

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 1 January 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Language and Literature: An Exposition -
Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

Editor:

J. Sundarsingh, Ph.D.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self
With Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self with Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Yann Martel
from Wikipedia www.wikipedia.org

1.0. Abstract

The paper aims to analyse the efforts taken by Yann Martel in confronting the different situations in his life in order to find out his hidden 'Self'. Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual points of view are taken to perceive, understand, and explain the crisis faced by the protagonist of SELF. The ways and means through which one can identify his/her 'Self' and other 'Selves' and liberate the individual 'Self' from the fetters of the body and mind are suggested.

1.1. Introduction

The questions that seem to propel Yann Martel to ask himself are: "Who am I?", "What does it mean to be a human being?", "What is man, if not a 'Self'?", and "Can the individual 'Self' be liberated from the fetters of the body and mind? How? " In the process of analyzing his 'Self', Martel not only addresses these questions to himself but also the readers. He doesn't provide the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self
With Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF

reader with answers to these questions. He invites the reader to ponder over these questions and find answers for themselves.

1.2. Question-1: Who am I?

This is the most radical, the most urgent of all questions. That is why Socrates proclaimed: “Man, know thyself”! In other words, the enquiry about BEING (ourselves as beings) is more fundamental than the question about KNOWING. According to Descartes, “I AM” is the first of all evidences and therefore good philosophizing must begin with it. I am sure of one thing that I doubt. To doubt is to think. To think is to exist. Therefore, he said: “Cogito, ergo Sum”, which means “I think, therefore, I am” (BEING HUMAN, “Introduction”, 5). This is the first state of being certain. I AM (thinking): this first basic experience has two components. They are: “I” and “AM”. They mean: MYSELF and EXISTENCE. Therefore, every human being deals with two distinct problems: the problem of “existence”, which provokes to ask a human being the question asked by Hamlet: “To be or not to be?” (ibid, 5). This question asks for the purpose of the existence of an individual, others, and the world around.

1.3. Question-2: What does it mean to be a human being?

The problem is about MYSELF, not as “existing” but as a human being. This is the question about ESSENCE and not EXISTENCE. ESSENCE deals with WHAT a thing is. EXISTENCE deals with THAT the thing is. In other words, ESSENCE is that which makes a person or thing. EXISTENCE is the status of being a thing (ibid, 6). Even though the existence of the unnamed protagonist is transformed from male to female, the essence of the unnamed hero of the novel seems to remain the same to some extent. Even after having been transformed into a woman, he thinks like a man on many occasions. However, there is also the transformation of his ESSENCE. That is, he undergoes the experience of a woman and feels like a woman. SELF deals with the problem of identity morphing, the hidden nature of the ‘Self’ and its survival. The identity of ‘Self’ of an individual is so much entrenched in his body-mind-intellect personality that becomes necessary to distinguish between the ‘Self’ (Atman) and the ‘Non-Self’ (An-Atman), the one without ‘Self’ (ibid, 14). In fact, nothing is stable or permanent. According to Heraclites, everything is in a state of flux or change. A human being is no exception to it. He too has to become a ‘Non-Self’, a ‘Non-Soul’ (‘An-Athman’) or ‘Metaphysical Self’ (Paramatma). The individual ‘Self’ must become the UNIVERSAL SELF the ‘Atman-Bhraman’, the Spirit that is within every ‘Self’ and lose himself in it. (ibid, 17-18; PHILOSOPHY, 121) This is the cosmic force that sustains the universe as well as the ‘Self’ within an individual. A being normally confuses his “true” ‘Self’ with one’s “Empirical Self” (a self which is guided only by practical experience rather than by scientific ideas). The “Empirical Self” which is composed of what the ‘Self’ sees, touches, feels, experiences and even thinks, is not the true ‘Self’. The empirical reality is false because it cannot lead one’s ‘Self’ to the realization of the Bhraman who is the true ‘Self’. In order to realize one’s true ‘Self’, one should raise his/her ‘Self’ to a superior level of existence. This is the process of identifying one’s ‘Self’ with Bhraman.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self

