

# Selfhood: An Analytical Study of Self-Hood in Anthony Doerr's "*All The Light We Cannot See*"

M.Iswarya,

M. Phil., English,

Holy Cross College (Autonomous),

Nagercoil.

## Abstract

This paper entitled 'Selfhood: An Analytical Study of Self-Hood' tries to venture the role of external agency in the formation of selfhood through the concepts propounded by Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser. For ages, selfhood has been a great problem and a central topic of discussion among the intellectuals. People who believes themselves to have an individual identity is in the true sense are devoid of selfhood. This paper depicts both the pessimistic face as well as the optimistic face of external factors which are solely responsible for the formation of selfhood with perfect epitomes from the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. A person's selfhood is not really his own, instead one's self is metaphorically covered by the hood call external agencies which may affect and influence one's real self either directly or indirectly.

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Anthony Doerr is an American author of novels and short stories. He gained worldwide acclaim for his 2014 novel *All the Light We Cannot See* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Doerr's first published book was a collection of short stories called *The Shell Collector* (2002), His important works are *About Grace* (2004), *All The Light We Cannot See*, *The Shell Collector*"(2002), *Memory Wall* (2014) short story collections, *Four Seasons in Rome: On Twins*, *Insomnia* and *the Biggest Funeral in the History of the world*, a memoir.

Jacques Lacan is a French psychoanalyst whose ideas have a prominent place in post-structuralism, critical theory, linguistics, twentieth century French philosophy, film theory and clinical psychoanalysis. Lacan in his mirror stage proclaims that the child suffers of preconceived notion of its 'self' and its emotional experience. When the child tries to combine these two it senses a sort of alienated state. At this point the child turns to the big 'other' whoever carries the child near the mirror especially its mother for acknowledgement. This sort of reconciliation between the preconceived 'self' and emotional experience is brought out by the big 'other' through 'language'. Language acts as a tool for a child to resolve this tension arises out of an alienated identity and makes the child to be a social being.

Louis Althusser is a French Marxist philosopher. His arguments and thesis were set against the threats that he saw attacking the theoretical foundations of Marxism. He offers a clear picture of the prevailing situation in the society and also he explains how an individual and his idea of selfhood are affected by certain belief system. He offers certain new terms for denoting both the direct and indirect means by which everyone is controlled and brought into conformity without our knowledge. 'Repressive State Apparatuses' and 'Ideological State Apparatuses' are the two major forces which bind everyone under control as if all are hypnotized.

Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) includes police force, army, prison, and the head of State and the administration which create a kind of fear in people to obey them blindly. Next, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) includes educational institutions, religious institution, family, political system (various parties), the cultural ISA's like literature and arts, communication ISA's like radio, television etc. are involved in cajoling the people to obey the ruling ideology without questioning. Here one could see that each and every individual is forced to act according to the popular ideologies in the society without being informed directly.

When the mirror concept is closely analyzed one thing is evident that only through the assurance of someone the child tends to believe its own image. So the world around the child from the beginning is the 'make believe' world. From the childhood the child tends to accept the world around it as it is experienced by others either directly or indirectly without its own knowledge. There are only

two possible outcomes either the child evolves as a powerful individual or it is destroyed typically by the outside factors.

The above statement can be well proved with examples from the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. It is Anthony Doerr's second novel which is set in occupied France during World War II. This book won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2015. In this novel the protagonist is a French girl named Marie-Laure LeBlanc, with rapidly deteriorating eyesight who lost her eyesight completely at the age of six. Though she suffers due her physical inability, her selfhood has been well cultivated by her father. Her father is the one who make her believe that she can lead her life better with her strong will and determination.

Daniel LeBlanc, trains her daughter Marie-Laure LeBlanc with a wooden model of their neighbourhood in paris and insists her to run her finger over the model to memorize it. Gradually she learns to read Braille and with the help of her knowledge she begins to read novels and explores the world. She is also fond of the novel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. He also sharpens her wit by giving difficult puzzle boxes as gifts. When he trains her with various tasks at first she is terribly frustrated as she is unable to complete it effectively but, his constant effort in inculcating positive attitude in her mind enables her to save her life even in such a drastic situation during her troublesome period.

Marie-Laure LeBlanc proves to be one of the optimistic characters in literature. Even the books she read also imprint a kind of support to her. Her awakening comes from her optimistic self which has been carefully cultivated by her father till the end though he is not with her. She says, "When I lost my sight, Werner, people said I was brave. But it is not bravery; I have no choice. I wake up and live my life" (469).

According to Althusser every society is made up of ISA and RSA which are instrumental in constant reproduction of the dominant ideology of the given society. In the novel, *All the Light We Cannot See* Werner, though Werner Pfennig aspires to become a scientist he is compelled to be within a circle by his circumstances as he is an orphan. When the vice minister and his wife visit the children's house, the vice minister says to Werner's sister Jutta; "The only place your brother is going,

little girl is into the mines; as soon as he turns fifteen. Same as every other boy in this house” (58). It is mandatory during that period that either the orphan boys in the home must work in the coal mines or they should join the Nazi youth army. Thus his life has been altered by the ideology around him. There is no space for his own ‘self’. His selfhood has been shattered by the ideologies around him. This shows how one’s life can be under threat due to the prevailing ideologies which act as external agencies.

In this novel one can see both the prominent characters under the shadow of World War II. But the slight difference in the character’s self changes their course of life. Marie-Laure LeBlanc does not affected by the external factors predominantly since her selfhood has been developed in an appropriate way devoid of external factors. In the case of Werner Pfennig, the formation of selfhood is a great void as it is developed by the external factors, thus even after his realization he cannot lead a normal life as he wish.

In today’s world though each and everyone believes that they are living their own life with their own awareness it is not so. Everyone’s mind has been clouded by the influences from outside and corrupted in one way or the other. Thus Werner’s death in the novel is not by his faults but the result of external factor.

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