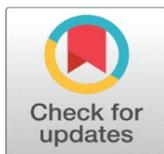# THE EVOLUTION OF SUBJECTIVITY: FROM CHARACTER TO IDENTITY IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of subjectivity was theoretically grounded in religious, communal, cosmic or divine orders, before the advent of modernity. The aim was to cultivate an accepted 'character' through moral and social duties/responsibilities, exemplified in classical Greek philosophy and the Christian worldview. Modernity's advent shifted this focus inward, stressing individuality, celebrating the uniqueness of selfhood and shifting the focus from 'character' to 'personality'. Changes in the literary world began with illustrations by Rousseau's Confessions and later with the rise of scientific psychological theories. Postmodernity further transformed the concept of individuality or selfhood, with now special emphasis on fluidity, situations and realizations that are shaped by a largely network-driven consumerist culture. Throughout this historical trajectory, literature and cultural practices both reflect and construct self-interpretation, demonstrating that human subjectivity is not fixed but socially embedded, culturally mediated and historically contingent. This paper argues that understanding these transformations illuminates the interplay between social structures, technological practices and the inner life, altogether offering multiple insights into the contemporary or modern understandings of identity and the human experience.

**Keywords:** Human Subjectivity, Selfhood, Personality, Identity, Postmodernism, Philosophy, Literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A single account cannot capture the entirety of human subjectivity. Narrow or single/brief accounts would only shield away half of its history, however preliminary explorations have gone on to outline three distinct forms of human subjectivity, ones that have emerged or covers both historical and cultural contexts holistically. They are:

- The premodern culture of character.
- The modern culture of personality.
- The postmodern culture of identity.

Here, we try to understand subjectivity as a way people experience the world individually and navigate or act within said world from a first-person perspective. Human beings aren't objective specimens, whose innate qualities can be

understood/observed from an external standpoint or third person's view. Studies state that human beings are self-interpreting creatures whose understanding of themselves gets fundamentally shaped by their cultural and social surroundings. This theory of subjectivity points out the fact that every meaningful or noteworthy human experience is mediated, or basically formed, through the profound interpretation of one's world, the environment, society and so on. People also try to understand themselves not as isolated individuals, but through collective ideas and frameworks that are essentially tied to their social practices and cultural stories/narratives. So, it is quite easy to figure out in this context that self-understanding is inseparable from the society or environment one grows up in. Accumulated factors like cultural notions, shared traditions/practices, and collective social imaginaries, like religious faith, notion of existence and human relationships, all work together to shape the way how individuals interpret their lives, be it in a positive or negative way. These social imaginaries or notions are inextricably linked to the material and technological contexts of the times as well. They are often expressed through folklore, stories, myths, images and everyday practices. It certainly does not rely on abstract ideas or theories. The dominant ways in which societies shaped the self can be used to trace the historical emergence of human subjectivity.

People in premodern societies were primarily focused on character of the individual, a type of subjectivity that was developed via moral and religious practices. "Who are you?" was the central question of life, framed in relation to a higher power. Since their lives were believed to have meaning only within a broader ontological and spiritual framework, this question required that people understand themselves through divine purpose and the cosmic order. Hence, the importance of faith and religion rose within the framework of human subjectivity. Literary work from this era, like the confessional writings of early Christian thinkers, showcases this very form of self-interpretation, wherein the human subject is shown to be deeply connected to a religious and morally driven universe. As modernity gained traction towards the latter periods, up until the industrial and democratic revolutions, a new form of subjectivity emerged. It was called 'personality'. In this case, the question shifted from "Who are you?" to "What am I?" The focus was now on the person as a discrete and measurable entity, one who is capable of being understood without having to be included within spiritual, cosmological or religious frameworks. Modern societies have gone on to realize that in order to cultivate stable individuals, there must be a direct harmonious relationship with social and economic roles. New conventions or practices, beginning from standardized education to psychological assessment methods tend to support these forms of self-knowledge. The conflict between individuality and social expectations is also reflected in the literature of this era, including autobiographies and writings that examine how societal structures express and simultaneously limit one's personality. Now, we have reached a time where human subjectivity has increasingly been manifested as a form of identity in the postmodern era since World War II, influenced by shifting and consumer-focused social conditions. "Who am I?" is now the most important question in life, not in terms of fixed traits or features but as a frequent process of negotiation within dynamic communities and subcultures. In a world where culture and technology are constantly changing, postmodern identity is defined by adaptability, mobility and the uncertainty of selfhood. A variety of self-interpretations are encouraged by the growth of electronic media too, essentially by the entertainment sector and other globalized forms of modern culture. Modernity has brought about an age where individuals now prioritize consumption and experience over permanence.

