



# Understanding Self

## An Analysis of Select stories in the light of Social psychology

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“Unlike a drop of water which loses its identity when it joins the ocean, Man does not lose his being in the society in which he lives. Man’s life is independent. He is born not for the development of society alone, but for the development of his self.”- B R Ambedkar

Mankind has been facing Identity Crisis from time immemorial. Just as Rousseau says “ Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains.” Man is a social animal, he lives in different societies amidst lots of differences. The differences may be due to geographic or natural barriers or manmade barriers like race, caste, creed and other minor divisions. Each society expects him to follow certain rules and regulations and not to step over many limitations. But the connecting link of humanity is the quest for self identity. Self Realization is something which every individual strives for. In some cases, Identity of various people can be studied through the prism called society. Just like the prism which segregates white light into seven colours, society enables one to perceive multiple dimensions of individual selves. The paper aims to analyse the select short stories from Volume II of *Best Loved Indian Stories of the century* in the light of Social Psychology. The select short stories are “The Letter”, “Tai Eesree”, “Maguni’s Bullock Cart” and “Encircling clouds”. In the select stories the self is identified either by the individuals or through the social perspective but the connecting thread of all the select stories is the society’s overall influence on the characters and upon their destinies.

Allport defines Social Psychology as “The scientific study of how people’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others.” (“The Historical background”) people are usually

prone to influence of society surrounding them. Social psychologist explain human behavior as coherent to social situation. The first published study about social psychology was by Norman Triplett in the year 1898, it focused on social facilitation. During 1930s, Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin who had fled Nazi Germany into the safe haven of the US was interested in the perception and cognition tendency of social psychology.

During the Second World War the prime aim of Social Psychologist were on persuasion and propaganda. Whereas after the culmination of the war their focus shifted to gender issues and racial prejudice. In the 1960s Social Psychologist focused their interest in cognitive dissonance, bystander invention and aggression. In the 1970s, situationist approach challenged relevance of the self and personality in psychology. Pluralistic, multicultural perspective, attribution theory and social cognition came into vogue.

Baron, Byrne and Surls define Social psychology as “the scientific field that seeks to understand the nature and causes of individual behavior in social situations” . it deals with the factors that lead us to behave in a given way in the presence of others.

Social psychology analyses the society’s influence on characters through interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomenon. Intrapersonal phenomena includes attitudes, persuasion, social cognition and self-concept. Interpersonal phenomena includes conformity, compliance and obedience, self-fulfilling prophecy and group dynamics.

The constituents of intrapersonal phenomenon are as follows: Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Attitude as “A Feeling or way of thinking that affects a person’s behavior”. It studies attitude formation. The structure of attitude, attitude change, the function of attitudes and relationship between attitude and behavior. Attitudes can be classified into two, they are, 1. Traditional self- reported attitude and 2. Implicit or unconscious attitude. Abraham Tesser says, “Strong likes and dislikes are rooted in our genetic makeup.” The second aspect of intrapersonal phenomenon is Persuasion. The effectiveness of persuasion depends on the communicator, the message, audience, Medium and the context. There are dual process theories in the process of persuasion they are central or fact based persuasion and peripheral or superficial persuasion. The third component is Social cognition. It defines how people perceive, think about and remember information about others.

The second phenomenon is Interpersonal perception. It is attained through the following factors. The predominant one is Attribution theory. Attribution stands for the explanation we make for people's behavior. The attribution depends on both internal and external factors. Internal factors include personality, disposition, character and ability. The external factors include weather, atmosphere etc. While using Attribution theory one must be careful to avoid Fundamental attribution error, self-serving bias, heuristic and schemas. The next element of interpersonal phenomenon is self-concept. It stands for understanding of his /her self. Hazel Markus defines self-concept as "the self-concept is made up of cognitive molecules called self-schemas. Schemas refers to the beliefs that people have about themselves that guide the processing of self-relevant information. Self is special object of our attention." The ABCs of self-concept is A for Affect, how much emotions of others affect us, B stands for Behavior and C stands for Cognition.

