. In principle, therefore, psychotherapy might be said to show how the story of life comes to be composed through a series of rectifications applied to preceding narratives (which we tell about ourselves or others tell about us).”⁸⁶ The recovery of the analysand or the success of therapy is not possible without a minimum of narrative self-constancy that makes the subject the same subject over time. I will

⁸⁴ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 36.

⁸⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer (trans.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁸⁶ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 37.

be discussing the therapeutic implementations of narratives in detail, in my subsequent chapters.

What is true for a subject, is also true for a community, as Ricoeur proposes. For communal identity, as for personal identity, stories proceed from stories and demand an adherence to the ethical principle of answerability or accountability. One cannot be faithful to one's word unless one has a minimal grasp over his or her narrative of who he or she is. But narrative responsibility also requires fluidity and flexibility, to be something dynamic that can be made and remade. "Societies which admit that they constitute themselves through an on-going process of the narrative are unlikely to degenerate into self-righteousness, fundamentalism or racism..."⁸⁷

While appreciating the depth and extent of the power of narratives to explain personal and communal identity, Kearney also warns us about the potential dangers of unexamined narratives, which can distort reality and create fictional narratives. Therefore it is crucial to acknowledge that narratives are never innocent, presuppositionless or without any interests. Every story is told from a certain point of view, which presupposes certain interests and aims at achieving some goals. Following Jürgen Habermas, Kearny prescribes that a hermeneutic of affirmation should always be accompanied by a hermeneutic of suspicion. Nussbaum or MacIntyre, in the view of Richard Kearney, underestimates the abusive potential of narratives and over-glorifies them. But story-telling can prove to be a breeding ground for distortions, illusions and lies. "The narrative self can only be ethically responsible, I believe, if it subjects its own self-constancy to self-questioning. Narrative identity, in other words, must never forget its origins in narrativity. For such forgetfulness breeds uncritical naivety."⁸⁸ In many cases, historical and fictional narratives overlap, like in historical novels such as *War and Peace*

⁸⁷ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 38.

⁸⁸ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 39.

(1869) by Leo Tolstoy or the film *Schindler's List* (1993) by Steven Spielberg. Many have argued that narrative imagination neutralizes injustice or simply explains away things when we try to represent the irrepresentable in forms of quasi-fictional drama. It can belittle the horrors and sufferings of the Jews in concentration camps or of the victims of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki nuclear bombing, by reducing them to 'object' of genocide. On the other hand, some believe that however difficult the task might be to recount or narrate the Holocaust or mass genocides that history has witnessed in a linear narrative, yet one should still try to reproduce it, lest it is forgotten and repeated again. "...certain injustices appeal to narrative imagination to plead their case lest they slip irrevocably into oblivion."⁸⁹ Here I would like to mention the 1956 documentary film *Night and Fog* (French: *Nuit et brouillard*) by Alain Resnais, which uses real wartime black and white footages and contrasts it to the coloured footages of the deserted concentration camps from around the time the documentary was shot. Without resorting to any exaggeration or drama, the documentary captures the harrowing conditions of the victims of the Holocaust, as objectively as possible. It is a difficult watch, the horrors embedded in the visuals are distressing and nauseating, but they speak a thousand word of caution amidst the deafening silence. Nussbaum believes that ethical experiences of good and evil must be felt as shared emotions. Ricoeur, while commenting on narratives of Holocaust says, "Horror attaches to events that must never be forgotten. It constitutes the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims. The victims of Auschwitz are par excellence, the representatives in our memory of all history's victims. Victimisation is the other side of history that no cunning of reason can ever justify and that, instead, reveals the scandal of every theodicy of history."⁹⁰ Although narratives have called for much suspicion and controversies, the ethical potential of narrative cannot be undermined. Kearney notes, (i) narratives have the testimonial capacity to

⁸⁹ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 43.

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, 1988, p. 188.

bear witness to a forgotten past, (ii) the empathic capacity to identify with victims and heroes alike, and (iii) the critical capacity to challenge official stories with alternative ones. “While narratives are...clearly not on the side of the angels, they do possess the power to disclose dimensions of otherness. And it is ultimately this power of disclosure which...marks the basic ethical ability to imagine oneself as another.”⁹¹

3.5 Alasdair MacIntyre on Virtue Ethics

MacIntyre’s interpretation of human life is influenced by the medieval conception of virtue, more specifically the Aristotelian *Virtue Ethics*. He emphasizes the narrative unity of human life following the concept that life is a ‘quest’ or ‘journey’. Thus the self is tied up to a specific character which demands unity in narration. “The construction of personal identity revolves around the question of “what is a good life?” adopting a structured narration as a basis for the formation of personal identity.”⁹² The conception of the narrative unity of life involves an ontological dimension, a normative dimension and a historical-social dimension.

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the leading proponents of the contemporary revival of Virtue ethics, which seeks to define what is good for human beings in terms of purpose, aim, end or ‘telos’ of human existence. The questions that virtue ethics tries to answer are: what kind of a person one should strive to become and what constitutes a ‘good life’. This presupposes our ability to see life as an interconnected whole from birth till death and makes everything we do meaningful or interconnected in a purposeful network leading to an end. But MacIntyre faces the biggest challenges from the modernist and existentialist ideas that refuse to see life as a whole, they rather promote the atomicity of human life. He, therefore, says that

⁹¹ Kearney & James, 1996, p. 45.

⁹² Lia Mela, MacIntyre on Personal Identity, *Public Reason*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2011, p. 103.

any contemporary attempt to imagine each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose characters provide the virtues with an adequate telos, is encountered by two different obstacles: one social and the other philosophical. The social aspect derives from the way modernity partitions each human life into various segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So private life is separated from public life, childhood and old age is separated from the rest of human life, corporate life from personal life, etc. The philosophical obstacles derive from two distinct counters, one from analytic philosophy, and another from sociological theory and existentialism. Analytic philosophy tends to think atomistically about human action and to analyse complex actions in terms of simple components. This fails to account for how life is to be understood to be something more than a sequence of individual actions and episodes. This tendency to separate the individual from the roles that he plays is explicit in Sartrean existentialism and also of sociological theories of Ralf Dahrendorf or Goffman. MacIntyre finds the postmodern fracture of the society and the individual perilous to the concept of virtue, as, "...the unity of a human life becomes invisible to us when a sharp separation is made either between the individual and the roles that he or she plays-a separation characteristic not only of Sartre's existentialism, but also of the sociological theory of Ralf Dahrendorf..."⁹³ According to him, the unity of human life becomes invisible to us when life comes to appear as a series of unconnected episodes. The self, therefore, cannot be regarded as a bearer of the Aristotelian virtues. For a self separated from its roles in the Sartrean mode loses that arena of social relationship in which the Aristotelian virtues function. Virtue is not a disposition that comes into effect only in some particular type of situation. Someone who genuinely possesses a virtue is expected to manifest it in almost all types of situations. The unity of virtue in someone's life makes sense only as a characteristic of a unitary life, one that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole. With this pre-modern concept of virtue is related a concomitant concept of selfhood,

⁹³ MacIntyre, 1984, P. 204.

“a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links both life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.”⁹⁴

This way of thinking about the self is so implicit that it is hardly acknowledged, MacIntyre emphasizes. He shows with the help of examples how natural it is to think about the self in a narrative mode. Any human action or behaviour can be correctly characterized in different ways. We can say of the same man, in answer to what he is doing, that he is digging, gardening, taking exercise, preparing for winter, or pleasing his wife, with equal truth and appropriateness. But what is common to all the answers is that each of the accounts presupposes a setting and takes into account the agent's behaviour or intentions. While any activity may be aimed at a variety of ends, MacIntyre distinguishes between primary and secondary intentions. Behaviours cannot be characterized independent of intentions, and intentions cannot be characterized independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to the agents themselves and to others. The word “settings” is taken to have a history, within which the histories of individual agents have to be situated. The same piece of behaviour may belong to more than one setting. In the given example, the agent's activity may be part of the history both of the part of the household activity (digging, gardening, preparing for winter), and of his marriage (when we talk about pleasing his wife), and the two histories have happened to intersect in this case. As far as intentions are concerned, we need to know the primary intentions of the agent, i.e., we need to know both what certain of his beliefs are and which of them are causally effective. Until we know this, we shall not know how to characterize correctly what the agent is doing.

Another set of compatibly correct answers to the question “what he is doing?” could be ‘writing a sentence’, ‘finishing his book’, ‘contributing to the debate on the theory of action’,

⁹⁴ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 205.

‘trying to get tenure’. The intentions here can be ordered in terms of the stretch of time to which reference is made. Each of the short-term intentions is made intelligible by reference to some longer-term intentions and the characterization of the behaviour in terms of the longer-term intentions can only be correct if some of the characterizations in terms of shorter-term intentions are also correct. Hence the behaviour is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions invoked are and what shorter-term intentions are related to the longer. So here we are involved in writing narrative history. Intentions thus need to be ordered both causally and temporally.

MacIntyre shows the inter-relationships between the intentional, the social and the historical. One’s conception of good manifests itself in one’s intentions. A particular action is identified by invoking two kinds of context. The agent’s intention is placed in causal and temporal order with reference to their role in history and is also placed with reference to their role in the history of the setting(s) to which they belong. In determining what causal efficacy the agent’s intentions had and how his short-term intentions succeed or failed to be constitutive of long-term intentions, we ourselves write a further part of these histories. A narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions. In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer.

The concept of intelligibility is, as MacIntyre contends, closely related to human actions, for they can be held responsible for their actions, whereas other beings cannot be. To identify an occurrence as an action is to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent’s intentions, motives, passions and purposes. However, exceptions to this intelligibility occur in several different

kinds of situations, like when we enter alien social cultures or in our encounter with certain kind of neurotics or psychotics.

Similar is the case with speech acts. The acts of utterances become intelligible by finding its place in a narrative. Both purposes and speech acts require contexts. The most familiar type of context in and by reference to which speech acts and purposes are rendered intelligible is the conversation. Finding a conversation intelligible does not imply that one needs to understand it. Conversations can be allocated to genres just as literary narratives can be. As MacIntyre puts it, "Indeed a conversation is a dramatic work, even if a very short one, in which the participants are not only the actors but also the joint authors, working out in agreement or disagreement the mode of their production."⁹⁵ Conversations also have beginnings, middles and endings just as literary works. Conversations understood in a broader sense are the form of human transactions in general. So what is true of conversations must be true of battles, chess games, philosophy seminars, etc. Conversations and human actions are both enacted narratives, as MacIntyre proposes; the narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists, novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before it was imposed by the writer. Narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration. Stories are lived before they are told. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of those narratives, that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.

In the narratives of our lives, we, the agents, are not only actors but also authors. However, we are not the sole authors, but co-authors of our own narratives. We are always under certain constraints placed upon us by others. If life is like a stage, when we enter it and we find ourselves part of an act and both the stage and the act is not designed by me. Each of

⁹⁵ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 21.

our parts on the stage exerts constraints on each other. The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do; it is in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds.

One of the crucial features of the narrative structure of human life is that at any given point, we do not know what will happen next. This unpredictability is required by the narrative structure of human life which coexists with a second crucial characteristic of all lived narratives, a certain teleological character. We live out our lives both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward while others repel us; some seem already foreclosed, and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of the future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of telos, or of a variety of ends or goals, towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present. Unpredictability and teleology, therefore, coexist as part of our lives.

MacIntyre argues that life is like a play in the genre of tragedy as each life ends in death. The individual lives fragmented thus speaks only of the virtues of a good banker, or of being a good student or an artist, thereby deviating from the Aristotelian concept of excellence of character as a whole and reducing goodness to particular skill or talent. In Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), the protagonist Antoine Roquentin attempts to write a biography but abandons the project when he realizes that presenting the human life as a narrative is a lie. Contesting Sartre's position, MacIntyre claims that our life or for that matter anything becomes intelligible only through narratives and proceeds to put forward two amusing examples. Firstly, he supposes that he is waiting for a bus and a young man suddenly utters 'The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.' Now there is no problem in understanding the meaning of what the man said, but the problem is in understanding why would he do such an act. Unless it was some pre-determined code language (considering that

the man could have been a spy), or that the man mistook MacIntyre for someone else with whom he had previously discussed regarding the Latin name of common wild ducks, his actions will be reduced to the mere babblings of a madman. Secondly, he uses the example of a recipe to clarify that actions not only require a narrative to be meaningful but also a context. The instructions given for a recipe can only be intelligible if it follows a sequence and in addition to that narrative sequence, it also needs a context. MacIntyre says that if by following the recipe of a cake he breaks six eggs in a bowl and adds sugar and flour to it amidst his lectures on Kant's ethics, the action will not be considered intelligible, just by virtue of following a sequence. Because it lacks context.⁹⁶

So, in what does the unity of an individual life consist, MacIntyre seeks to elucidate: "The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life...The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest."⁹⁷ But this quest cannot begin without some or at least partly determined conception of the final telos. This quest for telos or what might constitute as good for an individual or human beings, in general, cannot be articulated as a wholly universal concept of the good but our narratives are that which makes the history of our conception of the good intelligible. "...the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for the man, and the virtues necessary for seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is."⁹⁸ What it is to live a good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance even when it is one and the same conception of the

⁹⁶ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 209-210.

