

Journeys to Autumn

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Abstract: *In this paper I have revisited my own experiences from almost a third person's perspective. I have explored my journey from my childhood till the autumn of my life. This is the time when we look back and can give new meanings to our lived experiences. Being a student of philosophy, I failed to free myself from the philosophical views that I have inculcated consciously or unconsciously. I am deeply influenced by Tagore's essentialism and Simone's (Simone de Beauvoir) existentialism, where existence precedes our essence. Interestingly the above-mentioned views are opposed to each other for both the theories revolve round the concept of 'freedom' which is very different in these two conceptual frameworks. I have interpreted the dialogical and dialectical evolution of myself mostly through the lens of these two philosophers.*

Keywords: Freedom, lived experience, individualism, essence, relational self, essentialism, Cosmos.

We are essentially related to our environment natural and social, with our culture, norms and values, our relations with our family and work place and many more.... these relations are dialogical, dynamic and dialectical. Many times, our surroundings, the happenings in our life cannot be changed. They are beyond any alteration. The fact that I am a Hindu and a Bengali and I am born in a conservative environment are facts which we cannot change according to our wish and desire. But within this given fixed structure we evolve in unique ways, give meanings to the happenings around us, interpret it for our well-being.

We have our shared experiences, our collective projects in which we play different roles and there is a constant interaction between the outer given world and our inner being. This is true for all human beings; Each and Everyone's life is a grand narrative with so many sub stories within it. Once in an interaction with my teacher who has become a friend now, I

said, 'these days I do not have the luxury of reading novels and I feel very sad about it'. She said 'Jhuma you can easily mix with people and you have something in you that makes other people share their stories with ease'. This observation was an eye opener and suddenly I felt that, 'yes I intentionally or unintentionally play a very significant role'. Each individual in this sense is an interesting book with so many layers.

In this paper I was drawing the life of my student who has gone through many ups and downs and then I felt why not look at my own self and share my lived experiences. My life is also rich enough and I can look at myself from an aesthetic distance in the autumn of my life. I do not like my name and have decided to refer me as 'Tuli', which means 'brush' since I am painting some aspects of my life story.

Just because I am a student of philosophy, I could not resist the temptation of considering two important philosophical theories in this paper. One Indian and another western. I have chosen these theories simply because they focus on the evolvement of individual self in interaction with the happenings of the world.

These two theories have been proposed by two stalwart thinkers and are almost diametrically opposite to one another. Tagore (1861-1941) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). Both have emphasized on the freedom of human beings from two different perspectives. They consider freedom to be the essence of human species.

Tagore has clearly articulated his philosophy in his two famous books written for the western readers. One is *Sadhana* (1913) and the other is *The Religion of Man* (1931). In these two books he has expressed his philosophy in an explicit manner. It is more than obvious that all his writings, be it poems or stories, novels or dance – dramas (even his paintings) are expressions of his thought but in *The Religion of Man* and *Sadhana* he is more a philosopher than a poet, novelist or an artist.

Simone's entire theory revolves round the concept of freedom where she claims that a person builds up her essential self from his/ her birth by exercising freedom. She starts her life with bare existence and by asserting freedom, by taking up new projects she builds up her essence. Thus, a person herself is responsible for her becoming, by shaping herself gradually with changing lived experiences ignited by the social world that surrounds her. In other words, she is the one who assigns meanings to the different happenings of her life. Simone's theory thus emphasizes on pure individuality, where an individual is essentially unrelated to other individuals.

Simone maintains that there are aspects or events in our world which we cannot change according to our desires. For example, it was not me who decided to study in a hostel. The fact that I am born in an upper-middle class Bengali Family, that I am a Hindu Brahmin is a given structure which operates as a frame within which I could assert my freedom. I cannot simply deny the frame in which I am situated. I can decide to get admission into a music school or to marry after my Higher Secondary examination but cannot decide to be a student of class 1X all over again. I exercise my freedom within this given frame. According to Simone taking decisions according to my free will makes me responsible for my actions and for this reason I am in constant anxiety which has been technically referred as 'angst' in her existentialist model.

The individualism of Simone is in sharp contrast to Tagore's essentialism where men are essentially related, related to other individuals and Nature. Nature with a capital 'N' which is actually identical with the Cosmos This theory is labeled as essentialism, for his Ontology, epistemology, where he talks about relation between the Cosmos and Man has some essential features.