Literary texts showcasing the postmodern identity often explore fragmentation, fluidity and the challenges of maintaining one's individual coherence amid a rapidly changing social and technological world. Across the varied historical transitions that we've so far understood, literature indeed offers a vital insight of how human beings have interpreted themselves over the centuries. From the confessional and introspective writings of St. Augustine, reflecting the premodern concern with character, to Rousseau's exploration of personality in the modern age, and finally to contemporary narratives like those written by Michel Houellebecq, grappling with postmodern identity, literature unearths the evolving relationship between the individual and society in a holistic manner. These writings undoubtedly demonstrate that subjectivity isn't a mere psychological state but a substantial cultural phenomenon, that is primarily structured by traditions, practices and the normative structure of society. Later on, contemporary discourses and literature goes on to present the shift from personality to identity. Identity has now emerged as one of the primary prisms, through which people and societies can view human subjectivity and the dynamic trajectory of human interpretation in recent decades. As a reflection of the larger postmodern state of uncertainty and change, discussions in literature, social theory,and cultural studies are increasingly concentrating on the multiplicity, fluidity and constructed nature of identity. This focus on identity emphasizes how important narrative, representation and cultural context are when it comes to understanding and development of the individual self. Modern thought emphasizes that identity questions the fundamentals of what it means to be a human subject in a world that is changing quickly, whereas character and personality were focused on moral consistency or quantifiable qualities.

## 2. HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

One must indulge with nuanced and structured approaches to understand the various complications and historical shifts of human self-understanding and subjectivity. Simplistic explanations or linear assumptions would simply derail the authenticity of research. Studies have continuously argued that human history doesn't necessarily proceed in accordance with a single, simplified and identifiable mechanism. It rather unfolds itself through a complex wave of interactions between ideas, practices, cultural and material conditions. To avoid misinterpretation of human history, it is important to analyze the varied forms of self-interpretation themselves, before even attempting to explain the catalysts of such historical transitions. Literature, philosophy and historical texts are undeniably rich primary sources, enabling the scholar/researcher to trace the development of human understanding across time. These sources essentially reveal patterns of thought and action that reflect broader social, cultural, technological and material structures. It is also worth noting that human subjectivity is never internal or isolated. It is always and fundamentally imbibed within social practices, technologies and public institutions. To put it in a better way, ideas and material conditions are basically intertwined. Beliefs, judgements and self-concepts go on to shape social practices, while beliefs and self-concepts also keep changing in response to the transitioning environment and technological advancements. So, it's quite safe to say that the development of subjectivity is dialectical, influenced concurrently by both internal contemplation and external factors. For instance, in premodern societies, religious beliefs influenced how people perceived their own moral and spiritual lives in addition to directing group rituals. The self was also made into a quantifiable, analyzeable entity by the advent of standardized education and psychological

techniques in modernity, which reflected larger social and technological shifts. Ideas and material conditions are not in a fixed hierarchy of influence; rather, they develop through mutual interaction, each creating and limiting the other.

Premodern societies, like the Greco-Roman world for example, cultivated a culture where an individual's character was given importance, and where individual ethics became inseparable from a moral or cosmic order. Earlier, humans were seen as beings that possess a natural function or essence, where the gradual development of a virtuous character was placed as the central ethical aim of society. Now, what did it mean to be virtuous? The person must fulfill his/her purpose, regardless of the position as a citizen, a warrior or a religious figure. The works of Aristotle and Plato brilliantly reveal a world where individual identity is simply inseparable from societal roles, communal expectations and the overarching cosmic order. Their writings basically state how the importance of one's character would go on to shape how individuals would ultimately interpret themselves. The quest for identity was limited within a plot of ethics, not having any sense of fluidity of flexibility. Social notions in many cases could not be contested too. So another crucial finding here is that the cultivation of character wasn't simply a matter of personal choice or subjective whim, but a predestined or disciplined engagement that goes along the lines of communal and metaphysical imaginings. In Christian Europe, this same ethical framework developed into a spiritualized form, emphasizing faith, religion, moral development and the pursuit of salvation. The premodern subject, which was frequently portrayed as the pilgrim in both literary and religious texts, lived according to unchanging, transcendent ideals, altogether molding one's own personality and conforming to the higher cosmic and moral order. Moral therapy demonstrates the practical applications of such concepts in premodern Europe. People were largely encouraged to participate or improve not only for their individual benefits, but also for the cause of fulfilling social norms or objectives. It is true that such behaviors emphasizing adherence to common moral and symbolic frameworks, were highly normative. The complex relationship between cultural values and self-formation gets further highlighted through this era's literary works, wherein a character's moral decisions and personal development are inextricably linked to their social and religious backgrounds.