⁹⁷ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219.

⁹⁸ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219.

good life and one and the same set of virtues which are being embodied in a human life.⁹⁹ “What is better or worse for X depends upon the character of that intelligible narrative which provides X’s life with its unity. Unsurprisingly it is the lack of any such unifying conception of a human life which underlies modern denials of the factual character of moral judgements and more especially of those judgments which ascribe virtues or vices to individuals.”¹⁰⁰

We as individuals, do not only live in different circumstances but also approach those circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity, as someone’s daughter or sister, as a citizen of a country, a member of a certain profession, nation or tribe. There is a starting point which is determined right from our birth. “...I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point.”¹⁰¹ “What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition.”¹⁰² “...the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of a historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide.”¹⁰³ Man through his history becomes a story-telling animal. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, good kings, etc. that children learn about virtues. It is also crucial in understanding the roles into which we have been drafted, and to understand other’s responses to us and our responses to them.

⁹⁹ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219.

¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 225.

¹⁰¹ MacIntyre, 1984, 220.

¹⁰² MacIntyre, 1984, 221.

¹⁰³ MacIntyre, 1984, 221.

MacIntyre's account of human life as a narrative, although extremely debated, provides a compelling insight into the nature of what it means to be a human and gives reason for optimism regarding the possibility of a virtue-based modernity even in postmodern time.

3.4 Self-Constitution Views of Marya Schechtman

Marya Schechtman builds a theory of narrative identity on her reinterpretation of John Locke's theory of personal identity. As she puts it, "Locke was proposing a self-constitution view of personal identity by proposing that the continuity in my identity is partly constituted by my own reflective activity in recognising and appropriating my identity as my own."¹⁰⁴ In her book, *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), Schechtman argues that the contemporary mainstream theories of psychological continuity end up being incoherent because they approach the question of identity in terms of the third-person perspective of re-identification. These theories emphasize numerical or qualitative identity and somewhere lose sight of the question of personal identity. The kind of psychological continuity that we should look for, is the one that can only be effected from the first-person perspective in narrative continuity. In popular theories of psychological continuity, the metaphysical account of identity is given in terms of causation; personal identity consists of causal connections between memories or person-stages or time-slices of a person's life. The reason why personal identity or the psychological continuity theories matter to us, as Schechtman points out, arises from four practical concerns: self-interest, moral responsibility, compensation, and survival. It is important to me that I continue to be the same person not simply as someone extremely similar to me, argues, Schechtman, but it matters because it is essential for me that *my* interests are realised, that *I* am held morally responsible for *my* actions, that *I* go on a holiday that *I* saved for and that *I*

¹⁰⁴ Schechtman, 1996, p. 105.

continue to exist (or cease to exist). Each of these concern involves the processes of self-reflection on my attributes, values, goals and interests. These four concerns, namely: *self-interest*, *moral responsibility*, *compensation* and *survival* constitute the intrinsic continuity of my identity. She argues against the plausibility of the brain as the centre of identity and in a way challenges the views of Sydney Shoemaker, Derek Parfit, John Perry and David Lewis. According to Schechtman, "It is only because we have empirical reason to believe that it is the brain that causes the psychological continuity we value that we want to make it part of our definition of what constitutes personal identity. If we found that our assumptions about the brain's causal powers were mistaken, we would certainly no longer take it to be required for the continuation of the person."¹⁰⁵ To demonstrate, she puts forward three cases of continuity to show the bizarre consequences of psychological continuity theories that promote causal connections between psychological states to offer explanations of personal identity. In the first case, one goes to sleep and wakes up as usual, in the second, one goes to sleep while a madman brainwashes her neighbour to have the exact psychological states as she would have, had she woken up as usual, in the third case, one goes to sleep and wakes up on a cloud with wings and a harp, while having the same psychological states that she would have had, if woken up as usual. In further defence of her view, Schechtman raises the issue of transitivity faced by the re-identification problem of personal identity. It has been demonstrated by Thomas Reid in his well-known objection to Locke, where Reid cites the example of a boy who has been flogged for stealing apples and later joins the army while remembering the incident of being flogged during childhood, but as he ages, he forgets the incident but remembers the incident of his bravery during service whereby he was promoted to the rank of a general. So the retired general can be said to be identical with the soldier but not with the boy, as he does not remember the incident, although the boy and the soldier is the same person. This problem arises from the

¹⁰⁵ Schechtman, 1996, p. 23.

insistence upon numerical identity as the criterion for re-identification, which must take the logical form of an identity relation. Numerical identity holds as long as each memory, person-stage or time-slice has sufficient of the psychological states characteristic of a preceding memory, person-stage or time-slice. Although theorists differ in their views about the degree of overlap and the nature of the causal connection, they all agree that the connectedness and continuity should ensure one's sense of being the same person or the same experiential subject. But these theories cannot generate enough reasons for someone to care more about being connected to one future person than any another, however similar that person is to him or her. Causal continuity, Schechtman clarifies, is different in kind from the self-constancy that underpins the continuity of the four concerns that has been mentioned earlier. Failing to appreciate this difference leads the psychological continuity theorists to collapse "being me" into "being someone like me."¹⁰⁶ I will not be anxious about or excited about or be responsible for what is going to happen to someone like me, but not me. It is an overestimation to try to address all the complex issues of personal identity in a single blow, like the whisk of a magic wand. "There is no monolithic 'question of personal identity,' but rather a variety of identity arising in different contexts...demanding distinct kinds of answers."¹⁰⁷

Schechtman proposes it would help to begin by distinguishing the issues of re-identification of persons from those of characterization of persons and to acknowledge the diversity of the problems that personal identity entails. "Our concept of persons has a dual nature. On the one hand, persons are objects in the world, whereas on the other they are subjects, with agency, autonomy, and inner lives."¹⁰⁸ According to Marya Schechtman, personhood is not a fundamental birthright of all human beings but is something that has to be achieved. "Some, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so

¹⁰⁶ Schechtman, 1996, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ Schechtman, 1996, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Schechtman, 1996, p. 68.

that makes them persons.”¹⁰⁹ This idea of person is combined with a normative overtone which necessitates or links the self-constituting narratives with ethical flourishing. Self-narratives help in developing morally significant beings and are the means by which we are navigated in moral spaces while moving towards the good. “In many narratives the self seeks its identity on the scale of an entire life.”¹¹⁰ According to Charles Taylor, “as I project my life forward and endorse the existing direction and give it a new one, I project a future story, not just a state of momentary future but a bent for my whole life to come.”¹¹¹ As Daniel D. Hutto puts it, “the narratives we weave about our lives can profoundly affect how we respond to our past and how we lead our lives in the future.”¹¹²

A prescriptive mode of narrative identity has been contested by many and have sometimes led narrative theorists to resort to a weaker version of their claims. I believe we now have a fair understanding of the problems that the narrative self theories address and their implications. I will move on to the next part of my thesis, where I will talk about the applicative aspects of the narrative views of self.

¹⁰⁹ Schechtman, 1996, p. 94.

¹¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey (trans.), 1992, p. 114-115.

¹¹¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 1989, p. 48.

¹¹² Daniel D. Hutto, *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Vol. 60, 2007, p. 5.

PART II

HEALING THROUGH NARRATIVES

CHAPTER 4

MAKING AND RE-MAKING OF THE SELF THROUGH NARRATIVES: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

So far I have explored the psycho-linguistic foundations and ethical dimensions of the narrative self. In this chapter and the next chapter, I will be giving an idea of how narrative self views are being successfully applied or implemented in contemporary therapeutic practices. In this chapter, I will focus specifically on the narrative views of self from the feminist perspective and then move on to discuss how telling and retelling of trauma narratives or the act of narration helps in healing. There are several brands of feminism but the important aspects of the feminist views of self, in general, are dynamicity, embodiment, situatedness, relatedness, interdependence, and vulnerability. The feminists challenge the traditional western philosophical views of self as an entity over and above the body, independent of and immune to changes in the external world. The feminists argue that there is a binary attached with such a conception which belittles the female or the feminine by undermining the role of the body in the study of self. Therefore, they re-emphasize the importance of the body in shaping the narratives of the self, especially but not exclusively, the women's body. I will be discussing how the embodied self is inseparably embedded in a socio-cultural and historical context and the importance of narratives in rebuilding the self that is disintegrated after succumbing to trauma. I draw my arguments from secondary sources of first-person accounts and psychological researches that have been conducted. It is possible to know the self and to remake the self through narratives, not because narratives are mere tools, but because the self itself is nothing but the narratives that are multi-authored by us and our significant others.

4.1 Critique of the Classical Approaches to Selfhood

One of the important concerns of feminists is to study the women's self as it is related to personal identity, autonomy, agency, and to the female body as well, which was long ignored or neglected in the traditional western views of the self. As Simone de Beauvoir noted that "men" are the subject and "women" are the other. The "other" reduces the women to a non-agent or a mere object. Women's selfhood or autonomy has been systematically side-lined throughout history, across cultures, and even denied by law. Women have been deprived of education, the right to earn a livelihood, to participate in politics, to take part in important decision making or even barred from casting their votes. It was commonly thought that women cannot think rationally and their entire upbringing should focus on nurturing the qualities and values of becoming an ideal wife and mother; in short, an object of gratification and a mere caregiver. It is always men or the "masculine" that have exercised social, economic and political powers in society. Many would argue that the times have changed so much, we see women everywhere working at par with men, be it in the academic sector, in politics, in the fields of scientific research and technology and even fighting in the battlefield. But breaking out of cultural stereotypes is never easy, whatever a woman achieves in life, she is not considered "settled" unless she gets married and has children. So starting a family, conforming to stereotypical expectations, serving the needs of men and bearing child is still seen as the foremost duty of women and motherhood has been glorified so much that it has been blown out of proportion. A woman is not even seen as "complete" unless she bears a child; after all what good are the ovaries for if it does not help in propagating the genes of the family. Sania Mirza, who has been a former doubles world No. 1 in tennis, won six Grand Slam titles in her career, was awarded the Padma Bhushan, Padma Shri by the Indian government and won numerous accolades worldwide, was once asked in an interview during the peak of her career by a reputed news channel that when does she plan to "settle down" by marrying and having

children. I do not wish to generalize the perception of the entire world, but want to emphasize the widely prevalent ideas that deny women her agency, her autonomy to choose, to make decisions for herself and even to have control over her own body. And marriage as an institution has been explicitly and implicitly dissolving the women's identity or changing her life-narratives. A woman is expected to leave her paternal home, change her surname, give up on her claims to the paternal property although legally entitled, adapt to the food and customs of her marital home and also silently bear the physical and psychological abuse, humiliation inflicted on her by her in-laws, the domestic violence and marital rape. And due to the conditioning of fear, shame or rejection and lack of financial independence in many cases, the women try to overlook these injustices done to her and fail to seek legal advice or social support.

In India, women reaching the age of twenty sends a chill down the spine and a rush of anxiety among the parents and relatives, who starts looking for a "suitable match" and plan to wed her off as early as possible, because with each passing year she would become less attractive, less potent to bear a child and more independent to take her own decisions; in short, less "marriageable" and "manageable". As Ambrose Bierce would say, men *have* a body; women *are* a body.¹¹³ Women are fooled and betrayed by her own families who glorify marriage and fabricate stories of a good life that is intertwined with matrimony, how she can pursue her career even after marriage, how marriages will make her realize her full womanhood, how motherhood would complete her existence, and so forth. The condition is worse for girls belonging to the lowest socio-economic strata of society. They are married off at very young ages, without consent, often with much older grooms and sometimes sold off in the name of marriage. "Simone de Beauvoir labels women under patriarchy "mutilated" and

¹¹³ J.C. Chrisler & I. Johnston-Robeldo (ed.), *Woman's Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image*, The American Psychological Association, 2017, p. 7.