For example, a human being is not an isolated individual, his very existence is relational. Man is essentially creative and free. This freedom enables man to realize his essence, his related self, his self that is not confined within this narrow present but goes beyond it. He is not only related to The Universal Man but related to each other and related to Nature or Cosmos. The concept of Universal man is not relevant in the present context and so I am not discussing it.

To understand his view, it will be most sensible to have a glimpse of what he actually stated in his famous book *The Religion of Man*.

This very mind of Man has its immediate consciousness of will within him, which is aware of its freedom and ever struggles for it. Every day in most of our behaviour we acknowledge its truth.

Man has a feeling that he is truly represented in something which exceeds himself (RM, p.45) He irresistibly feels something beyond the evident fact of himself which only could give him worth (RM, P.44)

Tagore is referring to 'Boro Ami', where the altruistic self feels his or her worth by going beyond selfish desires and acts for the overall well-being of his surroundings. She /he is essentially a lover. His love for his family, neighborhood, his nation, his culture, and with the universal social and natural world that surrounds him is actually a manifestation of his actual soul.

I will consider Tagore and Simone's perspective for studying Tuli's life and will differ from Tagore's view of 'soul' or 'boroami', our essence which takes us beyond our narrow mundane self.¹

I will argue that in several occasions 'we do not consciously choose our projects. We are bound by the circumstances to opt for them. Simone was aware of this constraint of our life. She differs from Sartre who will never accept that in certain circumstances we cannot exercise our freedom. We are forced to choose a project and we have no other option left. Suppose if my parents decide to get me married, I will force myself to study for GRE, even if I am not interested in higher studies. Simone will agree with Sartre in insisting that one should be assigning meaning to every experience that makes one's being.

I will again argue that Simultaneously a person can be a Boro Ami or a selfless altruistic person and Choto Ami a selfish one. In fact, there relation is a very complex one and a neat compartmentalization between the two is not realistic. In fact, there can be an intrinsic relation between these two aspects of mind where either one overpowers the other or they can be different layers of the same self. I will do this by narrating my experiences of some journeys of my life. I will refer myself as 'Tuli', as has been mentioned.

Tuli is the first child of a family with a very affectionate mother and a disciplinarian father who was a Bank Manager in Bilaspur, then a very small town in Madhyapradesh. Her father in spite of being a good student could not continue his studies and had gone through a very rough patch because of the partition story. Tuli was extremely pampered in her maternal grand father's home in Ranchi where she had three Masis or aunts and a very big family and good number of Pets. Life was very smooth, happy and colourful.

But a dark cloud covered her cheerful life when she was sent to a very expensive boarding school in Kolkata at the age of seven. It was one of the best schools of Kolkata. By that time, she was an eldest of two other sisters who were twins. The family had to cut down their expenses for sending their child (Me) to an expensive institution. Her father had the dream of educating her child in a very good school.

Her separation with her mother with whom she was very attached made life painful and dark. Initially for a year or so *there* was not a single day that witnessed her, without tears.

The boarding school was very luxurious with an Anglicized Bramho culture charged with Tagore's songs and Christian prayers. She had to use spoon and fork in her lunch and dinners, had to go to bed by putting on night suit. Dinner used to be at 5.30 pm sharp and supper at 8.30 with a cup of milk. She gradually adapted herself with this alien culture and got back her cheerful self. The school routine had so many extracurricular activities and Tuli loved them. She was not good in her studies and she had a strong desire to prove that her parents took a wrong decision in sending her in a boarding school.

Tuli was a victim of his Father's project. She had no other option but to accept it. Simone is correct in the sense that within this hostel life Tuli struggled to be happy. She did not have any other option left but to make the most from her caged life. Sartre has not mentioned the age from which a person can take independent decisions. It feels absurd to think that a child would take up independent projects in his/her dawn of life.