With Special Reference to Yann Martel’s SELF

1.4. Question-3: What is man/woman, if not a 'Self'?

Man is in a succession of ever-changing psycho-physical state (Aroopa- without shape). (Upanisad Saram, 114) He is in a state without 'Self' as a permanent substance to support and sustain life. The body cannot constitute the 'Self' because it changes. Jiva (Soul) is conceived as an eternal substance. It is capable of adjusting its size to the dimensions of the physical body in which it happens to be housed for the time being. In Jiva or Atman has Prana (Uyir) which is physical, mental and sensuous power. (PHILOSOPHY, 50-51, 54) The 'Prana' cannot be the 'Self' as it is neither conscious nor intelligent. The Mind (Manas) cannot also be the 'Self' because it cannot do anything independently being dependent on the sensory inputs for its functioning. (Upanisad Saram, 118, 124) It is the Intellect (Buddhi) being intelligent and endowed with the power to discriminate good from evil, enables one to identify either with the 'Self' or with the 'Non-Self' aspects of one's personality. So, it is apparent that the intellect is responsible for both bondage and liberation. This is the general analysis of the identity of 'Self' of human beings. Man mistakenly attaches his 'Self' to Ego which produces illusory thoughts and desires. (BEING HUMAN, 12; PHILOSOPHY, 89) Salvation can be attained by renouncing the false notion of the permanence of the 'Self'. This is the end of misery and the beginning of Nirvana, which is not "immortality" but a state of mind in which all thoughts and desires cease to exist. (BEING HUMAN, 14)

SELF is an interesting character study of sexual identity and orientation. Martel analyses his 'Self' with the identity of 'Sex'. He gives significance for the analysis of 'Sex' within an individual. He explores different layers of identity which are preoccupied with 'Sex' and 'Self'. The novel is a physiological, psychological and spiritual journey through an unnamed character's soul. On the part of Yann Martel, the reason not to name the protagonist may be making all the human beings undergo strange experiences of life. Moreover, the novel is Martel's twisted work of fantasy-autobiography. SELF is pretentiously a story about an eighteen year old boy who, in the course of a transformation, becomes a woman, only to change back into a man form in his mid-twenties. He just wakes up and finds himself being a woman. He remains a woman for seven years and then turns into a man again (<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth03A14L010512634824>).

Yann Martel recognizes that there have been earlier narratives which employ gender change such as in Virginia's Orlando (<http://www.avclub.com/articles/yann-martel,14166/>). Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis also reflects transformation, but it is of different kind. The story begins with a travelling salesman, Gregor Samsa, waking to find himself transformed into a monstrous vermin. Hence, to a modern man, life becomes an adventurous journey to discover his 'Self'. This is based on the Greek mythology, in which, Tiresias was a blind prophet of Thebes, known for being transformed into a woman for seven years (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiresias>). The novel presents a story of opposition mediating between male and female (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/08/01/1059480537663.html>). The novel ends at a point

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self

With Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF

where further movement of the plot is blocked. The narrator struggles physically and mentally to find out his hidden 'Self'. The hint about the 'Self' within his 'Self' is found in the beginning of the novel:

I became aware of a voice inside my head. What is this? I wondered. Who are you, voice? When will you shut up? I remember a feeling of fright. It was only later that I realized that this voice was my own thinking, that this moment of anguish was my first thinking that I was a ceaseless monologue trapped within myself. (SELF, 2)

After his parents' death, the unnamed narrator "envisioned life as a series of metamorphic changes, one after another, to no end" (ibid, 9). The foundation of the narrator's understanding of the difference between his 'Self' and other 'Selves' takes place in the narrator's mind. Martel uses the concept of physical change in the narrator's life to show more clearly and effectively to the readers about the psychological perspective of different 'Selves' in a personality. Here both 'Body' and 'Soul' are interdependent to find out the hidden nature of the 'Self'. The plot follows the narrator through the stages of personality and sexual development. SELF is not only an acute study of sexual orientation but also sexual identity.

It seems, according to Martel, life is an odyssey to find out one's inner 'Self'. The journey is filled with unusual and unexpected experiences which startle all human beings. The unnamed narrator is not constant in his 'Self'. Though his 'Self' is deeply rooted in him, he struggles to find out who he is. When 'He' becomes 'She', the novel takes a twist. She gets her first menstrual cycle. Her reaction is filled with horror and shock. "I knew that it was coming, that it had to come, but to me it was like death; the oldest story in the world, yet still a surprise" (ibid, 119). She goes to Montreal, where she gets a job as a waitress. At her job, she meets Tito. As the novel ends, she is suddenly raped by a vicious neighbour in her secluded apartment and her body reverts to being a male again. The narrator echoes the horrible and brutal experience of rape as follows:

I don't know why they call it rape. To me it was murder. I was killed that day and I've had to drag death around in me ever since, a roaming grayness in my colourful interior: sometimes it's my stomach that's dead, sometimes my head, sometimes my intestines, often my heart. (ibid, 315)

