

A Perspective of Dialogical Engagement Between Self and Culture

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I

In one of his seminal works, Ernst Cassirer writes that, "man is to be studied not his individual life but his political and social life. Human nature, according to Plato, is like a difficult text, the meaning of which is to be deciphered by philosophy" (Cassirer 1944: 63). The difficulty of studying one's individual life lies in its varied, complicated and contradictory experiences that entangle his life experiences. Philosophy helps in deciphering the meaning that follows from the experiences *per se*. Hence, it needs to reflect on the political and social experiences of human life in order to understand the nature of man. The political and the social not only refer to the regulatory guidelines of the state and society, but also broadly include the civilizing process. The civilizing process bears many significant elements that 'organize feelings, desires and thoughts. They are not only contained in thoughts and language, but also systematically organized and represented in myths, in religion and in art' (Cassirer 1944). The art, myth, religion, etc. are very much part of culture as culture represents man's varied experiences. We make a humble attempt to construe the meaning of our existences by philosophizing the modalities and expressions articulated in culture. Human existence commences with intentional-dialogical modes of relationship involving culture as man's being, so to say, the other.

Self has many referential points, such as, man, individual, agent, subject, person, etc. which are characterized by intentionality and freedom. Intentionality constitutes not only man's experiences but also defines the actions performed by the self. Being the constituting feature of experience, self flows along with these experiences that develop the self. The flow of intentionality manifested through experiences has the peculiarity of transcending outer modes of relation as well as reflecting on its own *loneliness*. The outer relations show as to how one develops himself/herself in real time and history with relations to his/her beliefs, desires, hopes, etc. Over and above it defines one's belongingness to the socio-cultural space in which s/he lives. Understanding its own loneliness brings a reflection to the very mode of intentionality that defines the socio-cultural engagement from the 'subjective perspective of the world.' Thus, the subjective becomes the antonym of the objective. In this mode of relationship the self transcends the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-historical engagements reflecting on the formal conditions of such engagements. Thus, intentionality totalizes the various kinds of relationships that the self shares with the world or the other and with itself (Mohanty 2000: 73).

II

The totalization signifies not only a process of relationship that the self shares with the other, but also shows an inseparable relationship in which the self and the other are engaged. Such an understanding of this inseparable engagement brings out self-knowledge as well as the knowledge about the other (Mohanty 2000). The self-understanding is not generated by the other, rather it is out of the self's own cultivation – the cultivation of freedom (Verne 1979: 83). It is the freedom of the self that

constitutes culture; - 'it defines a way of life, a manner of thinking and acting shared by a group of people over time' (Dallmayr 1994). Here culture is not a stilled phenomenon, rather a dynamic field of knowledge, which has equal potentiality to interact with the self. This potentiality of dynamism is captured in reflective consciousness, so to say, reflective mode of intentionality. As Fred Dallmayr puts it, "captured in reflective judgment, culture provides an over all framework through which we understand the world; it offers a frame of reference which gives sense of meaning to individual terms and concepts (like the concept of development)" (Dallmayr 1994: 101). The freedom in which the self constitutes culture or frames for the discourse of meaning of life implies that there could be diversified flow of experiences in which multiple frameworks can take birth. The multiplicity of cultural life is unified showing the normative traits of integration and aspiration for values. This aspiration works as internal force or operative idea in looking forward to revise and reconstitute the alternative frameworks of values show the result of free engagement in an operative idea of life as whole that enters into the making and working of institutions. Hence, it may be said that the freedom of the self creates values.

Freedom and experience are the breeding ground of creativity. While living in the cultural mode of life and practicing the cultural activities signifies culture as experience. The experiential mode of relationship unfolds the field of interaction and communication in which the involvement of other is shown. The involvement develops the sense of belongingness in knowing, representing and contemplating on experience and they all form an intentional mode of engagement. As Mohanty points out, "But a person, while being all these things, she acts, judges, demands, has rights, entertains values, is in connection with other individuals and their acts, judgments, evaluations, rights and values. This living space of a person is not field of objects, but an actual and valuational field of situations which constants undertake her, and in which she is called upon to make new decisions, and form within which she projects new possibilities" (Mohanty 2000: 83). The culture as experience looks at the living space as the field of intentional engagement and involvement that give opportunity of putting forward new ideas and possibilities as well as opens up the scope for realizing them. This engagement becomes instrumental in developing the self-knowledge.

III

The development of self-knowledge is the result of self-cultivation. The notion of cultivation is one of intrinsic potential quality of man. It initiates the *movement* of rising up 'humanity through culture.' The movement is an 'inner action' (Buber 1965). This action not only commences with the self but also forming the field of dialogue that turns to the other. In this regard, the movement has two important functions with regard to the notion of cultivation as defined by Dallmayr; they are *preservation* and *transformation* (Dallmayr 1994). The idea of cultivation is meant to preserve the self and transform the process of educating it. The notion of educating the self for developing self-

knowledge partly derived from one's involvement with various forms of cultural activities or with the community. Experiences encountered in the process of involvement are significant for 'self-formation'. The experiences are not 'isolated moments' of life. Rather, one's involvement builds up linkages – experience works as in 'integrative processes' toward the development of the 'self- image' (Gadamer 2004: xiii).