“immanent” (Beauvoir 1949). Socialized to objectify themselves, women are said to become narcissistic, small-minded, and dependent on others’ approval. Excluded from careers, waiting to be chosen by their future husbands, taken over by natural forces during pregnancy, and busy with tedious, repetitive housework, women never become transcendent agents. For Beauvoir, they often resist the burden of responsibility for their freedom.”¹¹⁴

Therefore it is urgent and necessary to respond to this state of affairs which the feminist philosophers working on the self have been doing in three main tracks:

- (i) Presenting a critique of the dominant modern, Western views of the self.
- (ii) Reclaiming feminist identities, and
- (iii) Reconceptualising the self as dynamic, relational and embodied.

As a critique of the modern western Philosophical views of the self, the feminists primarily target the Kantian and the Cartesian doctrines of the self that projects the self as a free, rational, autonomous agent, a disembodied mind that is immune to dilemmas, vulnerabilities, anxiety, depression, prejudice, hatred, love, fear or violence. This conception is fundamentally misleading according to the feminists. “Although represented as genderless, raceless, ageless, and classless, feminists argue that the Kantian subject and homo economicus mask a white, healthy, youthfully middle-aged, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, cisgender male citizen. On the Kantian view, he is an impartial judge deliberating about applying universal principles, while on the utilitarian view, he is a self-interested bargainer wheeling and dealing in the marketplace.”¹¹⁵ Also, “The self is essentially masculine, and the masculine self is essentially good and wise.”¹¹⁶ There is an unmissable binary between the gendered roles that have been historically assigned and reinforced to both the sexes. Masculinity is coveted as it encompasses

¹¹⁴ E. Anderson, et. al. (eds), “Feminist Perspectives on the Self”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/>), hereafter, SEP, 2020.

¹¹⁵ SEP, 2020.

¹¹⁶ SEP, 2020.

rationality, moral uprightness, and adherence to principles, emotional integrity and prudence, dutifulness in the public, economic and political domain. Femininity is stigmatized as being uncontrollably emotional, unpredictable, unbridled, and unprincipled and something that is heavily dominated by the body rather than the mind. Therefore it needs to be shackled, confined to domestic spaces and channelized through rigorous engagements as a caregiver in the roles of a wife, mother, sister or daughter. “Many Western philosophers denigrated the body as “animal”, as appetite, as deceiver, as prisoner of the soul and confounder of its projects”, and they saw it as something to rise above and separate from, a challenge at which men were more likely than women to succeed.”¹¹⁷

The self, however, is not immune to social influences, cultural bearings or traumatic incidents. Another problem with the traditional modern views of the self that is addressed by the feminists is that it fails to account for the internalized oppression and the process of overcoming it that is commonly experienced by women. There is nothing derogatory in associating or pinning the self with the body, rather we should explore the role of the body in constructing our life narratives. When it comes to women especially, the dynamicity that her body experiences must be acknowledged, as it goes through various changes during puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and menopause. All these bodily changes are closely linked with a woman’s sense of self. “For many feminists, to acknowledge the self’s dependency is not to devalue the self but rather to value vulnerability, as well as to call into question the supposed free agency of a self that implicitly corresponds to a masculine ideal.”¹¹⁸

It is important to reconceptualise the self and to account for those features that the traditional philosophers have been oblivious to. These include interdependence, vulnerability, embodiment, social situatedness or embeddedness and relatedness. The term *embodiment*

¹¹⁷ Chrisler & Johnston-Robeldo, 2018, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Chrisler & Johnston-Robeldo, 2018, p. 8.

originated from the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), in the field of phenomenology. According to him, all our perceptions, our experiences of the world are embodied. The lived body is a social agent. Interacting with each other and understanding the environment and reacting to it is unthinkable without a mediating body. Any animal would react to its environment based on the body it has. For example, a cat would curl up in a chair, a human would sit on it and a horse will have no business with a chair. So the body is the seat of all experiences and learning; the body is the basis of subjectivity and self-expression. But embodiment can be experienced both positively and negatively, as empowering or weakening.

4.2 Feminist Narratologies & Women's Self-Narratives

I would like to explore how the female or the feminine body shape a woman's sense of self, especially her image, identity, self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence, following some psychological studies that have been conducted.¹¹⁹ But at the very outset, I want to make it clear that there is a difference between "feminist narratives" and narratives that shape the idea of femininity and here my concern is not about the former. Feminist narratives or narratologies focus on the impact of culturally constructed gender upon the form and reception of narrative texts and has broadened its scope to include race, sexuality, nationality, class and ethnicity in their analysis of texts. It is a theoretical approach that proposes to examine non-mainstream texts, as main-stream texts that are studied are either authored by males or have a masculinist perspective.¹²⁰ The study of gender and narrative explores how sex, gender and sexuality shape both narrative texts and the theories that interpret them. "Feminist narratology" is one such field which is concerned with how various narratological concepts, categories, methods and

¹¹⁹ Chrisler & Johnston-Robeldo, 2018, p. 10.

¹²⁰ Robyn Warhol, "A Feminist Approach to Narrative", in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, James Phelan, et. al. (ed.), 2012, p. 9.

distinctions promote or side-line the exploration of gender and sexuality as signifying aspects of narrative.¹²¹

Since my area of research is on the narrative views of the self, I would like to explore how narratives influence or make or constitute the women's self and how it also helps in rebuilding or remaking or reconstructing the women's self that has been distorted or distraught by trauma and abuse.

4.3 Making of the Women's Self through Narratives

As I was discussing how historically and culturally a woman is defined or identified through her body, women have also internalised the idea of a close association between her body and her self-image. But the body, in general, is a crucial aspect of everyone's self-identity and how others perceive our body contributes largely to our notions of self-worth. Encashing on this idea in the age of consumerism, the capitalist market is making a multi-billion dollar profit. Even before one can get to know a person's capabilities, skills, values and ideals, he/she is judged on his/her appearance which can reveal a lot about his or her sex, gender, age, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, physical disabilities and perhaps even sexual orientation. When the body is carrying with it so many connotations, it is a good opportunity for the companies to make one feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied with their bodies and to sell everything from green tea, whole-grain gluten-free digestive biscuits to herbal concoctions that would allegedly reverse the process of ageing, fairness creams and slimming products, on the pretext of promising greater confidence and better acceptance in the society. And while purchasing, people do not just buy those products but buy them as solutions to their perceived problems.

¹²¹ Susan S. Lancer, "Gender and Narrative", *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de>)

By endorsing famous personalities and working on attractive packaging, big brands often fool people who are unaware of the many harmful ingredients that go into making several products. But in a society that has objectified women as a body bereft of intellectual capabilities or agency, women are more gullible to fall prey to the traps of consumerism which promotes the view that the body is a vehicle to ascertain one's socio-economic class. Psychologists have termed this as "the body project".¹²² Girls are subjected to harsh judgements on how they look and how they dress from all quarters-parents, relatives, friends, teachers, religious texts, religious leaders, advertisements and even online on social media platforms and there is a persistent pressure to comply with unrealistic standards of beauty. Based on appearances they are labelled as "beautiful", "unattractive", "tomboyish", "pretty", "sweet", "cute", "sexy" and even "slutty". There is no way that the feminine self can be experienced or understood in isolation from these socio-cultural narrative cues. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, an American social historian studied the diaries of young American girls between 1830 and 1990, which eventually culminated into her book *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1998). She found that self-improvement has been a recurrent theme in those diaries, which mostly focussed on nurturing internal virtues like kindness, patience, religiousness, etc. But during the mid-20th century self-improvement projects focused on the external, on the body. Girls wanted to become prettier, thinner and more attractive.¹²³ But the same holds true for girls and women across countries and cultures. A considerable amount of time, money and energy is being spent on availing exotic diets, hiring personal trainers or enrolling in expensive gyms, sports and fitness activities, cosmetic surgeries, updating to latest fashion trends, and so on. Of course, there is the question of affordability; not everyone has the means or access to these high-end services. But there is a constant desire to attain that goal and a lingering dissatisfaction on not

¹²² J. J. Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, 1998.

¹²³ Chrisler & Johnston-Robeldo, 2018, p.5.

being able to achieve it, among women from the lower socio-economic strata. I would be wrong if I say only women succumb to the pressure of keeping up with the latest fashion trends and men are immune to it. That is certainly not true. But the stake of being attractive and marriageable is too high for women, whereas men can focus more on their functionality and productivity than on their bodily appearance. Women are constantly policed on what to wear and what not to wear and how to or how not to behave during different phases and events of their lives, which is intimately related to the functioning of their bodies. For example, on reaching puberty, girls are usually advised not to wear short dresses as that will reveal her body and provoke men. Many schools also change their dress codes accordingly. Even there are specific regulations to tie the hair, failing which girls can be punished. Untied hair represents the woman's unbridled sexuality, which is not the sign of a morally upright woman. Menstruating women are not allowed to enter temples or attend religious ceremonies as she is considered impure, a woman after childbirth is considered sexually unattractive and post-menstrual women are constantly reminded of their wrinkles and greying hair. A woman in her 20s would be constantly pestered to get married and right after marriage she will be hounded to have children, unmarried or divorced women would be looked down upon as some suspicious creatures and widowed women are not expected to wear bright coloured clothes. It is true that many women have rebelled against these stereotypes and have lived or are living their lives in their terms, but still, a lot of women cannot. I am reminded of a beautiful French film that I watched, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019), written and directed by Céline Sciamma. Set in the late 18th Century France, the story revolves around a woman painter named Marianne who is commissioned to paint the portrait of a young aristocratic woman, Héloïse, so that she can be married off if her suitor likes the portrait. Héloïse's studies have been abruptly cancelled and she has been called to her hometown to prepare her for the marriage. She is defiant to this idea of marrying a person without knowing

anything about him or meeting him. She has dreams of visiting places, of listening to operas, she likes reading novels, all of which she never got a chance to fulfil and she is snatched off her agency to decide the course of her own life. She is scared of an unknown future with an unknown person in an unknown city, where she would be expected to be a good wife and please her husband. Héloïse has little scope to change her fate, except for committing suicide like her sister. She helplessly craves the experience of love, one last time before marriage, which she perceives as impending doom. Marianne strikes a friendship with her initially for the sake of the project to paint her but what follows is a heart-warming and heart-wrenching love affair between the two women that was cut short by Héloïse's marriage. Same-sex love was forbidden in 18th Century Europe and of course, both of them knew it, but could not help being carried away by the desire to be understood, to be treated as equals, to be valued as a thinking and opinionated individual. The movie made me wonder how little have we changed during the past centuries? Are marriages still not arranged based on photos, online and offline? A woman's agency, choice, decision and rights over her body have been severely violated across cultures, throughout centuries.

Let us now come back to the body project once again. The body project is life-long; it begins during the early girlhood and continues late until old age. "Women have a complex relationship to their bodies. The body should be a source of pleasure, the enabler of agency, and the mediator between the world and the self. However, for most women, at least some of the time, the body is a disappointment, a source of anxiety, and a site of labor."¹²⁴ The socio-cultural experiences that a woman embodies can either empower or disempower her. Positive experiences lead to social empowerment, whereas negative ones lead to disempowerment. "The more physically and mentally free and socially empowered a woman feels, the more likely she

¹²⁴ Chrisler & Johnston-Robeldo, 2018, p.11.

is to experience a positive embodiment, defined as encompassing agency, self-care, and joyfulness. The more physically and mentally corseted and disempowered a woman is, the more likely the development of embodiment is to be disrupted and yield a negative body-self relation.”¹²⁵

In the next section, I will be discussing the effects of mental and physical trauma in the negative embodiment of women and how narratives can help in reconstructing or remaking their selves.