Modernity's rise brought about an expanse of changes, adding new theories to the overall conceptualization of  oneself. It resulted in the emergence of a new concept, the culture of personality. Scientific rationalism took over teleological concepts, shifting the focus from fulfilling an external/objective purpose to understanding the individual as a distinct and observable entity. Personality provides an interpretational lens through which individuals can be evaluated morally and psychologically. New-age educational and bureaucratic institutions emphasize on the keen measurement, standardization and cultivation of stable personal traits, to avoid hassles in the functioning of collective organizations, and reflecting broader industrial-democratic transformations. Psychoanalysis introduces a method for studying the human psyche, not as a moral problem motivated by religious or cosmic theories, but as a complex interplay of motivations, conflicts and desires that shape behaviour, or 'personality'. This shift can also be observed in literary depictions of personality, including the works of Rousseau. Early modern novels began focusing on self-reflection, individuality and negotiating with societal expectations. The concept of 'character' continued to exist in contemporary psychological discourse, but its cosmological and moral authority gradually declined. As the focus shifted toward objective self-observation and measurement, journals and scientific texts increasingly substituted "personality" for "character." Personality became a matter of traits, tendencies and capacities,

observed and interpreted within social and scientific frameworks. On the other hand, character was viewed as either good or bad in relation to an ideal. This change demonstrates how transitions in knowledge systems, social structures and cultural narratives have historically influenced the meaning and purpose of individuality and selfhood.

This trajectory of historical transitions that have occurred through the gradual course of time underscores a larger literary and cultural dynamic as well. A vibrant observer would vividly notice how premodern literature shows or depicts characters, whose identities are basically defined by duty, virtue and the alignment with cosmic or spiritual laws. There's always a predefined or objective plot, consisting of antagonists and protagonists who are categorized by the aforementioned associations. In contrast, modern literature stresses on the exploration of individual consciousness, personal development and how individuals tend to negotiate with existing social roles. It is evident that both cases reflect the same interplay occurring between human self-interpretation and prevalent social imaginary. This altogether shows that literature serves as a mirror and mediator when it comes to the dynamic cultural understandings of human subjectivity. With the postmodern emergence of identity, where individuality or selfhood becomes more flexible, somewhat fragmented and at times negotiated, the transition from a premodern culture of character to a modern culture of personality is indeed a major finding. Nonetheless, a character's legacy endures and serves as a basis for comprehending the evolution of subjectivity and historical continuity. It is clear from analyzing these shifts in literature and cultural practices that the manner in which people interpret themselves has never remained constant nor universal. On the contrary, it vividly reflects the dynamic interplay between individual consciousness and external circumstances, as it keeps changing in tandem with historical, social and technological developments. So, a crucial lens for tracking these changes and comprehending how people have conceptualized themselves over time is the study of literature, philosophy and of course historical texts.

## 3. MODERN AND POSTMODERN SELFHOOD

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Confessions, written in the late 18th century, offers a great insight into the rise of personality as a cultural phenomenon. Here, Rousseau started placing the individual at the center of the narrative. Unlike conventional literature, which relied heavily on plots, archetypes and canonical models, Rousseau depicts his own experiences, revelations, realizations, with greater depth and intimate detail, altogether depicting the uniqueness of the self. The narrative certainly introduces a new lens of view or understanding of human existence. The shift in thought is that the self is no longer attached to a divine order, or destiny, but the self is actually a psychological entity capable of narrating its own life, forming own ideals and creating one's own reality. This was the beginning of the culture of personality, wherein personal distinctiveness, inner reflection and self-realization became central to human experience. The two pillars of the literary world supporting this significant transition were romanticism and modernism. The former often took from Rousseau's works, asserting strong value to individuality and self-expression. Each person possesses a distinct personality that is gradually discovered and cultivated through unique experiences. This however differs from premodern autobiographical writing, like Augustine's works, where narratives centered on spiritual journeys and religious fulfilment. Augustine presents a theocentric worldview where the self is already pre-defined in relation to a divine order, whereas Rousseau's work is anthropocentric, celebrating the individual self

as a singular and autonomous entity. The secularization of thought and the scientific disenchantment of the universe has also led to such ideological transitions. Humans started looking inward for direction, meaning and moral orientation, while perceiving the universe as a scientific/mechanical entity that is uncaring. This inward turn is best illustrated by Rousseau's idea of selfhood, wherein he places strong emphasis on independence, authenticity and the quest for self-realization. Modernism's methodical and scientific investigation of human characteristics aided in the development of the aforementioned 'personality culture'. The concept of personality, which was originally based on ethics and theology, eventually became secularized. In order to facilitate categorizations and interventions, psychologists started treating personality as a quantifiable characteristic by the late 19th century, much like a physical attribute. Psychometric testing and behavioral observation are two examples of scientific methods that institutionalized personality research and made it an essential part of workplaces, clinics, the military and education.

