

Review of: "I is Another"

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On the Conceptual Surroundings of the I

Manu Bazzano's 'I is Another' is an insightful paper that mirrors reflective philosophical thoughts associated with the French poet Arthur Rimbaud's assertion of '*Je est un autre*' in his oft-cited letter sent to his teacher Izambard in 1871. Bazzano (henceforth 'the author') has written this paper in a literary form and intends to deal with the modern problem of how to make and feel one's identity in a society of difference, and offers some intriguing observations on various complex dimensions of human desire, sexual orientation, gender-interpretation, identity-recognition as homosexual or transsexual and feeling of being the 'I' of the feminine character. Filled with numerous interesting references from the existentialist ideas of some popular modern philosophers, feminists and litterateurs of 20th century such as Jean Genet, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the paper raises significant questions pertaining to the conflict and contrast between one's feeling of individuality *within* and one's socially-constructed identity *outside*. The author has clearly stated in the beginning that the paper examines "the complexities of desire, sexual orientation, and suppressed gender identities" and philosophically questions "the limitations of logocentrism, identity politics, and hermeneutics". Interestingly, in the socio-political domain of the globalized world of today, these are some of the burning topics of debate and deliberation across academia.

Rimbaud's letter cited by the author makes two philosophical claims of the existential nature: The first is that the being which utters 'I' defines 'I' as 'thought' (I am thought - *On me pense*) and the second is that 'I' is 'another' (*Je est un autre*). These claims reflect deeper philosophical meanings if we follow Rimbaud to understand his existentialist idea of the individual 'person' and his hermeneutical idea of the 'I'. Rene Descartes, the famous French philosopher of 17th century defines 'I' as a 'thinking being' (*Cogito*) who is taken to be the 'person' and interprets the term 'thought' as "all that which happens in us such that we are conscious of it, insofar as there is consciousness of it in us" (*Principia Philosophiae*, 19). More than 200 years after the time of Descartes, Rimbaud refers to the 'I' not as a thinker, but as an individually conceived and sometimes socially architected 'I'. In contrast to the Cartesian idea of 'I', Rimbaud's assertion of 'I is another' appears to be a sociological projection wherein the 'I' has multiple shades of social and subjectively shaped constructs which the author finds is of great use to know and live the individual 'I-life'. However, readers who have a strong background in philosophy might feel that the paper lacks detailed articulation of Rimbaud's thoughts.

Further, the given reference to the French writer Hélène Cixous takes us to another level of thinking about our individual

social identities created from our age, sex, language and other things. Cixous' questions about the 'I' ("Who are I? ... Who can say who I are, how many I are, which is the most I of my Is?") – actually presents the image of the sociological 'I' intertwined with the philosophical 'I'. Philosophers are primarily concerned about metaphysical questions of 'Who am I?' or 'Who are we?' and attempt to look for the ontological basis for these questions pertaining to our existence. On the other hand, sociologists speak of socially designed layers of identity which according to them determine individual identity and social recognition. They see the individual or the 'I' from a sociological lens and focus more on the question of how an individual being is associated with other beings, or say, how the individual relates herself as an essential part of the so-called socially 'other'. It looks that the author agrees with Cixous and tries to hold that the individual who sometimes finds herself in isolation and alienated very much feels being a part of 'the social other' where there is a very little space for her to live her sexually-oriented life – a life that is shaped by her own subjective thoughts and psychophysical desires. To a common mind, the author correctly beholds that the individual who cannot lead to a self-designed life with no restriction to her physical needs is indeed on a loss of something more crucial, i.e., the loss of her subjective 'self'. However, since the paper is potentially rich in both its content and context, it thematically invites a rather deep emphasis on realizing one's solid social identity sketched out by Cixous and emerging challenges associated with one's sex and gender in modern times for a better understanding of one's 'I-ness' or self.