4.4 Surviving Trauma & Reconstructing the Self through Narratives

In this section, I would like to discuss how narratives help the survivors of trauma to reconstruct their disrupted selves and reconnect with their environment and society through the telling and retelling of the incidents to an empathic audience and thereby re-gaining greater self-control over their thoughts and actions. I draw heavily from the works of Susan J. Brison, a Professor of Philosophy, and Ethics and Human Values at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. She works on the philosophy of law, feminist ethics, trauma theory and allied subjects. She has been a victim of a brutal rape and attempted murder and has worked extensively on how trauma narratives contribute to rebuilding the self of the victim. It is important to clarify what is meant by trauma and what kind of trauma we will be talking about here. In her article “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self” (1998), Brison compiles the definition of trauma from the works of various psychologists as “a traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening. The immediate psychological responses to such trauma include terror, loss of control, and intense fear of annihilation. Long-term effects include the psychological responses of hypervigilance,

¹²⁵ Chrisler & Johnston-Robeldo, 2018, p.10.

heightened startle response, sleep disorders, and the more psychological, yet still involuntary, responses of depression, inability to concentrate, lack of interest in activities that used to give life meaning, and a sense of a foreshortened future.”¹²⁶ These symptoms are commonly known as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Trauma can be inflicted by violent or abusive acts of other human beings or by being affected by natural calamities or accidents. Brison focuses on the trauma of human origin, both individual events such as rape and systematic cruelty towards a mass such as the Holocaust. First, it is important to understand what the victim or survivor experiences as an aftermath of a violent physical and sexual assault, and near-death experiences. When the trauma is inflicted intentionally by fellow human beings, one’s fundamental assumptions about the world and his or her safety in it is shattered. Moreover, it disrupts the connection of one’s self with relation to others and even to one’s self. Therapists often encounter such victims as saying, “I died long ago” or “I miss my earlier self.” Abusers not only harm the victim’s physical body but snatch away their subjectivity, self-worth and reduce them to mere helpless objects. Severe trauma disrupts the cohesion of consciousness, the ability to remember the past, understand the present or envision a future and to identify oneself as the same person over time. There is a loss of control over memories, desires and feelings, in short, cognitive and emotional capacities are challenged. “The inability to feel one’s former emotions, even in the aftermath of trauma, leaves the survivor not only numbed but often also without the motivation to carry out the task of reconstructing an ongoing narrative.”¹²⁷

Brison opposes the modern western accounts of the self that has a long lineage, starting from Descartes, which promote an independent and individualistic self, detached from its social context. Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, the postmodernists and the feminists, have made a shift

¹²⁶ Susan J. Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self”, In Mieke Bal, et. al. (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, 1998, p. 40.

¹²⁷ Brison, 1998, p. 44.

in perspective by situating the self in a social context, in relation to others. Brison is taking a Lockean approach to personal identity with her modifications. So she is focussing both on a continuity of memory that connects one's ongoing narratives as well as the relational aspects of the self. What she proposes is that the self is remade through acts of memory. "Trauma undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future. In telling a first-person trauma narrative to a suitable listener, the survivor is, at the same time and once again, a second person, dependent on the listener in order to return to personhood."¹²⁸ Memories of traumatic events are themselves traumatic; they act as flashbacks to the horrifying events. But narrating those memories to empathic others empowers the survivors to gradually gain control over the traces left by the sufferings. "Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self."¹²⁹ Repeatedly narrating traumatic memory is not enough for an individual to heal but it indeed helps, especially during group therapy sessions where victims who faced similar kind of trauma are encouraged to open up, mediated by a therapist. It is important to narrate before empathic others, who are eager to listen and are strong enough to endure, who will not judge, criticise, frown or express shock and disbelief. Brison cites the example of the 1974 Israeli documentary film *The 81st Blow* by Haim Gouri, which uses an assemblage of archival footage of Nazi camps, along with witness testimonies. The title of the documentary is inspired by true events that were experienced by a Holocaust survivor. While in concentration camps, he received a punishment of 80 blows, which he somehow survived and later on managed to escape to Israel. When he recounted his experience to his Israeli

¹²⁸ Brison, 1998, p. 41.

¹²⁹ Brison, 1998, p. 40.

friends, they disbelieved him and thought that he was making up the story. According to the survivor, being considered a liar among his own people was the 81st blow, which was even more painful and bitter than the harrowing experience of that inhuman physical torture.

On the other hand, Brison recollects how she received some respite in narrating and recollecting the incidents that happened to her- to policemen, doctors, psychiatrists, or lawyers, while she was admitted in the hospital. She felt validated because those who listened to her trusted her accounts and she later realized that this exercise was therapeutic even at those early stages after the assault. “Fortunately, just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become a human subject again through telling one’s narrative to caring others who are able to listen.”¹³⁰

The repeated exercise of articulating traumatic incidents help to achieve a narrative coherence, the victims gain greater control over their memories, makes the memories less intrusive, and can eventually help in assigning meaning to those incidents so that it can be integrated into the rest of life. And so it is important to repeat stories of trauma and to also listen to others who have experienced it. Dori Laub, who was an Israeli-American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and a Holocaust survivor himself, extensively collected testimonies of Holocaust survivors and their children. Many of the victims recollected that while in concentration camps, they wanted to live one day more than Hitler so that they can tell their stories. Laub came to believe that the survivors not only lived to tell their stories but they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. Our stories are interwoven; we are keepers of each other’s stories as a community, we derive the meanings of our lives only within the fabric of larger significations. Stories not just constitute our selves but helps in remaking our selves and act as a survival tool for the human species.

¹³⁰ Brison, 1998, p. 48.

CHAPTER 5:

THE DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY: EXPANDING THE IDEAS OF NARRATIVE SELF

During the late 70s, some psychotherapists and clinical theorists began to move away from the constraints of modern cognitive psychology and its view of the self as a computing machine and took on an interpretative perspective. The common characteristic of this new direction is the notion of the individual or the self as narrator or storyteller. This interpretive turn evolved from two distinct yet overlapping paths. One that represents the emergence of narrative storytelling and weaves around the notion of the self as a storyteller and the story as created inside the self. Psychotherapy from this perspective is a storied event. The other path represents the emergence of an interest in language and dialogue and centres on the self as a social and dialogical process. Here, the narrative is thought of as being created outside the self and therapy is perceived as a dialogical event. Perhaps the earliest attempt at outlining the role of narrative in psychotherapy arose from the psychoanalytic movement which dates back to Freud and is related to the primacy he gave to discovering one's past or discovering the why. In his 1937 paper "Constructions in Analysis," Freud suggested that when the requisite childhood oedipal memories are not recovered by the process of free association and analysis of ego defences, it is permissible for the analyst to "construct" a story close to what it would be if it could be remembered. Later the writings of Roy Schafer (1981) and Donald Spence (1984) in the psychotherapy literature and of Donald E. Polkinghorne (1988) and Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990) in the psychology literature recreated psychotherapists' interest in the narrative by introducing the notion of the self as the narrator or story-teller, and by delineating the role of narrative in psychotherapy. The later path that this interpretive turn in psychotherapy took, led to the emergence of an interest in language and dialogue in which the self as the dialogical self and psychotherapy as a dialogical event became pivotal. Anthony Paul Kerby suggests, "In a narrative account the self is to be constructed not as a pre-linguistic

given that merely employs language, much as we might employ a tool, but rather as a product of language-what might be called the implied self of self-referring utterances. The self, or subject, then becomes a result of discursive praxis rather than either substantial entity having ontological priority over praxis or a self with epistemological priority, an originator of meaning.”¹³¹

In this chapter, I will be discussing the therapeutic method known as the Dialogical Self Theory or DST, which has gained prominence in recent times and has successfully incorporated the idea of narrative identity while also extending and combining the psychological or psychotherapeutic approaches to literary narratives.

5.1 The Dialogical Self Theory

The Dialogical Self Approach (DSA) is a methodology based on the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) used in psychotherapy for coaching, training and counselling which helps the clients in exploring and understanding entirely different sides of themselves, and their important emotions, which not only have different meanings but can also imply conflicts and oppositions. The goal is to build a relation between one's most opposite sides and find a relative balance between them, by understanding the relationship between them. Someone experiencing high levels of stress may discover that in one of the I-positions, she is very ambitious, career-oriented and hardworking, while at another important I-position she wants to leave her job to spend time with her child. The target is to bring such conflicting I-positions in closer contact with each other so that they can cooperate and work in harmony, rather than causing distress.

¹³¹ Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, 1991, pp. 4.

Since the I-positions are not standing in isolation to each other but are able to become engaged in mutual dialogues, hence the name ‘dialogical self.’

Hubert J. M. Hermans is a Dutch psychologist and Emeritus Professor at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, Netherlands and is internationally known as the creator of dialogical self theory and also the founder of the International Institute for the Dialogical Self. The “dialogical self” is the central concept in the Dialogical Self Theory (DST), which waves two concepts, self and dialogue together in such a way that a more profound understanding of the interconnection of self and society is achieved.¹³² Usually, the concept of self refers to something “internal”, while dialogue is typically associated with something “external”. But the composite concept “dialogical self” goes beyond the self-other dichotomy by infusing the external to the internal and in reverse, to introduce the internal into the external. The self here is considered as “extended”, so the other is not simply outside the self but also the imagined other who is entrenched as the other-in-the-self. An important theoretical implication is that processes like self-conflicts, self-criticism, self-agreements and self-consultancy are taking place in the different domains in the self: within the internal domain for example, (“As an enjoyer of life I disagree with myself as an ambitious worker.”); between the internal and external domain (“I want to do this but the voice of my mother in myself criticizes me.”), and within the external domain (“The way my colleagues interact with each other has led me to decide for another job.”). As these examples show, there is not always a sharp separation between the inside of the self and the outside world, but rather a gradual transition. DST assumes that the self as a society of mind is populated by internal and external self-positions; i.e., individuals and groups in society at large are incorporated as positions in the mini-society of the self. As a result of this extension, the self does not only include internal positions (E.g.:

¹³² Hubert J. M. Hermans, et al (eds.), *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory and Psychotherapy: Bridging Psychotherapeutic and Cultural Traditions*, 2018.

I as a son of my mother, I as a teacher, I as a lover of music) but also external positions (E.g.: My father, my pupils, the groups to which I belong). When some positions in the self silence or suppress other positions, monological relationships prevail. When in contrast, positions are recognized and accepted in their differences and alterity (both within and between the internal and external domains of the self), dialogical relationships emerge with the possibility to further develop and renew the self and the other as central parts of the society at large.

5.2 The Impetus for Dialogical Self Theory (DST)

Historically speaking, DST is inspired by two thinkers, in particular, American psychologist William James and Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, both of whom worked in different disciplines and different theoretical traditions; pragmatism and dialogism, respectively. According to William James' view, people and things in the environment belong to the self as far as they are felt as "mine". This means that not only "my mother" belongs to the self but even "my enemy". In this way, James proposed a view in which the self is 'extended' to the environment. This proposal contrast with a Cartesian view of self which is based on a dualistic conception, not only between self and body but also between self and other. With his conception of the extended self, that defined as going beyond the skin, James has paved the way for later theoretical developments in which other people and groups, defined as "mine" are part of a dynamic multi-voiced self. The story-telling self in the view of Bakhtin (1981), also takes a dialogical form. Bakhtin was significantly influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky's literary forms in which the story was not singularly narrated by an author but told by multiple-authors, as each character gave separate accounts of the story. In his analysis of Dostoevsky's character constructions, Bakhtin suggested that each character (or an author) is a plurality of independent voices (which could be another character or conscience, one's inner thoughts or an imagined other) in dialogue, or what he called a "polyphony." Bakhtin characterized the self

as a polyphonic novel, in which the self is not a single entity, one voice or one position, but a multiplicity of each.¹³³

Inspired by the original ideas of William James and Mikhail Bakhtin, Hubert Hermans, Harry Kempen and Rens Van Loon wrote the first psychological publication on the “dialogical self” in which they conceptualized the self in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous “I” positions in the (extended) landscape of the mind. In this conception, the “I” has the possibility to move from one spatial position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time. The “I” fluctuates among different and even opposed positions and has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in processes of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them has a story to tell about their own experiences from their own stance. As different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective “me-s” and mines, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. Particular attention is devoted to the metaphor of the polyphonic novel as proposed by Bakhtin. Instigated by this metaphor, the concept of the dialogical self is developed in which the notion of ‘voice’ is central. It is argued that the dialogical self allows studying not only verbal but also non-verbal aspects of the self and opens the realm of collective voices in society. Finally, it is argued that the dialogical self can be considered as a response to postmodern views of self and society which focus on the problem of emptiness and fragmentation.