Tuli was pampered by her matron and elder did is of the hostel though she did not have a very close friend. Deep within her happy cheerful self-there was a lonely child. She cooked up a story that she was a neglected child as she thought that her parents neglected her especially after the birth of her twin sisters. The story was a convincing one for she received very few letters from her parents in comparison with the frequency of letters for the other inmates living in the boarding. Her religious mother almost reiterated the same sentence in every post card that she sent to her daughter writing 'Bhogobantomarmongalkoruk'. This is almost similar to 'May God bless You'. Sunday evening was a visitors' day. Her uncles did come to meet her not regularly though and Tuli was not attached with any one of them. A child is sensitive enough to realize whether she is actually loved. In festive days like in Holy and Saraswati puja she stayed with her matron, who took her to the beautiful Cathedral Church (which was very near to her boarding) quite frequently. Again, we see that she had to choose what she chose. She did not have any option left. As has been already mentioned She probably decided (not consciously though) to be happy with whatever life offered her.

Tuli at this age feels that her perfectionist Christian Matron made her learn so many small and not so small things like doing bed, serving, knitting, cooking and many more. She had a very strong influence on her. She tried to make her realize that love, care, forgiveness are very important qualities that one should inculcate. In spite of the love that was showered on her by her matron and seniors Tuli was neither altruistic nor selfish.

Tuli felt very alienated in her home. For she was growing up in a different culture altogether. She was extremely problematic and destructive in her home where she went during Durga Pujas and long summer vacations. Everything was so different there starting from the food, their sense of dressing, the pattern of teaching, the mode of worshipping God. She felt alienated in that surrounding. She felt that it was a house and not a home with insensitive people around her who were unaware of her emotional turmoil and would never endeavor to understand her.

She got into the habit of beating her innocent sisters, breaking things whenever she had a slightest chance and wanted to go back to her boarding. Her parents were very upset and disgusted with her unbearable behaviour. Actually, it was her interpretation of her world. Her parents were not at all bad. They were interpreting the situation from their perspective. They cared for her in their own way. But they could not understand the complexity of Tuli's psyche and reasons for her non-senses. Things became more difficult with some incidents of repeated sexual abuse from a close relative when she was in class v and vi. She coped with this experience in her own way. She was in a state of complete denial.

If I look at Tuli from an aesthetic distance I would argue against Tagore claiming that though we are free and creative, we cannot be lovers in adverse situations. Our higher self can get manifested only after the most basic needs are satisfied. One of the most basic need of a child or an adolescent is to have a home where she is cared for and loved. She/he needs understanding care-givers, chiefly parents. So, the most fundamental precondition of blooming the 'Larger Self' or 'Boro Ami' is the satisfaction of some fundamental physical and emotional needs. Tagore would argue that he himself probably is a counter example, but I will reiterate that he is an exception and we should not be concerned with exceptional cases

I would rather walk with Simone, accepting that every person consciously or unconsciously assigns meanings to the happenings of his/her life.

We see that in this story that inspire of the negative happenings Tuli locked her pain, denied the negative experiences and got back to her vibrant cheerful state at the earliest. She was very good in sports and was appreciated for her knack in story writing. Her world of imagination saved her from getting depressed.

She left her hostel at the age of sixteen and to her utter surprise she scored very high marks in her school final examination. Her parents were happy. But she continued with her rude behavior towards everyone in her house

especially towards her mother. Her sisters hated their 'Didi' and hoped that she would join another hostel so that they can be 'happy four' parents and two sisters.

Tuli was extremely skeptical about friendship and close relationships in her school days. In spite of her varied negative and positive experiences she had a strong liking towards altruistic, helpful people. In class xii she got a very good friend Ratnabali and this was the first time when she got the flavor of good friendship. She started changing. She discovered a hardworking, intelligent persevering helpful self within her. Her philosophy teacher was excellent and Tuli was fascinated by this subject. Probably after a long waiting she could embrace the subject of her love. Her behavior towards the family was taking a constructive turn though she remained alienated with her family culture.

After finishing school, she joined Presidency college which was supposed to be the best educational institution in early eighties. Her cold behavior persisted at home and her happy loving altruistic self-bloomed in the outside world that waited for her with full of different colours. Her college life was very interesting with heated debates in the coffee house, long walks in the college street and art films directed by Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal and world-famous directors such as Fellini, Truffaut, Kurosawa, Bergman. Films played a very significant role in shaping her values, her voice against power relationships specially patriarchy and cynicism regarding the institution of marriage.

If we study this phase of her life, we will see that she was simultaneously both selfish and helpful. It was a spontaneous response to the happenings around her. This phase will go both against Simone's existentialism and Tagore's essentialism. She did not choose to be either selfish and helpful. If circumstantial factors determine our behavior then we are not free in complete sense. There can be instances where one chooses to be selfish in one situation, but there can be different more determining circumstances where one is almost compelled to be selfish. So, both the possibility remains open. We exactly don't know what is meant by 'choosing a project'? How do we define a project? Can a chosen mental state or a particular behaviour be labelled as a project? In fact, 'can we choose mental states' or we simply perceive us behaving or thinking in a particular way? We can see that Tuli was quite justified in being self-centered and helpful at the same time.

As far Tagore is concerned, we can see that being 'chotoami' is not inconsistent with being 'Boroami'. Thus, conceptually there is no inconsistency regarding the coexistence of both of them, or 'boroami' 'preceding,'chotoami' and vice-versa. In many occasions we take decisions which are apparently egoistic, a manifestation of 'chotoami' but in the deeper layer it is story of 'boroami'. For example, Abhisekh decides to divorce his wife, he wants to give more time to the blind school with which he is associated. He divorced his wife when his daughter was in class IV, it appeared to be a very selfish decision. But probably it has a deeper layer. The complexity of this action cannot be captured by a strict compartmentalization between the two kinds of self-depicted by Tagore.

Let us again go back to Tuli's story. Eventually She got married had a son, got into a job. Life again witnessed shadows and sunrays as things were always not so pleasant. A person who is against patriarchy or any kind of top down power structure should be prepared for rough patches in life. Tuli decided and chose her projects and exercised her freedom and enjoyed whatever life had to offer for her. Simone was her best friend in these phases of life. She loved being a mother experiencing the dynamic growth of a young adult (his son) with his strong individuality.

To cut a long story short she had three vital experiences in the rest of her journey.

1. She got a job in Srishiksayatan College after a long waiting because college Service Commission was closed for almost nine years. She worked there for eight and a half years. This phase can be described as the 'Gupta period' of her life. First time in her life she experienced group friendship and culturally active academic ambience. She was almost pushed to apply for JU (Jadavpur University), a department that made her depressed simply because she was being too idealist too romantic about relationships among colleagues. This was probably because of her exposure to a best possible academic ambience with supportive colleagues. She took time to understand the undercurrents and cross currents of this new academia and learn the language to be used in her present job.
2. She got into a long depression probably because of her menopausal stage and a feeling of deep alienation both at home and in the work place. She was missing her 'home' for the place where she was staying again became a house. Her husband is her colleague, a

very caring person. But both her son and husband love to get into debates regarding political issues and she resented continuous debates on political stories. She failed to cut out her space in home where she can be herself.

3. She experienced a feeling of falling in love with a doctor who was actually supporting her when she was into depression. It was actually a case of transference. She was very honest about her feelings towards the doctor, shared her mental state with her son who was twenty-two by then and her husband. There were very cool and relaxed about this change of her mental state. She felt like eulogizing her feeling of falling in love for she felt that this experience was precious in this phase of her life.

Her alienation in her work place and also at home made her sad. She was probably tired with the existential struggle at this stage of her life. She wished to have a space of her own where she can be absolutely free from all the different roles she was playing; that of a teacher, colleague, mother, wife, daughter and even a friend. She wanted to be herself. She thought the best way for being with herself would be to write scripts of short films, the dream that remained with her from her college days.

She took a leave for three months from her work place and just did nothing. She did not feel like scribbling anything. Probably for the first time she looked at life from an aesthetic distance. This worked as a magic. She realized that life has given her so much, starting from an understanding family, a good work place some very good friends and her consistently tolerant affectionate mother and a caring husband.

She could go back to all her usual roles. The entire journey of Tuli's life is not so unexpected unusual and unpredictable. Simone's existentialism has not addressed the issue of taking a project and then not working at it. Probably Simone would argue that not doing anything is also a project but this answer is not satisfactory.

Tuli is not interested in looking at life through the lens of either Simone or Tagore or anyone else. She just wants to be with her own lived experiences, in the autumn of her life.

Note

1. Tagore has made a distinction between soul ('boroami') I and self. The altruistic essential being within us is soul and self is 'chotoami' that the narrow, self-centered being in us which is actually not our real self.

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