Certain universal parameters enabled individuals to be assessed based on observable features instead of cosmic ordeals. This also reflected broader social transformations, including the intense industrialization of society, rise of public institutions and bureaucratic structures. Additionally, the rising impersonality of social relations demanded new frameworks for understanding and organizing human behavior. The shift from 'character' to 'personality' has always been influenced by these social changes. The modern self is expected to carry its own unique traits and habits, being free from the normative roles of society. In this context, literary history has always portrayed a conflict between modernity and tradition because of the emphasis on individuality rather than predestination. Psychological attribution often locates the explanation of behavior in inner dispositions, rather than in situational roles. This reflects the modern preoccupation with personality as a stable and measurable variable. Standardization, which was central to early industrial society, extended to the measurement and evaluation of personality, paralleling processes in mass production, bureaucratic organization and educational systems. This created major institutional shifts as well. Despite the focus on measurement, the romantic notion of a unique inner self remained influential, inspiring humanistic approaches to self-realization and autonomy in therapy, education and organizational practices. Further changes in selfhood, social imagination, and ideas of social order have been brought about by the postmodern era, which emerged in the decades after World War II. Postmodernity places a strong emphasis on fluidity, contingency and flexibility. More and more, social life is seen as a cooperative network, rather than biased hierarchies. The network functions as an ideological framework influencing individual expectations and actions, including perceptions towards the self and organizational structures.

In the case of the modern consumer-centric era, the individual's social presence is only sustained or substantiated through a dynamic web of relationships and opportunities, which one must constantly navigate and optimize. The moral and psychological implications of this shift are evident. Stability, which was once valued in defining both character and personality, has now become less important. More focus has been given to factors like adaptability, mobility and overall responsiveness to changing circumstances. Which is why popular culture praises slogans like "improvise, adapt, overcome" to motivate accepted and expected behavior. Postmodern subjectivity places special emphasis on the concept of 'identity'. While 'personality' showed enduring inner-traits of an individual, identity in postmodern discourse is more fluid and situational. Social acceleration and continuous change have made fixed roles and stable social positions less reliable; people now conceive of themselves in terms of temporary affiliations, networks and relational positions.

The language of identity reflects this transformation: one is no longer simply "a teacher" or "a spouse" but "works as a teacher" or "lives with someone," indicating an awareness of temporariness, constant change and movement. Identity becomes a project rather than a possession, an ongoing quest that gets continually shaped through social, cultural and economic dynamics. The concept relates to consumerist culture because it treats human existence as a perpetual journey, one that every individual navigates through in their life's journey. The quest for identity and self is indeed unceasing.

## 4. TO CONCLUDE

The development of human self-understanding through three historical stages which began with premodern character and advanced to modern personality and finally reached postmodern identity demonstrates that self-understanding depends on cultural, social and technological factors. Literature provides a lens for observing these transformations, offering narratives in which selfhood is both represented and enacted. From Augustine's spiritual introspection to Rousseau's celebration of individuality and the modern psychological focus on measurable traits, literary and cultural texts document the shifting conditions of selfhood. Postmodern literature and theory demonstrate how contemporary society allows people to construct their identity through multiple social relationships which result in different patterns of belonging and movement between different social groups. The current changes demonstrate that people understand themselves according to historical patterns which exist within their respective social environments and cultural frameworks while their self-identity develops through interactions with evolving social and technological and imaginative changes. The historical journey from character to personality to identity reveals that human selfhood is a dynamic and culturally situated construct rather than a fixed essence. In premodern societies, selfhood was defined by communal norms and cosmic or divine frameworks, fostering character as a moral and spiritual ideal. Modernity shifted this focus to the individual, emphasizing personal traits, psychological depth, and the measurable dimensions of personality. Postmodernity, in contrast, foregrounds the fluidity and situational nature of identity, reflecting the imperatives of flexible, consumerist societies and networked social structures. Literature, from Augustine to Rousseau to contemporary narratives, mirrors and shapes these transformations, documenting how selfhood has been experienced, expressed, and interpreted across historical contexts. Ultimately, this paper highlights that subjectivity is inseparable from social, cultural, and technological contexts, and understanding its evolution is essential for comprehending the human condition in its historical, literary and philosophical dimensions.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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