

Self, Attachments and Detachments

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Abstract: *In trying to understand the process of self-formation, this paper argues that attachments and detachments work in a dialectical interface as self transcends through stages and transcends layers in one individual's life time. The author draws from her personal experiences in an autobiographical style while illustrating her observations and discourse about the formation of self of an individual through attachments and detachments. The formation of self happens only through interaction between one member with the other members in a lifeworld or social space and the fluid self moves through a developmental cycle. The core argument of the paper is that while one's attachments and detachments reflect one's taste, interests and demands of the situation, the experiences thus gathered have a direct bearing upon her self-formation, which, in turn, reflects upon future attachments and detachments.*

Keywords: Self, self-formation, attachment, detachments, dialectics, dynamics, developmental cycle of self-formation.

Introduction

One of the universal structural principles of social life (in the sense of Rousseau¹ and Levi-Strauss²) is embeddedness or attachment. The feminist thinkers like Julia Kristeva (1980)³ and Nancy Chodorow (1994)⁴ have also observed that the child's attachment with her/his mother leaves a permanent imprint on the psyche of the child even when she/he, the later state of life, is subjected to linguistic and symbolic influences. However, attachment works as a dialectical counterforce to detachment. This can be explained in two ways. First, the process called "attachment" becomes intelligible only in contrast to the process called "detachment" (in the sense of linguistic binary of Saussure). Second, the social process of attachment is entangled with the simultaneous process of detachment, as they can cohabit in a dialectical unity. In reality, the social processes of attachment and detachment are far more complex than the way they appear in a binary, as it is not simply either this or that (in exclusion). It can be both, and the elements of attachments and detachments could be mixed in differential

proportions in a particular social relation or process. Further, there is a great deal of dynamism in time-space term in a singular social relation. A relation that appears only attachment in a given time and space and progresses into detachment and the reverse can also happen. A great deal of considerations, assessments, strategies, interests go into the selections of objects and individuals and relations of attachment and detachment. All these contribute to self-formation, self-deconstruction and reconstruction. In other words, one's self formation can be judged through attachments and detachments.

My parents and my lifeworld

My mother conceived after one and a half years of her marriage. She and my father together dreamt of a child. While my mother gave me the safest shelter and nursed me as a part of her body my father took the best possible care of both my mother and me, the unborn. My mother told me that I had given her no trouble during her pregnancy. My parents dreamt of a daughter and my father dreamt about me (he saw me as a 5-6 year old girl, dark complexioned, puffy cheeks, sitting on a heap of paddy straw in the outer courtyard of his village house, waiving hands to him with a smiling face while he was going out for his office) and narrated my physical features to my mother before I was born. Strangely, my physical features resemble the girl who appeared in my father's dream. My birth was the first physical detachment from my mother. However, during breast-feeding years the physical attachment continued. Physical attachments of many forms continued in my early years. For many years I slept with my father and mother on both sides. At least one of them, mostly my father, accompanied me in all my movements outside our house in my early years.

From my childhood I was very close to my mother. Both my parents were very caring as well as protective. I was very obedient and not so demanding as a child. Both my parents had given me more than what I wanted. My father's profession, his reputation as a teacher, his appearance everything played a crucial part in creating a distance between me and my father. He loved me a lot, never scolded me nor slapped me but there was something which made me feel scared of him. My father taught me right from my early school days, he has been my dearest and trusted teacher all through, even today. But I was always driven by a feeling that I fall short of meeting his expectation. This could be one of the reasons that I approach him for help yet I shy away from him.

This distance with my father pushed me closer to my mother. Interestingly my mother used to rebuke me and quarreled with me quite often and had slapped me up on many occasions. But that did not impact our friendship. She gave me the basic education both at home and at school (incidentally she was a teacher in the primary school where I studied), educated me about physical changes in my childhood, adolescence and adulthood. I used to depend on her in my everyday activities and decisions. When I grew up and went to high school my equation with my mother continued to be as strong as before. Starting from my first menstruation to my first crush I used to share everything with her. My mother, with all her experience and knowledge, always gave me advice to deal with my life cycle changes. My mother is a very emotionally balanced person. I was down with a serious ailment at the age of 12. My father completely broke down but my mother remained calm and provided strength to both me and my father. Before my board exam I used to study the whole night while my mother remained awake with me.