'Self' is the essential quality that makes a person distinct from all others. In short, 'Self' refers to the person concerned. The 'Self' is the idea of a unified being which is the source of one's distinct consciousness. This 'Self' is the agent responsible for the thoughts and actions of an individual to which they are ascribed. Martel uses a clever and unusual twist to explore the meaning of identity in the depth of a human being's understanding of his 'Self' or her 'Self' with other 'Selves'.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self
With Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF

Buddha admits the 'Self' as the flow of consciousness. In the consciousness, the present moment is the result of the past moment and the future is the result of the present. Thus, one moment succeeds another moment and the actions and the memory of the past moments are transformed to the next moment. (PHILOSOPHY, 74)

SELF is preoccupied with the theme of identity. Though there is a physical change in the narrator's life, the mind is not totally changed. In other words, when the narrator becomes a woman, she is in a woman's body but still thinks like a man. So, she is still attracted towards women. Eventually, she has romances with women. Her loneliness urges her to seek company from others. She does not feel unusual about her company with Ruth. But over time, she changes her attitudes. There are many reasons for this change. One is the appeal of the forbidden. Though at the outset, her new attraction to men is heterosexual, and at the same time for her it is homosexual. For the first time, she kisses a man. She thinks that she is a man. "This is homosexuality. I'm a homosexual" (SELF, 201). She is shocked, yet thrilled. There is the appeal of the forbidden and that is one of the conscious reasons for the change. But beneath it, there is a link between the mind and the body.

The boundaries between 'Self' and other 'Selves' are in a state of flux in SELF. Martel tries his best for exploring the idea of sexual identity which is very hard to pin down. Sexual identity is a very complicated one to comprehend. What it means to be a man and a woman is very difficult to describe or write. But in practice, both man and woman get rigidified to the level of the individuals. They seem to have become rigid physiological, psychological, and spiritual ideologies.

1.5. Question-4: Can the individual 'Self' be liberated from the fetters of the body and mind? How?

The hurdle in the process of analyzing this question and finding an answer is the realization of IGNORANCE. The misery of human condition lies in this state of non-knowledge. Salvation is possible only to the self which follows the path of knowledge. By leaving behind one's empirical 'Self', one can discover one's true 'Self', the Universal 'Self', Parama-Atman, the divine reality within. His empirical 'Self' disappears with its merging and fusion in Bhraman. (BEING HUMAN, 12)

SELF concerns itself with the tension between fixed and changeable notions of which human beings are. It is about the limits of personalities and the possibilities of transformation of human beings on a grand scale. SELF is a mixture of fiction and facts. The scope of fiction is to express human confusions. Thus, SELF is a tale of search of identity which is based on sex. This identity crisis for both man and woman can be solved only through one's spiritual awareness of the secret of the sacred transfiguration of SIVAM into ARDHA NAAREESWARAM. 'GENDER' means the state of being Masculine, Feminine, or Neuter. The term 'SEX' physiologically refers to the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self

With Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF

condition of either being Male or Female. A man or a woman is an amalgamation of Male and Female characteristics in certain percentage. No person in the world can have the characteristics of a hundred percent man or woman. This is the case with a Eunuch too, who is neither a Male nor a Female completely. Similarly, God is also a Eunuch because God cannot be classified and rigidified into sex and gender based on psycho-physical ideologies. GOD is a sexless and genderless 'Self' because GOD transcends sex and gender differences. This transcendence of sexual differences such as Male and Female and gender differences such as Masculinity and Femininity can liberate the individual 'Self' from the fetters of the body and mind, if only one perceives and practises the demonstration of physical and spiritual oneness of SIVAM into ARDHA NAAREESWARAM.

References

Books

Anna. Ed. Upanisad Saram. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Mutt, 1964.

Martel, Yann. SELF. Great Britain: Faber and Faber Limited, 2003.

Mercier, Jean. L. BEING HUMAN. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998.

PHILOSOPHY. Delhi: Manoj Pocket Books (MPB Publications India Ltd.), 2004.

Websites

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth03A14L010512634824>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiresias>

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/08/01/1059480537663.html>

<http://www.avclub.com/articles/yann-martel,14166/>

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)

Tiruchirappalli 620002

Tamil Nadu, India

sjr1236@yahoo.co.in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

A Study on the Physiological, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives of Different Selves in a Self

With Special Reference to Yann Martel's SELF