According to Hermans, the well-formed narrative identity is like a polyphonic novel that gives full expression to a complex and shifting dialogue among the many voices of the self. Stories that succumb to a single, dominant perspective, no matter how coherent they may

¹³³ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, Michael Holquist (ed.), Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (trans.), 1981.

seem to be, are too simplistic to be true as they fail to reflect lived experience.¹³⁴ Hermans prioritizes the aspect of multiplicity regarding narrative identity and therefore rejects the simplistic view of a univocal self that is consistent. Self-coherence can nevertheless be realized in the multi-vocal dialogue itself. Although different voices or I-positions do assert their separateness and autonomy, they can also work in unison by participating in the same self-defining conversation. According to Hermans, the dialogical self incorporates both centrifugal and centripetal forces that promote separateness and coherence alike. He conceives of the dialogical self as, “a synthesizing activity, that is, as a continuous attempt to make the self a whole, despite the existence of parts that try to maintain or even increase their relative autonomy. The nature and function of this synthesizing activity can best become understood if we discern two antagonistic forces in the self; one centrifugal, another centripetal. The centrifugal force refers to the tendency of the different parts to maintain and increase their autonomy: The lover wants to love, the critic to criticize, the artist to express, the achiever to excel. As long as these characters are involved in their activity, they are not concerned with the strivings and longings of the other characters. Their intentions require a certain degree of autonomy. The centripetal force, however, attempts to bring these tendencies together and to create a field in which the different characters form a community, the synthesizing quality of the Self is indispensable.”¹³⁵

DST is now being applied to a variety of fields such as cultural psychology, psychopathology, experimental social psychology, autobiography, social work, educational psychology, literary sciences, etc. This is a vast area of study and applicative research, in which I am not particularly trained, but I have tried to understand and present its philosophical impetus within the limited scope of my research.

¹³⁴ Hubert J. M. Hermans, “Voicing the Self: From Information Processing to Dialogical Interchange”, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 119, No. 1, p. 42.

¹³⁵ H. J. M. Hermans & H. J. G. Kempen, *The dialogical self: Meaning as movement*, San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1993, pp. 92-93.

CHAPTER 6

NARRATIVE SELF VIEWS VIS-À-VIS COGNITIVE SCIENCES

In this chapter I will give a brief idea of the studies that are being done in the field of cognitive sciences, regarding the neurocognitive model of self, which are yielding positive results by providing the empirical evidence for the narrative self theories. In a way, this is leading towards validation of the claims of the narrativists. I am interested in the philosophical implications of such researches. Since this is an empirical study, done in labs, to which I neither have access nor the training, I will rely heavily upon two main articles to put forward my point: (i) Shaun Gallagher, “Philosophical conceptions of the self: implications for cognitive science”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2000, pp. 14-21. (ii) Erica Cosentino & Francesco Ferretti, “Cognitive Foundations of the Narrative Self”, *Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia e Psicologia*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2015, pp. 311-324. Shaun Gallagher is an American philosopher who works on the area of the philosophy mind, embodied cognition, social cognition, etc. and is presently Professor at the University of Memphis, Tennessee. Erica Cosentino is a post-doctoral fellow working in the areas of Philosophy of mind, language and cognitive science at the Institute of Philosophy at Ruhr-Universität in Bochum, Germany. Francesco Ferretti is Professor at Roma Tre University, Rome, who works in the areas of cognitive linguistics and cognitive neuroscience.

6.1 Role of Narrative Language in the Constitution of Subjectivity

Erica Cosentino and Francesco Ferretti explore the role of language in human cognition from two different approaches: (i) the view that human subjectivity is a by-product of the advent of language, and (ii) the view that there is a relation of coevolution between language and cognition. Cosentino and Ferretti proceed to reject the first view and provides arguments in

favour of the second view, which I will briefly present in this chapter. Self-reflective thought is regarded as one of the basic conditions for the construction of the self and, according to Andy Clark and Daniel Dennett, language plays a crucial role in the construction of the representational structures which are at the foundation of reflective thought. In their views, reflective thought cannot exist without a public and as such external language.¹³⁶ But according to Cosentino and Ferretti, human language would not be possible without a metarepresentational system, which precedes language. They compare and analyse the transition of human language from animal language. Whereas animal languages are easily interpreted through the ‘code model’, it is misleading to even consider it as a model for understanding human language. According to the code model, “the thoughts (i.e., the message) are encoded by the speaker in a succession of sounds that the listener decodes in order to share the thoughts that the speaker has intended to communicate.”¹³⁷ In the case of human language, there are differences between what the speaker says and intends, e.g.: in cases of irony or metaphor. If someone says, “the food is so garlicky that it can keep vampires at bay!” we have to understand whether it was praise or an insult, based on the speaker’s intentions. But it is plausible to assume that the dish was not preferred by that person unless he or she is either a big fan of garlic or vampire stories.

Understanding intentions require the possession of a cognitive system capable of decoding metarepresentational structures. Studies show that autistic individuals struggle to understand metaphorical and ironic expressions. Cosentino and Ferretti claim, “The metarepresentation is a necessary condition for the origin and functioning of language.”¹³⁸ And challenging Dennett’s position, they claim that, “the ability to reflect on past events, which plays such a critical role in his theory, does not depend on language. On the contrary, language

¹³⁶ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 314.

¹³⁷ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 316.

¹³⁸ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 317.

itself relies on pre-existent self-reflection...the ability to relive past events- also known as episodic memory- is just a part of a wider mental faculty which also includes the ability to pre-experience future events. This faculty has been called mental time travel and it plays a crucial role in the constitution of personal identity.”¹³⁹ Cosentino and Ferretti observe that although the relation between memory and personal identity has been a recurrent theme in philosophy, the connection between future-thinking and personal identity have not been explored sufficiently. But there is not much difference between thinking about the future and thinking about the past, as Ulrich Neisser has explicated with the example of a palaeontologist who tries to reconstruct the entire skeleton of a dinosaur while starting with just some of the fragments of the bones. The constructivist nature of memory is also confirmed by common mistakes that we all make, including distortions, illusions and false memories. These do not imply a malfunctioning of the system but rather reveal the functional basis of episodic memory. Episodic memory, as noted by Cosentino and Ferretti, “is constructive because its main function is not to provide an accurate record of the past, but rather to provide elements which can be later used to simulate scenarios that may occur in our future. Since the future is not an exact repetition of the past, effective anticipation has to rely on a system that can extract information from the past and flexibly recombine elements of previous experience within new representations.”¹⁴⁰ Findings from a large number of studies have led to the reconceptualization of a more general capacity of the episodic memory that of mental time travel, designated as MTT.

MTT is believed to play a key role in language as it is involved in the process of grammaticalization, which is essential for verbal communication. The main argument put forward in defence of MTT in language is that language has evolved to communicate about

¹³⁹ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 319.

¹⁴⁰ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 319.

specific events that occurred in a given time at a given place. “In order to fulfil this function, the structure of language has evolved to reflect the structure of thought. At least in part, therefore, the structure of language depends on the formation of a combinatorial system to represent events. Given that MTT gives the representation of events a combinatorial structure, it thus also gives language a combinatorial structure.”¹⁴¹ The two-way relation between language and thought is an asymmetric relation. Language acquisition and evolution rely on a network of cognitive faculties among which MTT plays a pivotal role. However, once a language is acquired, it retroactively affects thought and narrative language immensely contributes in shaping personal identity. “Individuals spend a fifth of their awake time in spontaneous conversations and a significant portion of these conversations concerns past events. The commitment to tell stories is so considerable because those who succeed in eliciting the interest of others are preferred in establishing bonds of solidarity, because they show more informational capacity and experience in facing unexpected events.”¹⁴² Narration does not presuppose the communication of unaltered events; the act of narrating itself affects how one thinks about the narrated events. But there are several constraints in narrating a story, like linguistic constraints and narrative conventionality, to which a narrator must comply in order to produce a good story. However, these constraints have epistemic value, as it provides with an insight into the narrator’s own experience while allowing him or her to reconsider certain aspects in a new light. “...the stories we tell modify and articulate the contents they are about, to the point that narration is not anymore only a mode of communication but becomes a cognitive system in itself.”¹⁴³ Cosentino and Ferretti, therefore highlights the constitutive role of narrative language in personal identity, while maintaining that the origin of the sense of self

¹⁴¹ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 320.

¹⁴² Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 322.

¹⁴³ Cosentino & Ferretti, p. 322.

is not rooted in language itself. But the acquisition of narrative language significantly shapes in shaping personal identity.

6.2 Neurocognitive Models of Narrative Self

Shaun Gallagher, in his paper, mentions that following William James' categorization of self during the end of 19th century, philosophers and psychologists have explored and expanded the concept to quite a number of possible variations (about which we have already talked about in the first chapter, following Galen Strawson and Dan Zahavi). Gallagher focuses on two groups of approaches which are being developed in recent times that promise a greater exchange of ideas between philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences. He talks about the 'minimal self' and the 'narrative self' and defines thus: "**Minimal self:** Phenomenologically, that is, in terms of how one experiences it, a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time. The minimal self almost certainly depends on brain processes and an ecologically embedded body, but one does not have to know or be aware of this to have an experience that still counts as self-experience. **Narrative self:** A more or less coherent self (or self-image) that is constituted with a past and a future in the various stories that we and others tell about ourselves."¹⁴⁴

The narrative approach to self has been imported into the cognitive sciences by Daniel C. Dennett, although he projects the self as a fictional entity and a constructivist posit that helps in anchoring the talks about self, or in other words, the self acts as a narrative gravity, without having any real existence. Gallagher believes that the narrative self views have much more complex significance than Dennett indicates. The narrative self is extended in time to include

¹⁴⁴ Shaun Gallagher, "Philosophical conceptions of the self: implications for cognitive science", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2000, p. 15.

past memories and intentions toward the future and neurophysiological descriptions of episodic memory and its loss can help to account for the neural substrates of the narrative self. Researches in the minimal self views explore two main ideas: (i) that there is a more primitive and embodied sense of self than that involved in the use of the first-person pronoun, e.g.: the experiences of neonates, (ii) the more abstract self-reflective access to the first-person experience which finds applications in AI of robotics.

The minimal sense of self, however, does not provide us with a view of the self that aligns with our common-sense conceptions of who we are. We do think and speak of ourselves as entities extended in time; we have memories of the past, we plan for the future, we acknowledge the continuity between our past and our future, and we as selves with individual identity also encompass a continuous experience. “What is the nature of this sense of a continuous self? Is it carried by a succession of momentary minimal selves that are tied together by real connections? Or are momentary minimal selves simply abstractions from a more substantial continuity that is the more genuine self?”¹⁴⁵ The responses to these questions are overwhelming in the philosophical literature. Contemporary neuroscience infers that neurological processing is mostly distributed across various brain regions and it cannot be said that there is a real, neurological centre of experience. This principle of organization holds true throughout living nature, but not sufficient in explaining the coherent continuity over time, that is the crux of human experience. What sets apart humans from other animals is that we have language which makes our experience relatively coherent over extended periods. “We use words to tell stories, and in these stories, we create what we call our selves. We extend our biological boundaries to encompass a life of meaningful experience.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Gallagher, 2000, p. 15

¹⁴⁶ Gallagher, 2000, p.19.

The idea of a narrative self-constitution finds confirmation in psychology and neuroscience. In the realm of psychology, Ulrich Neisser's concepts of the extended and the conceptual self that was explained in terms of memory has been expanded considering the role of narrative and language in shaping our own self-concept. In the domain of neuroscience, Michael Gazzaniga, based on his studies of split-brain patients, has suggested that one of the functions of the left hemisphere of the brain is to generate narratives, which he calls as the 'interpreter'. "In Gazzaniga's model, the interpreter weaves together autobiographical fact and inventive fiction to produce a personal narrative that enables the sense of a continuous self."¹⁴⁷ In this regard, the self in the pathological cases at least, cannot be said to be a fiction, because the normal functioning of the interpreter tries to make sense of what is actually happening to the person. A necessary condition for the non-fictional aspects of a narrative self is the proper working of the episodic memory, which depends on a fronto-limbic system that includes the anterior poles of the frontal and temporal lobes, and elements of the limbic formation.¹⁴⁸ This system is involved in providing a sense of time. A study showed that a young boy who was diagnosed with congenital damage to the right hemisphere and frontal cortex, suffered from profound episodic amnesia because he lacked the ability to quantify the passage of time or understand the meaning of temporal units. He was, therefore, unable to formulate certain essential structures of narrative, like, sequence and the demarcations of beginning and end.¹⁴⁹

Gallagher tells us that there is a general consensus among a diverse group of contemporary cognitive scientists working on the constitution of narrative self and even within philosophy across the analytic and continental divide, which is both surprising and promising. What Dennett, Neisser, Gazzaniga or Pribam have to say about the narrative self, can be found

¹⁴⁷ Gallagher, 2000, p. 19.