In 2007 I moved to Kolkata for my graduation. Leaving my parents, childhood friends and my birth place for a metropolis was a major decision. It was a mix of new adjustments, troubles, uncertainties and dreams, an invitation to a new life. I used to miss my parents while encountering the hardships of city life. The travel, the temperature, crowd, pollution, untimely eating, college discipline – everything was troubling me. I was missing the quietness of home and a life that was completely trouble-free. The glamour and glitters of the metropolis couldn't fill the vacuum of my life. The small town and Bengali medium background created an instant cultural gap with my metropolitan English educated classmates. The new city, new friends, new language, and different lifestyle put me in a state of culture shock. I was worried that I would not be able to adjust with the new lifeworld around me. I was so upset that I used to call my mother for emotional support and cry.

A couple of months passed by and life started becoming easier. I made some friends and three of us made a close-knit group. We spent a lot of time together and my friends helped me adjusting with city life. The college, the classroom, eateries, movies, music and new friends helped building an attachment with metropolitan life. I was so engrossed in this new life that I started feeling less and less presence of my parents in my everyday life. My new friends, my new lifestyle in a way started replacing the most precious relations of my life. I remained busy with my studies; friends and cultural activities so much so that I often used to forget to call up my

parents. Bangla bands were the new craze of the metropolitan youth in those days. I became a part of a band and its lead singer. I used to spend long hours with my band members experimenting new-wave songs. Guitar was my new fantasy. Knowing about this new interest of mine, my parents, especially my mother, become very upset. My parents worried that I would do badly in my studies. My mother stopped talking to me. My father was upset but persuaded me to stay away from my newly found passion. I was terribly disturbed because music was my love and I did not want to let down my band members by quitting it. I was upset and down with the feeling that my parents do not understand me and my likings anymore. The combination of all these issues contributed to push my parents away from me. I realized the split in my self and the resulting tensions.

This distance and detachment grew and got deepened when I moved to Delhi for my Masters. During my two years stay in Delhi I loved and enjoyed my newly found freedom to the full. I became culturally active. The JNU campus was full of activities; it offered me space to explore myself and flourish academically. I used to sing in various cultural programmes in the university campus, got associated with a local theatre group called Behroop and acted in plays produced by the group. I became active in students' politics. The food fest, occasional grand dinner, fashion parade, trying hands in badminton and table tennis were part of hostel life. The life in the hostel and campus was full of fun. JNU looked to me as a complete package where one can easily get lost. The importance of my parents in my everyday life became less and less. I received calls from my parents every night but never felt the urge to call them, to enquire about them. I used to be under severe stress while preparing assignments and on examination days. On those occasions, I used to call my parents hoping that talking to them would ease my tension.

The attachment with JNU culture was so magical. I visited the campus many times after I had left it hoping to rediscover the same magic. But I was hoping for the impossible. Every time I visit the campus sadness engulfs me; my hostel room is no more mine, most of my friends have left the campus, the department is taken over by a fresh groups of students, completely unknown to me, my teachers do not have time to talk to me, I am no more a part of the students' movement, if I get to attend a cultural programme I am only a part of the audience, the admirers of the performer that I was have all left the campus. In one word, I was nobody in the space that was once mine. A sense of nothingness overwhelms me. I wonder, if it is complete detachment. Perhaps not, because JNU gives me an identity

that matters in my career. Those two years of campus life, all the good and bad things, exist in the self that I am, in my conscious and unconscious self.

One lesson I have learnt from this story of my early life is that when everything in life is going fine and when one is lost in her own world the attachment with parents is less, but when in trouble she would fall back on her parents the most trusted of all relations. Therefore, attachment and detachment are never exclusive in practice; they are mixed up; the tilt on either side would depend on the situation.