The author's enthralling experiences of life, his fascination with transvestite and transsexuals and feeling of the good and the bad of the time spent here and there, speak much about the identity-crisis and eventual anguish and remorse of the modern generation. This paper indelibly discusses these psychological and social aspects of individuation and personality, and the existentialist approach to human life that have been central to discussions in the philosophy of Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, Bouvier, Rorty and many others in the 20th century West. To be precise, the author attempts and succeeds in hitting on the sexually-oriented soul with a reference to the French writer Jean Genet, whose life was full of ups and downs since his birth, who was found involved in homosexual acts and prostitution and led a vagabond life. Genet's writings have been a great inspiration for the author to poetically narrate the story of his inner world, especially his reaction to the alluring feminine and homosexual demand inside his body which he feels has been deeply repressed over time, leaving him in a state of melancholy and penitence. Ironically, this is the story of a large section of both men and women in today's world, particularly of those who suffer from the suppression or death of their sensual desires and are instead left to lead an alienated life of miseries and guilt due to social ostracism and stigma. The author has been successful to a great extent in highlighting the problem of social stigma, human sexuality and division of individuals on the basis of gender.

The most interesting thought in this paper that invites praise is the idea of smuggling, borrowed from Israeli-British writer Irit Rogoff, in the context of going beyond tradition and breaking down the barriers of past practices. It is applied to the individual in the context of removing the constraints of social dependence and restriction and moving forward by his own self-rejuvenating psychology. This is what the author highlights when he writes that "Smuggling allows emancipatory practices and knowledge to slide through tightly built borders and boundaries and respond to the needs of the present...it may potentially present an adequate and fierce response to the way hatred and prejudice have travelled and continues to travel through the decades: from misogyny to homophobia to transphobia." It seems that the author from one perspective

intends to explain why people of various sexual orientations, some of whom have lost their sexual desire or attracted to sexual tenderness, suffer from a feeling of guilt for suppressing their physical need, and from another perspective throws light on the life of individuals who feel intense craving for homosexual impulses under social constraints. The image presented by the author in the paper also throws light on the gender identity of the LGBT community, though insinuatingly. The implication of 'I is another' thus becomes clear that the individual, or say the 'I' is actually another person, different from what she or he thinks is biologically to be.

Later in the paper, the author attempts to outline some of the crucial aspects of prevailing identity politics and the nuances related to human subjectivity, recognition, social perception that are affecting the individual and society at large in the form of racial oppression, community-rights movements, division of values, marginalisation of people, and moreover promoting the social divide be that at the level of philosophical ideology, caste, culture, sex, gender or indigeneity. As a matter of fact, the author correctly observes that the individual subject and her freedom have been lost in the social and political contours when he writes that "To be a subject has come to mean to be subjugated to an existing order that defines my identity before I can begin to define myself. Identity is only partly what I choose. For the most part, it is assigned to and imposed on me by the Powers." In this context, the author finds logocentric metaphysics problematic because according to him it ignores the merit of difference, although it invites philosophers to compete seriously against this approach. This is what we often see in the contemporary debate on individuals and society. But it is also true that the philosophical position of many communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, multiculturalists such as Will Kymlicka, existentialists such as Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, pragmatists such as Rorty and psychoanalysts such as the famous Freud, is extremely difficult to counter because their position is firmly rooted in human sociology and cultural orientation. So, the paper does contribute some intriguing thoughts to the debate on the 'I' and the 'other' or 'I is another' although the debates on the universal 'I' and the existential 'I', on the feminine self, the masculine self and the other self, and on the body and the soul, creates a complex web of conflicting ideologies in which the human mind is easily entangled.

In brief, the paper shares some appealing insights to understand causes of gender-biases and identity crises in the society and the social and political challenges faced by the so-called 'other' genders. Everything in the paper - the text, references, contexts and comments - reflects the author's deep understanding and scholarship on the subject. It shows both the seen and the unseen side of the individual self that we can all relate to.