¹⁴⁸ K.H. Pribram, "Brain and the composition of conscious experience", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 6, pp. 19-42. (Found in Gallagher, 2000, p. 20).

¹⁴⁹ Gallagher, 2000, p. 20.

in the discussions of some earlier continental philosophers, the most prominent among them being Paul Ricoeur. “Ricoeur carefully explored these issues in depth, and reached conclusions that are not inconsistent with the view outlined in the cognitive science...In contrast to Dennett, however, Ricoeur conceives of the narrative self, not as an abstract point at the intersection of various narratives, but as something richer, more substantial and concrete. Ricoeur insists that, importantly, one’s own self narrative is always entangled in the narrative of others.”¹⁵⁰ Gallagher extends Ricoeur’s model by suggesting that, “the self is the sum total of its narratives, and includes within itself all of the equivocations, contradictions, struggles and hidden messages that find expression in personal life.”¹⁵¹ While Dennett views self as the centre of narrative gravity, the extended view proposed by Gallagher is decentred, distributed and multiplex. (Fig. 1 below).

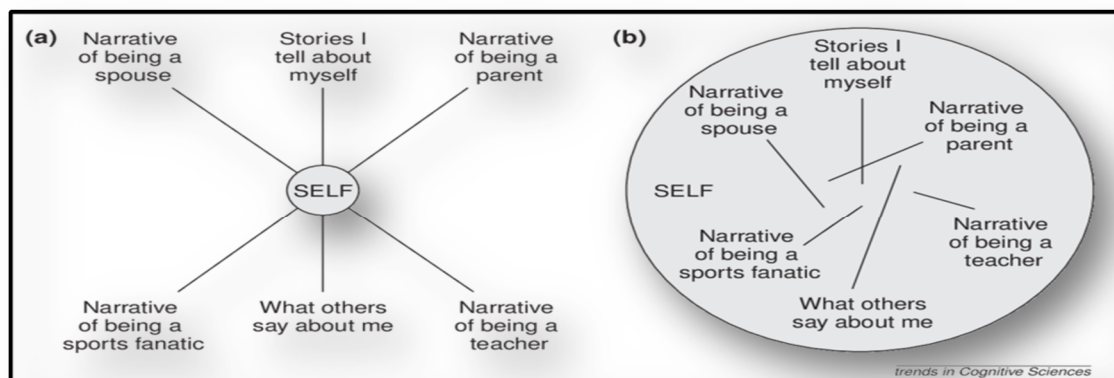


Fig. 1: Two Models of the narrative self. (a) Center of narrative gravity. In this model (formulated by Dennett), the self is defined as an abstract ‘center of narrative gravity’, where the various stories told about the person, by himself and others, meet. **(b)** An extended and more distributed model of the narrative self, less unified than the one proposed by Ricoeur, but importantly distinct from Dennett’s model in that the self is not an abstract ‘center’, but rather, an extended self which is decentred and distributed.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Gallagher, 2000, p. 20.

¹⁵¹ Gallagher, 2000, p. 20.

¹⁵² Gallagher, 2000, p. 19.

At a psychological level also, there is an explanatory advantage as the extended self can account for conflict, moral indecision and self-deception that would be difficult to express in terms of an abstract point of intersection. Gallagher is hopeful that, “By extending the ideas of a narrative self, we are perhaps coming closer to a concept of the self that can account for the findings of the cognitive sciences and neurosciences, as well as our own experience of what it is to be a continuous phenomenological self...collaborative efforts between philosophers and scientists promise to open up more subtle and sophisticated avenues of research, which will define more fully the concept of the self”¹⁵³

The positive results derived from researches in cognitive science promises us a better and greater understanding of the self and demystify it for the good. Although these researches are in their nascent stages, but with technological advancements, we can hope for a better construal of the self.

¹⁵³ Gallagher, 2000, p. 20.

PART III

REVIEWING

EXPLANATORY ADVANTAGES

CHAPTER 7

OBJECTIONS & REPLIES

This is the penultimate chapter of my thesis where I will discuss some of the very pertinent objections that have been raised against the theories of narrative identity and ethical narrativity, before moving on to the conclusions. The objections come mainly from the phenomenologists who claim for a minimal experiential self, and from theorists who are against the postmodern construal of a constructivist self. So, the narrative account, however promising, is not free from objections and difficulties. Narratives or stories are not mere records or annals, they are also essentially constructive, incorporating thereby, deletions, abridgements and reordering. A storyteller is more likely to impose more coherence, integrity, fullness and closure on the life-events than what actually happened when they were simply experienced. The immediate concern, therefore, is, to what extent one can talk about the truth or falsity of self-narratives. Can someone be mistaken in thinking who he or she is? In fact for some people, story-telling might serve to compensate for the lack of a fragile self-identity. Given that our self-narratives are fallible, the question that arises is: what are the constraints that the self-narratives should follow? This leads to the controversy whether one commits to the realist or fictionalist take on the self. Some defenders of the narrative approaches to selfhood have argued that the self is nothing but a fictional centre of narrative gravity. It is merely the abstract point where various stories interact. While others have claimed that the narrative self has reality in so far as it is a real social construction. It has also been argued that there are obvious differences between fictional narratives and real-life ones. In life we have to take things as they come, we are in the middle of events and are denied the authoritative retrospective point of view of the story-teller or the historian.

7.1 The Limits of Narrative Understanding: Dan Zahavi

Danish philosopher Dan Zahavi, currently Professor of Philosophy at University of Copenhagen and University of Oxford, is one of the contemporary proponents of the phenomenological approaches to selfhood and the main critic of the narrative view of self, is not entirely intolerant to the idea that narratives are a central means by which we come to know ourselves and others. Rather he thinks that such stories reflect how we view ourselves and also that these stories shape our self-understanding. So he would agree so far in conceding that narratives play an important role in the constitution of a certain dimension or aspect of selfhood. However, he opposes that the self is a narratively constructed entity and that every access to the self and others are mediated by narratives.

The crucial point underlying the views of the phenomenologists, as Zahavi highlights, is that an understanding of what it means to be a self is intricately related to the examination of the structure of experience and vice-versa. The self is an integral part of conscious life and its structures. Self-experience is simply taken to be a question of having first-person access to one's own consciousness. Most people subscribe to the view that there is something 'it is like' for a subject to undergo a conscious experience; to have the blues or to taste tamarind for example. Therefore, the subject must in some way, have access to and be acquainted with the experience. Moreover, although conscious experience differs from one another, what it is like to smell crushed basil leaves is different to see the full moon, although they share certain features, i.e., the quality of mineness.

Zahavi challenges one of the popular views of the self which holds that the self is a narrative construction. On this account, looking closely at the stories that others and I tell of myself will provide cues to understanding the self. Because who I am, is constituted by these stories. However, Zahavi thinks that this way of looking at the self limits our understanding of

the self. He contends that we need to work with a more fundamental and primitive notion of the self; the experiential self to be specific, which, however, cannot be grasped by the narrativist model. Moreover, Zahavi points out that the narrative approach misses a crucial dimension of what it means to be the other.

Zahavi makes a fundamentally significant distinction between merely being conscious or sentient and being a self at the outset. Being a self is not just a given but an achievement to be accomplished, through narrative self-interpretation. There is nothing more to the question of who I am, over and above how I understand and interpret myself. This interpretation consists in weaving stories of one's own lives, organizing their experiences and actions according to narrative structures and thereby situating them in the context of a unifying story. This is precisely what constitutes them as selves. We get to know about ourselves and others by learning the life stories of mine and others respectively. The emphasis on narratives to understand self is not merely an epistemological thesis but a metaphysical standpoint as well. As Zahavi puts it, "the reason why narratives constitute a privileged way to obtain knowledge about the self is precisely because they constitute it."¹⁵⁴

Now since we are talking of the self as a narrative structure, it is also important in this context to mention that the claim is not that selfhood requires the actual composition of an autobiography, which is the literary expression of the narrative self-interpretation. It is crucial to distinguish between the narratives that characterize our ongoing life from consciously edited narratives. In order that my self-interpretation is counted as a narrative, the different phases of my life should be understood in terms of an evolving character within an unfolding story.

¹⁵⁴ Dan Zahavi, "Self and Other: The Limits of Narrative Understanding", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Vol. 60, 2007, p. 180.

The narrative account explicitly emphasizes both the temporal and social dimension of selfhood. Narration is a social process that starts in early childhood and operates throughout our entire life. Who one is, depends on the values, ideals and goals one has, which again is shaped by the community to which one belongs. So when I interpret myself in terms of a life story, I am not the sole author of that story though I might both be the narrator and the protagonist. Others have always a role to play in moulding my decisions and choices, influencing how the story takes shape. As Alasdair MacIntyre says, “the story of any individual life is not only interwoven with the stories of others (parents, siblings, friends, etc.), it is also embedded in a larger historical and communal meaning-giving structure.”¹⁵⁵

Zahavi expresses his doubt by raising three questions:

- i. Can the narrative model of the self capture the sense of what it means to be a self in its fullness and entirety?
- ii. Is it legitimate to reduce our selfhood to that which can be narrated?
- iii. Is it possible to resist factionalism as long as the self is nothing but a narrative construction?¹⁵⁶

Zahavi is not entirely intolerant to the idea that narratives are a central means by which we come to know ourselves and others. Rather he thinks that such stories reflect how we view ourselves and also that these stories shape our self-understanding. So he would agree so far in conceding that narratives play an important role in the constitution of a certain dimension or aspect of selfhood. However, he opposes that the self is a narratively constructed entity and that every access to the self and others are mediated by narratives.

¹⁵⁵ MacIntyre, 1984, p. 221.

¹⁵⁶ Zahavi, 2007, p. 184.

Zahavi thinks that there are multiple aspects in which the self can be dealt with. He thereby moves on to argue that we need to operate with a different dimension or level of selfhood than the one dealt by the narrative account. Zahavi takes cues from various other philosophers such as Thomas Metzinger, Damasio, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Michel Henry. Damasio has claimed that a sense of self is an indispensable part of the conscious mind. Whenever one is engaging himself in mental activity, say, for example, reading a book, one could automatically sense that the thoughts formed in his mind are his only and not anyone else's. This presence of self pervades our conscious life. Damasio distinguishes between core consciousness which is simple and foundational and extended consciousness which is more complex. The sense of self that emerges in core consciousness is core self and that the more elaborate sense of self provided by extended consciousness is called the autobiographical self. Metzinger¹⁵⁷ has also argued for a close link between selfhood, self-experience and the first-person perspective. When Sartre speaks of self, he refers to something very basic, which characterizes phenomenal consciousness. For him pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is always affected by itself and it has no meaning independently of this self-givenness. Husserl believes that consciousness exists as a stream and it appears to itself as a stream. In Husserl, one finds a consistent investigation into the relationship between selfhood, experiential self-givenness and temporality. Michel Henry has repeatedly characterized selfhood in terms of an interior self-affection. The most basic sense of self is the one constituted by the very self-givenness of experience.

The crucial point underlying the views of all these phenomenologists, as Zahavi highlights, is that an understanding of what it means to be a self is intricately related to the examination of the structure of experience and vice-versa. The self is an integral part of

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, 2003.

conscious life and its structures. Self-experience is simply taken to be a question of having first-person access to one's own consciousness. Most people subscribe to the view that there is something 'it is like' for a subject to undergo a conscious experience; to have the blues or to taste tamarind for example. Therefore, the subject must in some way, have access to and be acquainted with the experience. Moreover, although conscious experience differs from one another, what it is like to smell crushed basil leaves is different to see the full moon, although they share certain features, i.e., the quality of mineness. As Zahavi puts it, "experiences are not merely characterized by the fact that they necessarily exist for a subject or a self; they necessarily feel like something for somebody."¹⁵⁸ The self is conceived as the invariant dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences. The first-personal givenness of experiences consequently entails a primitive form of self-reference. If the experience is given in the first-personal mode of presentation, it is experienced as my experience, otherwise not. The self-experience, again, is the self-experience of a world-immersed self. The phenomenological notion of a minimal experiential core self is not something like the Cartesian mental residuum. On the contrary, the phenomenological notion of self is fully compatible with a strong emphasis on fundamental intentionality, or being-in-the-world of consciousness.

Zahavi inquires whether the self is a narrative construction and are narratives the primary access to the self. His view is that the experiential core self is an integral part of the structure of phenomenal consciousness and it must be regarded as a pre-linguistic presupposition for any narrative practice. Because only a being which enjoys a first-person perspective could consider her own aims and ideals as his or her own and can form stories about them. However, in order to articulate one's first-person perspective linguistically, one

¹⁵⁸ Zahavi, 2007, p. 189.

needs mastery of the first-person pronoun. Taking cues from Alzheimer's disease, narrativists such as Jerome Bruner have argued that there would be nothing like selfhood if one lacks narrative capacities, a condition that is known as dynarrativia. But even though Alzheimer's affect one's narrative capacities, it cannot be said that the disease brings about a complete destruction of the first-person perspective. It cannot be rightly said that an Alzheimer's patient does not feel pain or discomfort as his or her own. From this, Zahavi concludes that there is more to the concept of self than is grasped by the narrative account.

Zahavi suggests making a distinction between a minimal experiential self and an extended narrative self. His contention is that while talking about the experiential self, the term 'self' can be retained since we are dealing with a primitive form of self-givenness or self-referentiality. But what we get in a narrative construction should better be called 'person', and not a self. What the narrative account grasps is the nature of one's personality that evolves through time and is shaped by his values, convictions and decisions. By this distinction, it is clear that the person presupposes the experiential self. However, the concept of person is not undermined by the experiential self because one's individuality is manifested more predominantly in his personal history, values, decisions, convictions, and also makes one stand apart from others. The concept of the person also presupposes a social dimension where others influence our growth. But the notion of an experiential self plays a foundational role and has importance in empirical sciences.

7.2 Against Ethical Narrativity: Galen Strawson

The stronger claims of narrative identity that try to promote or prescribe narrativity as a means to ethical flourishing and becoming a morally significant person are met with serious objections, the forerunner among them being Galen Strawson, British analytic philosopher and

literary critic who has been a Professor at the Oxford University. In his article, “Against Narrativity”¹⁵⁹ Strawson vehemently opposes the ethical narrativity thesis put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre and others. The ethical narrativity thesis prescribes that humans should be narrative in order to be ethical. Life should not be compartmentalized into the different roles that we play but should be planned and lived holistically, like a novel, having a beginning, middle and end. Strawson rejects both the descriptive and prescriptive claims of the ethical narrativists and shows instead that there can be a range of possibilities for temporal self-experience. Humans can be Episodics, Diachronics, non-Narratives and Narratives, each of whom enjoys distinct modes of self-experience and they should be allowed to do so and not be labelled as unethical beings. Not everyone tends to experience or live or see his or her life in a storied way, and none of these types can have a claim to ethical superiority. The fact that modes of human experiences vary, prove that the narrative thesis is false. According to him, “it is false that all human beings naturally see their lives in narrative terms, and false that they ought to do so. Successful psychotherapy should not be thought to require the elaboration of a narrative of one’s life. Those who do conceive their lives in narrative terms run a considerable risk of falsifying the facts, in a way that is unlikely to be conducive to their flourishing.”¹⁶⁰

7.3 We Are Not Stories: Samantha Vice

According to Samantha Vice, who is a Professor of Philosophy at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, narrative is the lens through which our lives are experienced; experience is essentially narrative in form. Narrative form is not just an essential condition of

¹⁵⁹ Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity”, *Ratio* (new series), Vol. 17, 2004, pp. 428-452.

¹⁶⁰ Galen Strawson, “Narrativity and non-Narrativity”, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, Vol. 1, p. 779.

experiencing the world, but also of understanding our selves. Vice first explores the normative claims made by the narrative views of self: why should we think of ourselves and our experience in a narrative way if we do not already and what are the consequences of self-consciously and deliberately doing so? In its stronger sense, we just are the narrative we tell or could tell about ourselves and our experiences just are inescapably narrative in structure. Essential to the concept of narrative is that it shows connections between its constitutive elements and traces continuities and changes through time. The traditional view of narrative or story is that it has a trajectory that follows time's arrow; it seeks coherence and significance. This experience of our lives and selves need not be articulated or conscious: we may not know it or experience it as such, but our selves are narrative in form and we do experience life as a narrative.

The narrative view of self is appealing in many respects because it makes sense of some deeply intuitive responses to living and our experience of being a self. It is tempting to think that so pervasive are stories that it is natural and fitting that our selves and our experiences should be understood in their terms. Vice suggests that if the narrative view is to be distinctive, these claims that we really are characters playing out certain roles in stories must be taken as seriously as possible. The claim could come down to saying that we should think of our lives as unified, that the self, in order to be psychologically healthy and ethically aware, should attempt to categorise itself and its experiences in narrative terms: form-imposing, unifying, etc. Vice argues that we learn from literature itself, from the great stories of our cultures, that self and life are not a narrative.¹⁶¹

Vice's first claim is that, if we really do try to think of ourselves as characters, we run the risk of too consciously "moulding" or "fashioning" our characters and decisions in a way

¹⁶¹ Samantha Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self", *Philosophy*, Vol. 78, No. 303, 2013, pp. 93-108.

that is not always conducive to real virtue or authenticity. In order to turn their astute lives into art, they forget that others are not objects in their dealings with themselves and with others.

To the greatest extent, it seems that we seek significance in moments of crisis or confusion when we turn to a psychologist, a stranger who knows nothing about us and whose job is to find underlying patterns that will help us to make sense of ourselves in the direction of our lives. We also look for significance when we reach moments of reflection about our lives as a whole; when we question their meaning and development and ask whether they reflect what we think is really important. Self-knowledge involves precisely seeing that we are not characters in stories. Our lives are messier and greater than stories, and great stories transcend themselves.

Only really in this last case we are “narrativising” events, but this does not entail that we lived the episode as a story at the time it occurred; if we did, spontaneity would disappear. Most of the time, however, we just live. Some live more reflectively but that does not necessarily mean they live concomitantly more narratively.¹⁶²

7.4 Replies

I believe that the objections raised by Dan Zahavi and Galen Strawson are extremely pertinent and that the narrativists must answer these objections to put forth an undisputed view of self. However, I feel that these objections are not a full-blooded rejection of the narrative self-views. Dan Zahavi does not admit the self as a construct, in so far as the claim is metaphysical. But on an epistemological level, we have no other choice of knowing the self and others without narratives and interpretations. As for Galen Strawson, he might not be fond of a prescriptive or

¹⁶² Vice, 2013, p. 105.

normative view of the self as proposed by MacIntyre. Strawson sets his own example and makes a distinction between the notions of diachronic and synchronic experiences. But rejecting MacIntyre's views does not entail a rejection of a constructive self. I might not like the doctor's prescription, his medicines or approach towards treatment, but that does not falsify the doctor's position. One might not like the rainy season, but that does not deny its existence. Zahavi's claim for a minimal self is relevant and I think that there should be a way to account for the phenomenon of mineness to be dealt with by the narrativists. In fact, recent works are being done to explore the possibilities of a hybrid view of self that can account for both experientiality and narrativity.

7.5 The Possibility of a Hybrid View of Self

I have been wondering whether there can be a theory which can accommodate both the concepts of minimal self and narrative self; is it possible to incorporate our expectations of experientiality and narrativity into a hybrid or holistic view of the self. Luckily for me, this probability is already being tested in recent times, especially by Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher. In the contemporary phenomenological literature, it is being said that it is possible to distinguish between two forms of selfhood, namely the minimal self and the narrative self. The minimal self is intrinsic to any phenomenally conscious state. Following Zahavi and Gallagher, Anna Bortolan notes, "it is impossible to undergo any sort of experience without being simultaneously aware that the experience belongs to us, as there is a "sense of mineness," a primitive form of self-reference, inherent to any form of consciousness. The self at issue here is not given as an object, but rather as a subject of experience."¹⁶³ The narrative self, on the

¹⁶³ Anna Bortolan, "Affectivity and the distinction between minimal and narrative self", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 2019, p. 68.

other hand, “is viewed as a self which possesses an “individual identity” and history, and is constituted through the engagement in a variety of personal and interpersonal forms of narrative activity...cardinal to the narrative self is the ability to reflectively endorse certain experiences and values, and to integrate them in a coherent self-conception.”¹⁶⁴

The minimal self does not give us the entire picture of selfhood, because we think of ourselves as more than mere subjects of experience. The richness of human lives is captured rather beautifully and is best accounted for through the concept of the narrative self. Narrative self views acknowledge the historical structure of selfhood and considers it to be ever evolving, as opposed to being a static entity. A fundamental aspect of this development consists in the internalization of specific values, beliefs and plans, which constitute the narrative self’s individual “identity” or “personality”. Gallagher and Zahavi consider the narrative self as a “self with a “story” and a “personal character”, while the minimal self is associated only with a “formal kind of individuation”.¹⁶⁵ Therefore they suggest, “When dealing with the experiential self, one might retain the term “self” since we are dealing precisely with a primitive form of self-experience or self-referentiality. By contrast, it may be helpful to speak not of the self, but of the *person* as a narrative construction.”¹⁶⁶ The narrative account, as we have discussed so far, addresses the nature of one’s personal characters or personality that evolves through time and is shaped by one’s moral values, decisions and actions. Zahavi proposes a multidimensional account of selfhood that incorporates both the minimal and the narrative self, as these two are not separate entities, but are complementary and coexist. Although I believe that this relation is not one of symmetry, for the minimal self does not necessarily coexist with narrative self. Think of people in the autism spectrum or those with brain damages, amnesia,

¹⁶⁴ Bortolan, 2019, p. 68.

¹⁶⁵ Bortolan, 2019, p. 70.

¹⁶⁶ Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012, p. 228.

dementia, Alzheimer's. In most of these cases, the narrative self is lost but one continues to feel or experience.

It is a very captivating and intellectually stimulating question whether the narrative self alone can account for both our experiences and identities or do we need a multidimensional aspect of self to capture it in its richness and entirety. In the next and the final chapter I will be offering some of my concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I remember having read the Bengali short story *Class friend* by Satyajit Ray in school. It was a simple story but with a bitter-sweet ending that etched an impression on me. Two childhood best friends meet after decades, one affluent and successful while the other sickly and worn out from all the struggles that he encountered in life. He came to his rich friends' house in order to seek some financial aid for his son's studies, which he could no longer afford. He was not received well and was met with contempt, as he was unrecognizable from his dishevelled appearance, and of course, his plea was not entertained. The other friend was suspicious about this guy's identity as he could only remember him as a bright and handsome boy from school with a seemingly promising future. The man that was now in front of him seemed like an imposter who is trying to earn money by fraudulence. Although the impoverished man did recollect some shared memories of school, he did not sound convincing to the other person. However, when a few days later he sent his son, his friend immediately recognized his class friend from the striking semblance that the boy had with his friend when he was young. So looking at his friend's son, whom he had never seen before but who had the same demeanour as his father, the man was able to connect the past, present and the future and felt the urgency to help this boy. When I now remember the story in retrospect, I wonder what theory of personal identity would fit into the explanation of this kind of remembering or recognizing. It is a fictional story, but not an improbable one and chances are that we might have had encountered similar experiences where we were not able to identify a known person from either their appearance or shared memories. Memories do fail us. But while researching the narrative identity thesis, I have come to believe that this story might be seen as an example of how we are one of the many authors of our life stories. We might be the protagonist but my story is connected to the larger scheme of events and is intertwined with the stories of our

significant others, who somehow share their lives with us. Isolating us from the bigger picture can lead to meaninglessness and a loss of contextuality.

8.1 Reviewing Explanatory Advantages of Narrative Identity

The narrative views of self and identity are intuitive and extravagant at the same time. Hopefully, I have been able to present the broader spectrum and the richness of the narrative self views through my humble yet sincere attempt. I have come to believe that this view holds greater promise of understanding the self and is better suited to give an account of personal identity. 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 onto the narratives that we and others tell about ourselves. The constructivist views, therefore, are not speculative in nature, but something experiential and has more commonsensical appeal. Since these views appreciate the embodiment, dynamicity, growth, changeability, experientiality, and the relational aspects of the self, they have more accountability in explaining different problems relating to the self and mind. The narrative self-views also have applicative advantages. I have discussed in previous chapters how this view of self is being successfully used in different psychotherapeutic practices and is also yielding positive results in researches in the cognitive sciences. Narrative self views have opened up avenues for empirical research and ushered in cross-disciplinary research trends that are approaching the problem simultaneously from different aspects, equipped with the respective skills of the concerned disciplines. We are probably more equipped than ever at understanding the self and this optimism is infectious. Finally, I would like to state the pandemic as an argument in defence of the narrative self views. It was not the original plan but the pandemic

just happened, forcing me to delve deeper into the questions of the dynamicity and vulnerability of our selves.