The crisis and after

In early 2012, in my final semester in JNU I was feeling it. I was losing weight lost appetite, always short of energy, having knee pain, and breathlessness while climbing stairs. I fainted on a couple of occasions and was taken to hospital by my friends. I suppressed all these from my parents thinking they would worry. I somehow managed to complete the semester and returned to our house in Siliguri. I returned with high fever and joint pains. All kinds of medical examinations failed to diagnose the disease. My parents consulted the best doctors in Siliguri but my health deteriorated to the point that I could not walk any more. I was taken to Kolkata and after rounds of tests I was diagnosed having a rare kind of autoimmune disease. I was shattered when the doctor said that it is something which does not have cure and I will have to live with it. It was a disaster in our small family. The magnitude of the disaster can hardly be captured in language. Periodic visits to hospitals, rounds of pathological tests, medicines, lifestyle change, a lot of restrictions on food and movements became the language of my life thereafter.

Apart from physical and psychological impacts, what pained me the most was that I had to compromise with my singing, my passion from my childhood. My voice developed cracks and my lungs lost strength. The quality of my singing dropped and I could not sing the songs with higher notes; I soon lost many of my admirers. I knew my father, who was the most trusted admirer of my singing was crying in silence. I was also worried about my career. When many of my friends joined MPhil or PhD programmes in top Indian and foreign universities I had to stay home under the care of my parents. I was very depressed. That was the time when I could feel the pain my parents were going through. I could not look at my father's sad, worried face. My parents concealed all their worries and found time to talk to me and be with me, doing silent counselling. Physical proximity (expressed through caring, loving touches) and lot of talking had their healing effects.

In the evening time both my parents used to sit in front of me and I used to read out the songs loudly. They used to take me for the evening walk. My mother would make chicken stew almost every day. Within weeks the weakness and the symptoms of ailment were gone. I started reading books, listening to music and one day with everyone's surprise I started singing. During that time the one song that I used to sing was a Rabindrasangeet 'আরো আরো প্রভু আরো আরো, এমনি করে এমনি করে আমায় মারো'.

There was a line in that song 'দেখি কেমনে কাঁদাতে পারো'।

It means saying to God "no matter how much you may try to give me trouble you won't be able to make me cry". My mother used to take me for movie shows. My father kept on motivating me to get back to studies.

Gradually I got back to the normal rhythm of life. I joined the PhD programme in North Bengal University, cracked NET, got teaching job in a government college, completed my PhD within a reasonable time, had my thesis published as a book. I could do all this with the enormous support of my parents, teachers, close ones and friends. In the process, my looks changed substantially, because of the ailments and drugs. Massive hair loss, darkening of skin, and weight gain had a depressing effect on my psyche. I lost some friends because of this crisis. However, I have made peace with these inevitable changes that came with the crisis. Notwithstanding the ordeals, I look at the positives. I am a stronger and mature self now. I understand my life and the world around me much better and ready to confront many more crises.

Empathy, the rule of life

My fieldwork among the middleclass elderly people in Kolkata was a unique learning experience. I have learnt that fieldwork is a form of sociation or social interaction full of embeddedness and empathy. I learnt about how urban families are becoming smaller and finally to lone-member households. How "rational" fertility control, dispersal of younger member and deaths in family are contributing to this process. I have seen how the NRI parents (parents with their grown-up children settled in a foreign country) long (with a sense of regret) for their lone child and grandchild settled in the USA or in Europe or Australia. I have seen them living with frail health, ailments and loads of uncertainties and insecurities. Yet they strive for a good life, a life and death of honour. Yet they make friends with old age home inmates, sing and dance and move around in groups and take part in collective activities. Dispersal and careerism have impacted urban

middleclass families in a big way. But the longing for love and care and the warmth of relations have not withered. Working in the urban neighbourhood called Salt Lake and in two old age homes I made many elderly friends, who had extended me unqualified love and support. A close look at the problems of the senior citizens made me a mature and sensitive self and tied me into relations of mutual empathy. Rousseau's idea of pity as the foundation of social relations always fascinates me. I look at my life and the people around me in the same light. My interaction with my respondents changed my approach towards life and my relationship with my parents and all the elderly people I see around me. I am in regular touch with many of my respondents and make occasional visits to their homes.

Detachment as a means to be in peace

From attachments we draw immense pleasure, happiness and emotional support and any form of attachments involves certain degree of reciprocal care and respect and a sense of responsibility. It helps us value ourselves and the people who care for us. But sometimes, attachment can bring pain, sufferings and even humiliation. It takes us to a situation where we feel betrayed and helpless. And that very feeling guides us to detach ourselves from certain relationships. I am a kind of person who trusts people very easily and eager to build relations based on love and mutual empathy. I always focus on the brighter side of people and try not to be judgmental. Because of my over sensitive nature I get hurt quite often. I reflect deeply on the little things that happen in my life and in doing so I get upset, depressed and vulnerable. I try to console myself asking: 'I am not overreacting since this is not something abnormal that happens in life?'. However, there have been instances when people whom I considered to be my closest friends have broken my trust and heart. When I realize that a person, whom I had considered to be my trusted friend, is not reciprocating my love and trust, I silently withdraw from the relation. Instead of engaging into an argument I prefer to distance myself from that person and from all her/his negativities. In this section, I will recount the relationships from which I have dissociated myself after being betrayed.

I am the single child of my parents. Since childhood I was raised in a very protective environment. Both my father and mother were working parents and I had to spend a considerable amount of time staying at home alone since my childhood. I was in my won world. I used to read story books, listen to music, sing songs and paint and thus enjoy my time. In my childhood I had a few friends. In school, I had the habit of talking to everyone but I

made friendship only with those with whom I had mutual liking. I had a friend called Adrita. We were friends since our primary school days. She was sensible, quiet, and brilliant in studies. All the teachers used to love her because of her academic performance as well as her behavior. She always stood first in class. She used to sit beside me in class, would play hide and seek, *kabadi*, *kith kith*, with me. During tiffin hours we used to share our tiffin with each other. Both of us got admitted to the same high school, the most reputed Bengali Medium School in our town. There also Adrita continued to hold the top position in class. I never stood first in class and my teachers never noticed my presence in the class. I had more interest in extracurricular activities than studies. In high school, I made a few new friends. Almost in every class we (me and Adrita) were in different sections. However, we would go to school and return home together since she used to stay close to my house. After class X board examination, Adrita chose science and I decided to take humanities. But she and I used to go to the same tuition for English and Bengali language. We used to have a lot of fun in our tuition classes. Our English teacher had small son. He would sit with us and play with us. Both our English and Bengali teachers were more like our friends and we would chat on very common and trivial issues. I used to visit Adrita's place on her birthdays. Her parents were very religious and they used to have puja in every month. I used to visit her place to have *prasad*. They had a Guava tree just in the front courtyard of their house. She used to keep aside the bigger ones for me. They had a field just behind their house. On hot summer evenings we used to sit there and chat for hours. On the day before teachers' day we used to buy gifts for our teachers. In Saraswati puja we would wear saree and attend the puja organized in our primary school. I was a certain visitor at Adrita's house to have bhog on the day of Saraswati Puja. Before Durga Puja we would visit the market to buy cosmetics together. Just after Lakshmi puja we used to have a three day long fair in the local fairground. I and Adrita visited the fair all the three days. We used to have *phuchka*, *papri chat* and *momo*. Adrita had fascination for glass-bangles (*kancher churi*) and I have always been an ear ring lover. We used to buy a lot of bangles and earrings and would return home happy. I had very few friends in my childhood and Adrita was one special friend who made my childhood days bright and colorful.

In our class XII Board Examination, I scored the highest marks in English in our school, which was more than her score by a few marks. Adrita could not take this in a very positive light. She outscored me in Bengali but I was not upset about that because she had always been a better student in all classes. It was useless to draw a comparison between two of us because

she was in Science stream while I was in Arts. After school she took admission in Siliguri college whereas I took admission in one of the reputed colleges in Kolkata. After I moved to Kolkata, my contacts with Adrita thinned. Whenever I made a home trip during holidays, I would try to contact her but I was never welcomed with warmth by her. Whenever I met Adrita in a shop or on road, by chance, I would always go up to her and initiate a conversation. She would reply but she never took interest in asking me about my life in Kolkata. I could sense that the warmth of our friendship was missing. Now when I visit home, I notice that Adrita makes all efforts to avoid a chance meeting in the market place or on the university campus. It really hurts me because she was one of the closest friends in my childhood. We shared a lot of memories together. I was always curious about her studies, her personal life and about her career. I kept on asking my mother about Adrita. Adrita did very well in her masters and completed PhD with UGC fellowship. She got married and got a teaching job in a high school through School Service Commission. I really don't understand why she has suddenly stopped taking to me. The inferiority feeling or jealousy on her part might be one of the reasons. Even after having an extraordinary result she has been looking for a right job according to her qualification. I, on the other hand, despite being not so good student, studied in good college and the best university in the country and got the teaching job in a government college at a very young age. All these factors might have contributed to creating a distance with my closest childhood friend. Sensing that she does not want to maintain friendship with me I also gradually moved away from the relationship, because no relation can survive if it is one sided. While visiting home if I get to see her, I try avoid her. Making an eye contact will create a compulsion to interact with her which I do not want. Jealousy, physical distance, uneven career achievements have contributed to creating a huge emotional gap between two of us. Cold behavior, loss of warmth and avoidance have made the gap wider.