The next element is Social Influence. Social influence can be explained as persuasive effects people have on each other. The effective social influence depends on Conformity, compliance and obedience. Conformity means identity of members of a group, their status, similarity expertise, cohesion, commitment and accountability. Compliance means any change in behavior due to request or suggestion. And obedience stands for change in behavior due to direct order or command. The above mentioned aspects influence the society's influence on people's self-identity.

The key figures of Social psychology include Allport, Bandura, Festinger, Taifel, Weiner, Milgram, Haney, Banks and Zimbardo. They researched and found the following concepts: Social facilitation (1920), Social Learning Theory (1963), Cognitive dissonance (1950), Social Identity Theory (1971), Attribution theory (1986), shock experiment (1963), and prison study (1973) respectively.

The paper tries to analyse the select stories using social psychology theory. The first amongst the stories is "The Letter". It was written in Gujarati by Dhumketu and was translated into English by the author himself. Dhumketu (1892-1965) was the pen name of Gaurishankar Govardhandas Josh, one of the pioneers of Gujarati short story. The story revolves around Coachman Ali, who is an oldman who was a hunter previously. The reader gets to know the protagonist by intrapersonal phenomenon. The clerks at the post office discuss and describe about him. They mock him for his habit of coming to post office daily at 4 AM and would leave very late. Coming to postoffice was like pilgrimage for him but for the postmaster and others he was a nuisance. Ali awaited a letter from his daughter Mariam

who was married off to a soldier. Ali gives some money to the clerk and asks him to bring his letter to his tomb because he had a precognition of his imminent death. The letter actually comes and the postmaster imagines him handing over the letter to dead Ali. Through the others characters, the author has depicted the identity of Ali.

The second story taken for study is “Tai Eesree”. Tai Eesree is written by Krishnan Chander in Urdu. It was translated by Kushwant Singh. The story depicts the trauma of partition era with special reference to the protagonist Tai Eesree. The Identity of Tai can be traced through interpersonal phenomena. The story is narrated by Radha Kisen, who is a doctor. He describes the peculiar and eccentric character of Tai Eesree. Tai is a noble lady and to distribute four anna coins is her habit. She commands great respect in the society. Although her husband abandoned her to live with a prostitute she kept on serving the in-laws. The story is a humorous description of her great qualities and her attitude. Here Social psychology depicts Tai’s identity through the perspective of others.

The third story is “Maguni’s Bullock Cart” which was written by Godavarish Mohapatra. It was translated from Oriya by KK Mohapatra. Here the technique used is interpersonal phenomena. Here the process is very clear since the story is about a deceased protagonist. Maguni did not achieve anything significant in life yet he was remembered by the village people. It is only through their conscience the readers get to know Maguni. Maguni had a bullockcart and two bulls, he used to transport people from and to fort town to railway station. With the arrival of buses, his business fell. He died of starvation. But the entire town felt the grief for he was a great entertainer, he would tell them various stories. Readers know about Maguni’s identity through the others.

The fourth story is “The Encircling clouds”, it was written by Krishna Sobti. It was translated from Hindi by Jai Ratan. The story revolves around Ravi who is admitted in Bhowali sanatorium. He is chronically ill and awaits his end. Through his memory he introduces the readers to Manno, whom he loved. Manno was chronically sick when he first met her. Later he moved on in life. He had wife and children but all left him when his illness was detected. Here, the technique used is intrapersonal phenomenon. Manno identified her self-identity or not, one cannot be sure. But through Ravi’s perspective, Manno definitely has her self-identity.

Man lives in a society, he has a perspective about himself, and the society in which he lives also has an image about his self. Through conscious or unconscious efforts man realizes his self similarly through social interactions the society also identifies the self of others. Therefore by the application of social psychology, multiple dimensions of

the protagonists of the select short stories are depicted. One's own perception of the self might be different from the society's. in a periscope the designs change with each permutation, similarly the concept of self-realization or quest for the self appears in different permutation from different dimensions.

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