8.2 A Global Pandemic & Our Changing Life-Narratives

It feels unreal that we have lived through the pandemic and that I am writing about my experiences of it. The danger is still looming but we have somehow learnt to live with our fears. The journey has not been easy for anyone of us, stuck amidst the emotionally and physically paralyzing pandemic that has gripped the entire world for the past ten months. Nothing that we ever read, heard or experienced has prepared us for this day. However, frankly speaking, we cannot deny that we were having premonitions of a near-future apocalypse in the face of global warming, climatic changes, water crisis, and endangerment of biodiversity including terrestrial, marine and aquatic ecosystems. Anticipating such an uninhabitable Earth, some scientists are optimistically working on the idea of building colonies in Mars. But never did we realize that we will be the one living in the worst science-fiction-like scenario. As Albert Camus wrote, “Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.”¹⁶⁷ 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”.

¹⁶⁷ Albert Camus, *The Plague*. Stuart Gilbert (trans.), 1948.

I want to explore both the negatives and the positives that the global crisis is teaching us or revealing to us, rather what we have been able to learn from it and whether in the process our selves are changing or evolving. In other words, I want to propose that the pandemic situation might be considered as a strong case for arguing for the narrative views of self.

8.3 The Background Story & the Point of Concern

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was officially brought to our knowledge during January 2020. But we could not foresee the impending doom yet; we were casual, complacent and ignorant until it hit home. For the first time, the world was united in its miseries; all are one in the eyes of the virus. We started fighting an invisible force, a microscopic organism that took lives mercilessly, voraciously. Everyday data started pouring in about the total number of infected people and the dead, as well as regarding precautions, preventions, prospective cures and projected failures. Nations went into lockdowns, borders sealed, flights and trains cancelled, movements restricted. All these looked so unreal that some people (mostly “influencers” on social media) even called this panic “fake” and put out conspiracy theories. Many people refused to wear masks or to abide by safety protocols. But on a serious note, the pandemic is posing a threat to humanity and civilization itself. It has hit us all badly in some way or the other, both individually and collectively. Millions have lost the battle; thousands have faced irreparable damages, many are fiercely fighting it while others are trying to adjust to the neo-normal. **“Globally, as of 10:33 am CEST, 17 October 2020, there have been 39,023,292 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 1,099,586 deaths, reported to WHO.”¹ “In India, from 3 Jan to 10:33 am CEST, 17 October 2020, there have been 7,432,680 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 112,998 deaths.”¹** No proven cure or vaccine has yet been discovered, although the race

is on. Thousands of laboratories and pharmaceutical companies are researching on a prospective cure and human trial of proposed vaccines has also begun. Although, according to experts, we have to learn to live with it, as a cure is not in sight or might even not be possible ever, just like the HIV that causes AIDS.

The pandemic has triggered our vulnerabilities, exposed our fragilities and has thrown us in a state of shock and despair, and sometimes even denial. As I am very closely linked to mental health professionals, I can confirm that the risk and uncertainty embedded in the current scenario have evoked mental health and well-being challenges to everyone; there are growing cases of domestic violence, of violence against women and children, of strained relationships, of divorces and depression and suicides to name a few. On the physical and physiological level also, the situation is grim. Health sectors are under tremendous pressure to cater to the Corona patients and contain the spread, so much so that other lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and obesity, and the treatment of terminally ill patients have taken a backseat. Also paediatric and geriatric care is suffering immensely. There has been a burn-out of doctors and health-care professionals who are losing their lives while in service, along with other front-line workers like the police, armed forces and the cleaning staffs. What I have said so far is a fact known to all; this information is available in the public domain but my real concern is something else.

The question that concerns me the most is whether our view of the self has also changed with the changing times. There has been a change in mass consciousness, in views of morality, religion and the world during any significant catastrophic events and revolutions in history, such as wars like the French revolution (1789), the First War of Independence or the Revolt of 1857 in India, the 1st and 2nd World Wars (1913, 1939), the Holocaust (1941-1945), the nuclear bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945), the Partition of India (1947), epidemics like the Spanish Flu (1918) or the Plague that recurred many times in history throughout the world, natural calamities like the volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in Pompeii (79AD), the

Tsunami of 2004, man-made accidents or disasters such as the Bhopal Gas Tragedy (1984), the Chernobyl Meltdown (1986), etc. The burning question that crosses my mind is whether the self remains unchanged and unscathed through these cataclysms. I propose that since the self is a narrative construct, which in turn is rooted in the society, any major changes to our surroundings or environment is bound to impact our “selves” as we know them.

8.4 Narrations from Personal Experience

I would like to share some experiences that I had during the past ten months of the pandemic, which urges me to strongly think that our selves are indeed narrative constructs and the society shapes or constructs those stories to a large extent. Who we are and how we see ourselves, depends on our aims, goals, values in life, which in turn are shaped by our significant others: the family, friends, teachers, the community that we belong to and also our socio-political-economic conditions, among other things. The history and even mythologies that are communicated as part of oral traditions in society have strong influences on an individual’s aspirations. These act as markers of virtue and vice, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, coveted and hated. We are not always consciously making choices based on our societal guidelines; I do not even wish to suggest that, but even when we try to break out of the norms, we rebel or we are seen as outcasts, we know what narratives we have chosen for ourselves.

— Example 1: (*Of the Unrealized Academic Dreams*)

A bright young fellow who works at my sister’s office and whom I know had a tough time juggling his office assignments and academic ambitions. He was literally burning the midnight lamp to crack the GRE and enrol for his MS degree at some University in the USA. He didn’t

want to be in the job anymore and wanted to pursue higher education, which would have given him greater self-esteem and probably more regards from his peers and family, as he believed. He did clear the exam and got the fellowship, the offer letter and his farewell party was also being planned, but the pandemic happened, and life as we know it had changed for all of us and him as well. To quote from Donald E. Polkinghorne, “In life we are engaged in many projects at once, not all of which interlock into large projects. These often interfere with one another. For example, my involvement in a tennis match is separate from my writing of an article. Of course, if I break a finger playing tennis, then that event will be configured into the story of my attempt to type the article.”¹⁶⁸

— *Example 2 (Of the Vegetable Seller & the Fish Vendor)*

During the initial stages of the lockdown, it was extremely difficult to procure the daily essentials. Thankfully, after a few days, we could spot some vendors in our locality that would bring vegetables, fruits and fish. But there was something amateurish about their dealings that would tell you they are new to this job. During further interactions, I came to know that one of them had put up a photocopy and mobile recharge shop with a lot of effort, in the vicinity of a nearby Engineering College. He had dreamt of climbing up the socio-economic strata and enrolled his daughter in a good school as he wanted to give her a better chance at education, which he was deprived of. But even before the shop started rolling properly, educational institutes were closed down and all students of the college went back home to their native places. So this man had to find something to feed his family and selling vegetables seemed the only viable option for him.

¹⁶⁸ Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 146.

— *Example 3 (Of the Dilemma of being a Teacher of Philosophy)*

When the nation-wide lockdown was declared and educational institutes were closed down indefinitely during the end of March, I had a sense of panic, anxiety, anticipation, uncertainty, as everyone else did. Being forced to stay at home was extremely difficult but when the unlocking phase started, going out also became difficult due to the conditioning of fear and the threat of contracting the disease. Strangely enough, I felt relieved that I can continue taking classes online and participate in webinars, from the comforts and safety of my home. In other words, I have a better chance of surviving the pandemic than those whose jobs demand that they go out of their homes. But soon this reassurance waned away into embarrassment. I have friends who are doctors and are fighting the battle head-on, risking their own lives and the lives of their family, working tirelessly without break or leave. I had an implicit pride in being a teacher but now I was questioning my contribution towards the society in these pressing times. Even the prisoners were making masks and PPE kits, what am I doing? To escalate this agony, I wondered how Philosophy as a discipline can contribute to this fight. The feeling of worthlessness was unbearable until I reminded myself that Philosophy never promised handy solutions to harsh problems of reality, but it teaches us to raise pertinent questions, critically analyse problems, form logical arguments and make sense of reality. This is the time to ask what is truly important in life, who we are and what we want to become, this is the time to review the existential questions regarding life and death, of the greater purpose of our existence. I did not have definite answers but only more questions. Jean-Paul Sartre had once said, “Life begins on the other side of despair.” I keep saying to my students that it will all be over and we would come out of this as more evolved beings.

— *Example 4 (Of the Kindness of the Neighbours)*

During the lockdown, I was stuck at a place around two hundred kilometres away from my home, at a rented place close to where I teach. I was all alone and there was no way of going back to the safety of my own home or of living with my family during these testing times. I barely knew anyone around because I never tried to break the ice or make friends and acquaintances in my compound. Each day I would go to University and come back and engage in my studies and household chores. I am not very enthusiastic about social interactions and gatherings beyond my known academic sphere, so I never bothered to know my neighbours. I would rush back to home during weekends or holidays. So it left very little scope to explore the people and their way of life around me here. The pandemic brought an air of suspicion among people. Nobody wanted to go out or let anyone in their house; anyone could be an asymptomatic carrier. House-helpers were dismissed and other service providers were either discontinued or allowed only outside the gates of the compound. Strangely and thankfully for me, some neighbours took notice of my situation and came forward to help me get through this difficult phase. They provided me with a strong support system and checked on me now and then to ask whether I need something, and I felt at home. This was a big revelation to me that how people connect in times of crisis and can bond so well over losses, overcoming selfish goals. The pandemic made me question my self-sufficiency, realise my vulnerabilities and limitations, made me more accepting of people who might not be like-minded, re-think my place in nature and made me more grateful towards the society.

8.5 Connecting the Dots

The few examples that I placed from my own experience will surely ring true to many people. You might have had similar experiences or have heard about similar stories happening to others

you know. We have read from newspapers, seen on televisions the plight of people from all spheres of the society: doctors, health-care professionals, the police, government officials, bankers, businessmen, daily wage earners, migrant workers, small vendors, professionals working at countries away from home and students studying abroad. There is hardly anyone who is not affected by the pandemic directly or indirectly. Social bonds were challenged by social and physical distancing, and in extreme cases, Corona patients and their families were ostracized. Healthcare, economy, business, education, agriculture, international relations, every sector received a big blow which will take a long time to heal. Academic pursuits were thwarted, job offers were cancelled, and marriages postponed or called off; important events in life had to be rescheduled or reconsidered. Even animals on the streets suffered because there was no one to feed them, animals in the zoo suffered as no revenues were generated from selling tickets. The pandemic came roaring like a wave, threatening to wash us all, one by one. In a few months after the Corona spread its poisonous tentacles far and wide, I knew of people who have succumbed to it and everyone had stories to tell about how they have lost someone they know. I too have lost one of our close relations, in whose family a good part of my childhood have been spent and I have celebratory associations in that house. After his death, other members of the family scattered over different places according to the needs of their respective life plans, and I feel that a slice of my childhood has been lost.

This makes us feel so helpless; all the remarkable achievements in science, technology and medicine could not save human lives. The complacency of living in an era of advanced technology crumbled to pieces. It was difficult to see light at the end of the tunnel since no one knew how long and dark the tunnel is. But this was also the time of big realizations, of great opportunities to explore our selves, of contemplating what is of importance and value in life. In isolation, we valued our family bonds more, understood the importance of being connected with our neighbours, with the community and society at large. Many people donated and

offered their services at various community kitchens, fed the animals, distributed masks and sanitizers, paid extra wages to their service providers. We could probably come out of our own bubbles and see the world in a different light. Well, there were suspicions, stigmas, taboos and outbursts of violence, but there were also benevolence, empathy, care and understanding.

Amidst all these, nature tried to heal itself; the air was purer, water was fresher, the sky was clearer and wild animals got a free run on the deserted streets and canals. This was also a time of great academic opportunities. After the initial hesitant phases of understanding to convert classes online, there was no looking back. We can learn, teach, connect nationally and internationally with our students and peers from our own homes. Time and distance are no more limiting factors to the pursuit of knowledge. Although a lot of people do not have privileged access to these technologies, we can hope that it is made accessible to all in the near future.

When changes are happening all around us at so many levels, there is no way to believe that the narratives of our lives and our selves, in turn, did not change. It is time to think and introspect the change within us and empower ourselves to face the future.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

— Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

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