For the second instance of detachment I have to go back to my JNU days. In 2010 I went to Jawaharlal Nehru University for doing my Masters in Sociology. I stayed in a hostel on the university campus for two years. These two years gave me some wonderful memories which I will cherish throughout my life. The CSSS offered us amazing courses and best of professors and a very productive academic ambiance. Apart from academics I used to enjoy the vibrant cosmopolitan campus environment, which finds representation of diverse cultures that India is. I made friends with fellow students from Kerala, North East, Rajasthan and Maharastra and even Bangladesh.

The most interesting part of my JNU experience, however, has been my involvement in its politically vibrant environment. The posters, the graffiti on walls, *mashal julus*, effigy burning and protest march, sloganeering, *dharnas*, discussion about political and social issues at Ganga and Godavari *dhabas*, critical analysis of various government policies, street plays on political and social issues, everything was fascinating and magical, to say the least. I was awe-struck observing the way the student leaders delivered speeches in front of large gatherings. I often saw the student leaders and the activists representing different political ideologies, the Left, the Nationalists, the Ambedkarites, discussing and debating political issues sitting in front of the academic buildings. The students were doing their Masters, MPhil or PhD while receiving political training. In my early days in the hostel, one night, one of my friends, who was senior to me and was very active in student politics, took me to one of her friend's room where I could see the leaders and activists of Students Federation of India whom I had been consciously avoiding until then. But that day, when I went there, initially I was a little hesitant to interact but very soon I realized that they were very friendly and welcoming. I was supposed to submit a term paper on Tagore's Nationalism in a couple of days. That day, I had a long discussion on Nationalism with some of them, which helped me draw a better and critical understanding of the question of nationalism. I got so excited after discussing with them that I decided to visit them more often. They made me understand the meaning of their slogan 'Study and Struggle Long Live'. I started visiting them on a daily basis, attending their *mashal julus*, protest marches, and I started helping them sticking the posters on *dhabas* and inside the mess. During the protest march I used to give slogans and would sing protest songs. Then came an indefinite hunger strike organized by all the students' organizations demanding immediate union election, which was held up for four years. I joined the strike and sat for a relay hunger strike. After almost a week's struggle we succeeded and we finally had our election after a gap of four years. I used to hang out with my friends and comrades. We used to celebrate each other's birthdays. We would go for attending political speeches outside the campus as well. We would also go for distributing our old clothes to the refugees coming from Myanmar. I campaigned vigorously for our candidates in Union Election as well as in GSCAS (Gender Sensitization Committee against Sexual Harassment). We cried together after our defeat to AISA in Union Election. However, we had a huge celebration after winning the GSCASH election. I had a wonderful time with all of them; but there were some with whom I had developed a very strong bonding. In 2012 I left JNU sick, feeble and

depressed. I messed up my MPhil entrance. I returned home and was not in a condition to even move. My activist friends and comrades knew about my health condition but they didn't bother to call me once to enquire about my health. That was the time I realized that politics will never be my comfort zone. I did activism because I believed in an ideology and a particular perception about the present society, culture and polity and in the process gathered huge political experience. I put a lot of emotion into my activism and also in the relationships that I had built up with many of my comrades. As I was out of campus, all of them forgot about me. I was hurt as I had a reality check. I felt that political activism bereft of emotion and attachment is meaningless. Reflecting back, I thought I would have done better in my studies had I not been involved in political activism. Contrarily, I also think that had I not joined students' politics I would have missed out an important lesson of my life. The painful experience of detachment taught me a lesson; I decided that I would keep faith in the ideology but do politics in my own way, preserving my individual or subjective freedom. I also resolved to extend issue-based support to the political outfit of my choice and would refuse to be taken over by any hegemonic force.

