

Editorial

***Homo Narrans* Constructing Identities**

"What is it?" is the fundamental question that human beings raise to answer the basic desire to know the environment in which we live, move and have our being. As we are reflective beings we also raise questions like: "Who am I?" "Who are you?" "Who do you say that I am?" and "Who are they?" These questions are inter-related because to know oneself one needs to know other people and other things. Know thyself is part of the fundamental human quest and images of the self were among the chief concerns of arts, literature, humanities, philosophies and religions. Before the philosophical traditions separated the 'know thyself' from knowing thy neighbor the logos and mythos danced together to celebrate the obvious fact that we belong to a community empirically and logically.

That we belong to a community is a fundamental and obvious fact of human existence and life; therefore, images of self are always intertwined with images of the others. Identities of self and others are constructed together and the self is given meaning in terms of 'others' and the images are constructed in terms of difference. Perceiving differences and constructing images of the other also led to mutual exclusion, exploitation, and expulsion resulting in enmity. This is true about personal, professional, ethnic, national, class, caste, religious and other forms of identities. Co-reflection, conversation and collaboration are the means and goal of living together in harmony, and literature and arts presented world views with a variety of implicit and explicit images of self and others. The images of others are often distorted by ignorance, prejudice and stereotype, leading often to discriminations, conflicts and wars at national, regional and international level. Hence they often oscillated between cooperation and conflict and the other is seen as a friend, neighbor or enemy.

The present globalized and globalizing world brings us a vast variety of the images of self and others showing the amazing unity and diversity within and among us. It is also a fact that the

construction of the self is inseparable from the construction of the other logically and empirically, at the individual and institutional levels. We have bodily-environmental relations in the nature, subject-object relations in the practical world, and subject-subject relationships in the social realm. These three relations which produce innumerable fibres inextricably intertwine to form images of self and others, which are being reformed all the time. We learn by finding similarities and differences among the persons and things around us. The questions with regard to personal identities are answered knowing the physical, intellectual, and psychological properties and social characteristics of the individuals. They include facts as well as values one holds or attributes to others. Therefore these identities and alterities are not just found; they are imagined, constructed and projected. These identities are not finished products with fine definitions; they are more often vague and in a fluid state and are continuously deconstructed and reconstructed. The fields of arts and humanities are the result of these imaginations and constructions in an effort to know where we have been and where we are going, to help us also envision where we ought to go. These stories challenge the existing boundaries and bridges and imagine and construct new ones.

Story telling is species specific to human beings and we are rightly called *homo narrans*. Narrative and Narrating are fundamental ways *homo sapiens* construct and reconstruct individual and social identities of self and others and they form the basis of personal and collective history and culture. We would typically tell others stories in a variety of ways – myths, fables, fantasies, speculations, interpretations, poems, novels, etc. – about our dreams, plans, joys, sorrows, desires, defeats, etc. The elements that make identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, exile, diaspora, and multiculturalism co-exist and influence each other. Together with facts of information, feelings, justifications, memories, etc. are integral part of our story telling through which we imagine and project identities of self and others. The identities are explored, mapped, defined, and challenged in the arts where boundaries are often

overlapping, contested and expressed. It is through stories that we describe our past, present and aspirations about our future and collection of such stories taken together creates personal and social identities. The stories also form interpretive frameworks for further stories to construct identities and alterities. It is chiefly through such stories and reflection over them that we create images of self and others.

Homo sapiens are at the same time homo loquens and homo narrans in the life-world, though academia tended to separate them. Exploring identity and alterity and building accurate representation of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity present at local, national, regional and global levels is necessary for living together in harmony in the globalized and globalizing communities, avoiding essentialist understanding of identities as well as to the contradictory celebration of the other.

This issue of the *Journal of Dharma* is arranged to critically examine and evaluate some of the present and past images of self and others showing the layers present and absent in such constructions to prevent stereotypes and discriminations and to creatively suggest and argue for alternative images to promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, reconciliation and harmony of life.

Don Adams presents fruits of his reading of Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* in parallel with the philosophical perspectives of Emmanuel Levinas in his excellent article "Radical Evil and the Infinite Other in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*." The novel, in which the psychopathic narrator himself dies at the end of the story, operates as an allegorical embodiment and expression of inexplicable evil resulting in useless suffering. The metaphysical implication and fictive logic of transforming the novel's horrific and yet materialistically mundane narrative into a posthumous confession transforms this existential life-trap into an ethical indictment of radical evil. The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Thompson's contemporary, which focuses upon the inexpungeable reality of the Other, to which we each individually owe an infinite responsibility that precedes our birth and survives our death,

allows us to make metaphysical sense of Thompson's confounding narrative conclusion, while providing us a critical ethical perspective from which to appreciate and benefit from Thompson's prophetic cautionary tale.