The unfolding of self-knowledge opens up the space for one's existence., which we call as man's cultural existence. As Werkmeister would put it, "...human existence is essentially a cultural existence. But since, culture itself is man's own creation, we are up against the fact that, in creating himself, man also creates his own culture; and in creating his culture; he creates himself. The two aspects of his existence and his becoming are inseparable" (Werkmeister 1967: 33). The inseparable relationship represents the two aspects of his selfhood. One of the aspects of the self represents its identity through the socio-cultural system, e.g., as one would like to relate himself to his profession, to social status, etc., in which his association with the other becomes a public phenomenon. The self presents itself in this mode as intersubjectivity. Whereas, another facet of the self represents 'the subjective dimension of the self'; as mentioned earlier, it is the aspect of the self-performing its intentional activities. In this mode, the self looks for new possibilities while interacting with the other. The latter, in fact, integrates the former. Assimilation and integration proceeds in the form of intentional experience, which is otherwise the subjectivity of the self. But it manifests another facet, i.e., its physical participation in the forum of community that is regulated by a normative order. The assimilation itself represents an intersubjective forum. Nevertheless, bringing two facets of the self into one level of thought is indeed an intentional activity manifested in the act of *bundling*. Illustrating the desire of bundling, Buber writes, "Collectivity is not a binding but bundling together: individuals packed together, armed and equipped in common, with only as much life from man to man as will inflame the marching step. But community, growing community (which is all we have known so far) is the being no longer side by side but with one another of a multitude, though it also moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*" (Buber 1965: 31). Buber's emphasis bundling relation not only lays down an intentional space for the integration of the self and the other, but also shows the similar rhythm in prevailing the form of community life in which values of life can be shared and cherished. Thus, the spirit of the intentional movement of the self aspiring for relationship with the other opens up a kind of journey that the self undertakes in search of itself. In other words, it is a search for meaning (Pradhan 1996).

However, the idea of search of meaning is embedded in the dialogical engagement between self and culture. There are two phases to this engagement, as mentioned earlier; one is viewing *culture as experience*, which shows one's existential engagement or participation with cultural activities, whereas another phase refers to the process of distancing from the cultural conflicts and problems in which the self looks forward with a vision and hope for values for future humanity. The process of distanciation requires a *creative dialogue* for sustainable engagement. The sustainable engagement looks after the continuity of making choice for alternative framework so far as one's existential engagement with culture is concerned. It shows a creative mode of succession, which eventually overturns an existing perspective that can be perceived as

narrow or erroneous. Thus, the form of creative dialogue not only develops the unity between the psychological, physical and the cultural but also helps in preserving and protecting the values of life.

IV

The shift from one pattern of cultural life to another form of cultural practice shows the *dialectic of value seeking*. The dialectic of value seeking motivates *self-criticism* and that helps the individual to foresee the value beyond the finitude of a given pattern of life. The self-criticism with regard to the dialectic of value seeking brings about '*self-transfiguration* through the interaction of vision and praxis' (Pande 1994: 54). Unless we conceive the underlying communication between the theoretical and the practical aspects of culture, we will not be able to bridge the gap between the self and the other. The self may create a false distinction in every levels of its experience of culture.

In view of the intertwined relationship between cultural life and cultural practice, some may prefer to overemphasize the tension that persists in comprehending the link between the realm of theoretical meaning and practical meaning. Defining the tension Nandy writes: "It is a creative tension with which some persons and cultures prefer to live. The gap between reality and hope which such a vision creates becomes a source of cultural criticism and a standing condemnation of the oppression of everyday life, to which we otherwise tend to reconciled" (Nandy 1999: 3). The creative tension results in cultural criticism. The self reflects on the asymmetry between the practice and the value aspired. Cultural criticism attempts to make reconciliation between theory and praxis by inviting interpretation from the other. Interpretation as Mohanty suggests, is not a one-way process. It sustains rather in 'multiple processes – simultaneously received from many ends and lays down 'multi-layered paths' to develop coherent understanding. Mohanty observes: "Such multi-layered process and the consequent synthesis of 'overlapping' can lead us much of a better self-understanding as to a better understanding of the other" (Mohanty 2000: 122). Establishing the multi-layered paths, they share their viewpoints communicated in the process of dialogue. The communication reveals its profoundness, when, as Buber points out, "Speech can renounce all the media of sense, and it is still speech" (Buber 1965: 3). Such speech facilitates a healthy conversation in silence.

To conclude, facilitating the *creative dialogue* in the realm of *self-criticism* as well as *cultural criticism* unfolds the complementary process of unification in which the development of the self and culture is realized. Cultural creativity as cultural critique opens up the possibility of appropriating the dimension of the human self and its realization. The dialogical engagement continuously enriches the creative process of understanding the universal end of humanity. Humanity manifested in diversified form of cultural, religious, scientific, artistic, mystical, etc. activities of life needs a dialogical engagement for agreement and harmony. The notion of agreement signifies intersubjective solidarity, whereas, harmony signifies the dimension of valuation. Thus, the dialogical engagement of value seeking would alarm to the notion of *spiritual awakening* in which peace would flourish showing the path towards infinity.

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