From these two instances we observe a few things about the process of self-formation. At the level of personal relation, friends always jealously compare their achievements and if one is doing much better than the other the relation can be in trouble. The power equation also works here. So long one is underperforming than the other and if the two friends accept this as natural there is no problem; but, if the one who had been underperforming so long outperforms the other the relation is in serious trouble. My political activism has taught me that when the young students join politics, they nurse a dream and their attachment is highly emotive, but the organization works on some "rational" non-emotive principles. So long as you are there active you matter but the moment you move out you are reduced to "nothingness". The organization has a mind but no heart. In a way the attachments and detachments from the subject's point of view is fluid. It works like Engel's dialectical law of 'quantitative change leading to qualitative change'⁵. Once gone, it is impossible to restore the mutual trust and at that point one has to get out of the relationship in order to buy peace. Distancing can really hurt and can even bring depression but it is not at all a bad idea to remove the "tumour". This is a strategy to good life, as a look for new relations, new truths of life, bidding good bye to the rotten ones, applying another dialectical law (proposed by Engels) called 'negation of negation'.

Conclusion

A very brief narrative of some of my lived experiences tells me a few things about the formation of the self that I am. First, one's self is difficult to capture in "concrete"; its fluid and always in the process of becoming through an endless reflexive dialogue between the person (the subject) and the world around her (the object). Second, one way of looking at self-formation is that it evolves through attachments and detachments, which again are not exclusive and unrelated processes. There could be attachment in detachment and the vice-versa. While a few relations are stable, like my relations with my parents, because they are 'total' (where love is unqualified and there is no trust deficit, where the members are tied in a spirit of altruism) most other relations are partial, and fragile, like the relations with the friends, colleagues and comrades in a political organization. The stable relations can withstand temporary detachments since such detachments are not based on any deficit of trust and care but result out of some pragmatic considerations. The partial relations, on the other hand, move through a developmental cycle. Initially, it takes time to build such relations since they develop in a relatively new unknown place when the will to get into a relation for emotional security is at its peak. Relations can also build centering a collective dream, as in case of political activism. But with passage of time and closer interaction the negative sides of the persons/objects in interaction come to the open; the initially hidden personality traits (jealousy, will to domination or authoritarianism) come to the fore. In such a situation, the honest and the naïve partner in the relation suffers the most. But life moves on through detachments and attachments with the new and significant ones. Finally, I tried to bring in the process of attachments and detachments with the geo-physical space narrating how I developed attachment, and then detachment, with the JNU campus, with the space called my hostel room, the Department, the library, the canteens, the theatre group, the cultural programmes, the political organization, the individuals who add life to the campus and make it as it is. After leaving the campus in all my later visits I felt that I was an unknown outsider to the campus. But the impression of two years of active participation in campus life and politics lingers; although I am an 'outsider' to the campus now the mental attachment in the form of imaginaries and fantasies is 'inner' and permanent.

Notes

1. Rousseau believed that people have a genuine human kindness or compassion for their fellow man. Rousseau equated compassion with pity, and he believed that people did not relish the problems of less fortunate people, but desired to help them (Rousseau 2008).
2. In elaborating one of the structural principles of kinship in the book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969) Levi-Strauss observed that the drive for new relations (which is the source of both unity and security) prompt the aboriginal communities to practice exogamy by exchanging daughters outside their own communities.
3. Julia Kristeva (1980) argues that the impressions drawn by a child in the semiotic (pre-linguistic phase) leaves a permanent imprint on the self, formed in the later linguistic phase and the early impressions and images often contradict the linguistic or symbolic formations.
4. Contradicting the father centric interpretation of father-daughter and mother-son relationship of Freud Chodorow offers a mother-centric interpretation of the relationships where the symbolically constructed feminine or masculine self is contracted by the early (pre-linguistic) impressions drawn by both the mother and the children (Chodorow 1994).
5. One can use the three dialectical laws (i. unity of the opposites, ii. quantitative change leading to qualitative change, and iii. negation of negation) to explain the changing relations and dialectically evolving self of a person (Engels 1947)

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