Building on Eakin's critical position on the self in autobiography and Dennett's idea of self as a 'centre of narrative gravity,' Parvathy Das and Vinod Balakrishnan in their paper "Balancing the Centre of Narrative Gravity: Abjection and Diffraction of Self in Nalini Jameela's Autobiographies" examine the nature of self and identity in collaborative autobiography and argue that our identities control the porous boundaries of our potentially limitless narrative-selves. These narrative selves are situated in nature as they manifest differently in different contexts thwarting any attempt to nail any one representation as original. The paper deploys Haraway's diffraction as the more appropriate metaphor for this narrative-self formation. Against this theoretical background Jameela's revision of her collaborative autobiography, *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude Ātmakadha* as *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli: Nalini Jameelayude Āthmakatha* is read as an abjection (Kristeva's formulation) of her earlier identity and self.

The hierarchical binary of the masculine 'self' and the feminine 'other' establishes polarised discrete categories defining a rigid sex-gender system. In "Navigating the Plurality of Gender in Chitrangada: Identity, Alterity and Beyond" Priyanka Banerjee and Rajni Singh explore how Rabindranath Tagore's adaptation of *The Mahabharata's* Chitrangada in his dance drama transformed the character into a warrior princess who dismantles the hierarchical binary of the masculine self and the feminine other by questioning and redefining dominant gender norms. The paper examines how Rituparno Ghosh's adaptation *Chitrangada - the Crowning Wish* reconceptualizing Chitrangada as an androgynous gender non-conforming dancer who undergoes sex reassignment surgery dismantles the binary sex-gender system suggesting a plurality of sex and gender. The paper interrogates how acceptance and celebration of plurality

leads to a more progressive society enabling individuals to achieve their potential.

The multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and racially mixed nature of contemporary American society is accountable for a troubled history of 'identity.' Identities are shaped on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, class, and gender, all of which are still paramount and alive in the US. Identity has often demarcated between the ruler and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed, the white and the black, the male and the female, often subjecting the latter in the relationships to a prejudicial treatment and identifying it as the 'other.' The demarcation questions the fixed, coherent and stable nature of 'identity' based on monolithic categories, thereby, necessitating a redefinition of interpretive patterns and existing theories of identity. Averi Mukhopadhyay examines the complexities of contemporary identity where individuals are caught hanging tantalizingly between the 'given' group identity and the 'chosen' self identity in her paper "Imploding the Meaning of Identity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*." Coleman Silk, the protagonist of the novel, is intent on keeping his disadvantaged African-American identity a secret from all, including his wife and their four children. His desire for purification and for freedom convinces him to pass as white, and for the most part of the book is seen as deconstructing and challenging his existing Negroid origin.

With the advent of social media and digital imaginaries, the right-wing cultural politics has taken the centre-stage in India's popular imagination. On this digital landscape, images are manipulated to create identities, thereby othering the self and producing alterity. Digital India, which was launched to wire the nation, has paved the way for digital imaginary, and has become a contested site which dominates the public discourse by displaying right-wing political power and a cultural nationalism as defined by groups owing allegiance to the ruling dispensation. Instead of providing an even-playing field for a multiplicity of identities, the digital imaginary has endangered identities. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are used to shame and silence non-conformists to alienate and subjugate, thus othering

the self. Within the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, Richard Rego in his "Identity, Alterity and Social Media: Coercing Silence" examines tweets posted by trolls to name and shame the other to create alterities. Using a case-study of television journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, who for a while quit Twitter owing to attacks on him by trolls, it argues that the online space is a pliable domain on which dominant voices create identities and alterities to suit their agenda. It concludes that images are used to create fake identities along religio-nationalist ideologies, and hate speech and propaganda devices employed to other the self and create alterities.

This issue of the *Journal of Dharma* on "Images of Self and Others: Literary Perspectives," thus, explores how human beings shape their world through the stories they tell and the ways literature and media influence and in turn are influenced by the complexities and complications of identity. These papers were first presented in conferences *Journal of Dharma* organised at St Alysius College, Elthuruth and Christ Academy, Bangalore with institutions of higher education in India and the support of Globethics.net India. With sentiments of gratitude to all the collaborators may I have the privilege of presenting to the readers this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*.

Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief