

# Polarisation, Dichotomous Discourse and Imposed Identities: A Study

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**Abstract**— Although media content appears to be, for the most part, open and accessible for analysis, the subtext(s) are largely open for subjective interpretations. An analysis of the subtext(s) of this communications content is an indicator of a number of underlying cultural forces. Analysing this content and these subtext(s) helps us infer fundamentals of several cultural processes. The purpose of this paper is to analyse four different cases and study the underlying subtext(s) in each one of them. The four cases analysed in this paper demonstrate the fact that texts and discourse play an important role in the development and protection of individual identities. Texts and discourse can also be abused by media to destroy and erase identities. Media, society, and groups of individuals have constructive power to develop identities. If such power is unequally disbursed, the result can be abuse of the constructive power to impose, destroy or erase identities.

**Keywords**— Polarisation; Discourse; Identities; Culture.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Analysing media content is important to understand the basis of media impact: Although media content appears to be, for the most part, open and accessible for analysis, the subtext(s) are largely open for subjective interpretations. An analysis of the subtext(s) of this communications content is an indicator of a number of underlying cultural forces. Analysing this content and these subtext(s) helps us infer fundamentals of several cultural processes.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse four different cases and study the underlying subtext(s) in each one of them.

To begin with, I would like to define the context of this paper by defining three related critical terms: *Culture*, *Language*, and *Literature*. Culture, Language, and Literature are inextricably linked. The interrelationship among these three entities can be interpreted from a number of different perspectives. I would like to propose definitions based on broader perspectives.

**Culture:** Dynamic view of culture assumes that cultural identity is flexible, claimable, and it is possible for an individual to renounce membership of a cultural group.

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**Language:** The presence of language can be seen not just in the verbal or textual media. Language is overpowering visually and semiotically. Language is present wherever communication takes place.

**Literature:** In the ancient era, literary media was a prominent media. Performed plays were a major mass media. With the proliferation of mass and social media in current times, it would be useful to consider literary texts as a form of med).

## II. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Individual Identity and Autonomy

Hegel views individual identity as property. According to him, autonomy is a process (rather than an entity) that involves an individual's right and freedom

To acquire property,

To claim the acquired property,

To protect the claimed property, and (more importantly)

To recognise the property of others.

Thus, the Social Contract that human beings enter into in any civilised society provides them right to choose an identity at free will, claim and protect the chosen identity. The contract also expects the individuals to recognise the rights of others to their own identity.

Hegel emphasises: "We choose to become who we are"; and this right of choosing one's own identity can be dynamic and recursive.

*"If emphasis is placed on my needs, then the possession of property appears as means to their satisfaction, but the true position is that, from the standpoint of freedom, property is the first embodiment of freedom and so is in itself a substantive end."*(Ph.R., §45). - Hegel

Just as we exercise autonomy in disposing of properties owned by us and acquiring new properties; we are at free will to acquire and claim new identities and hold multiple identities in our individual portfolio. Similarly, individuals have autonomy to erase, retrace and reclaim our previous identities.

### B. Culture and Cultural Identities

Although we have tried to define Culture as broadly as possible at the outset of this paper, a number of definitions of 'Culture' are narrowly based on the notion of culture as heritage. According to Hofstede (1994: 5–6), "Cultural traits have often been attributed to heredity, because philosophers and other scholars in the past did not know how to explain

otherwise the remarkable stability of differences in culture patterns among human groups.” As Hofstede admits, such definitions underplay the effect of learning and experience acquired from earlier generations. He states: “The role of heredity is exaggerated in the pseudo-theories of race, which have been responsible, among other things, for the Holocaust organized by the Nazis during the Second World War. Racial and ethnic strife is often justified by unfounded arguments of cultural superiority and inferiority” (Hofstede, 1994: 5–6)

In the following sections of this paper we argue that such narrow view of culture as heritage limits our understanding and may restrict individual autonomy..

### C. Polarised Discourse

The subversion of a text and the resultant loss of individual identity can be partly attributed to Polarisation in the popular discourse to a large extent. Polarised discourse tends to present individuals and their attributes in terms of polar opposites such as Good and Bad, Black and White, Deity and Demon, Hero and Loser. These polar opposites become highly detrimental when these other-constructed identities become largely static. Polarised discourse ignores the fact that individual identities (and cultures) are constantly in a flux and most identities exist along a continuum rather than at the extremes of a narrowly defined scale.

## III. METHOD OF STUDY

This study uses a case-study approach to analyse media content to understand the basis of media impact. Texts and subtexts related to the following four cases were analysed.

1. Subversion of a Text by Mass Media: The Lewinsky Scandal Case
2. Imposed Identity as a Theme in Literature: The Case of ‘Hamlet’
3. Imposed Identity as a Theme: The Case of ‘The Pygmalion’
4. Erased and Imposed Identity: Discourse of the State and the Media- The Case of Jyoti Singh

## IV. FINDINGS OF CASE ANALYSES

### A. Imposed Identity: Subversion of a Text by Mass Media

To begin with, let us consider a case of imposed identity. This case prominently suggests how mass media can subvert a text or entire discourse to impose identity on an individual. Background information on the case is quoted below from Wikipedia.

“*Monica Samille Lewinsky (born July 23, 1973) is an American and former White House intern with whom President Bill Clinton admitted to having had what he called an "inappropriate relationship" while she worked at the White House in 1995 and 1996. The affair and its repercussions, which included Clinton's impeachment, became known as the Lewinsky scandal.*” (Wikipedia)

It is well-known how Lewinsky was publicly scorned on the Internet regarding the scandal in White House. However,

Lewinsky did not surrender to the imposed identity. She returned in full public view with her reclaimed and new identity: as a social activist. Lewinsky began discussing the scandal's effects on her and on the society. She also began a campaign against cyberbullying. Today she is known as an activist, a media personality, as well as a fashion designer.

As a result of the scandal, Lewinsky became an international celebrity. She subsequently engaged in a variety of ventures including designing a line of handbags under her name. She was also a media and advertising spokesperson for a diet plan. She worked as a television personality, and then left the public spotlight to pursue a master's degree in Psychology in London. (Wikipedia)

Lewinsky's case demonstrates the power of the media to override the power of social and democratic agencies including the law. While the media defined Ms Lewinsky as an decadent personality engaged in ‘immoral’ extra-marital relationship, the law protected her since an adult individual has complete autonomy to engage in consensual sex with another adult. At the same time, Lewinsky's case also demonstrated how the individual can ride on the wave of negative popularity and exploit the public opinion to her advantage to subvert her identity to create a new persona of her choice.

### B. Imposed Identity as a Theme: The Case of Hamlet

At the outset of the play Hamlet's character has a well-constructed identity. He is a young prince and scholar studying at Wittenberg. As the play progresses, the audience observes Hamlet's character facing a severe identity crisis after his father's death and his mother's re-marriage. These events bring forward the theme of the importance of parents in formation of identities of children.

Young men often identify themselves partly or fully with one or both of their parents. Old Hamlet (Hamlet's father) is depicted in the play as a respectable and successful head of the state whom Hamlet considers a hero.. Hamlet's first Soliloquy goes beyond his anger toward his mother's incestuous marriage. Hamlet mentions suicide as an option since he finds his life without a purpose.

“*To be or not to be that's the question*”

“*Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.*”

The readers and audience of the play also observe that various other characters in the play attempt to impose different identities on Hamlet.

For instance, the ghost asks Hamlet to avenge his father's death. The ghost tries to impose a purpose on Hamlet's life. The purpose is so predominant that it will in itself form an alternative identity for Hamlet. The purpose becomes precarious since the ghost asks Hamlet to take care that, in the process of taking his revenge, the mother is not harmed in any way.

Claudius is another important character in the play. Claudius advises Hamlet to come out of his bereavement and mourning. He reminds Hamlet, the prince, that he stands in line to succeed to the throne upon Claudius's death.

Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, is no different. She echoes her new husband, expressing a desire for Hamlet to remain close to her and to support Denmark.

*Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.*

Polonius and Laertes assume Hamlet to be someone who he is not. Hamlet reacts:

*Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can vex me, you cannot play upon me.*

To respond to the attacks on his identity, Hamlet feigns madness thinking that this garb will protect him from the attacks on his identity. However, this assumed identity of a mad person creates a greater personality crisis because other characters change their perceptions of and opinions about Hamlet. Polonius assumes that this madness is madness of love.

*"Though this is madness, yet there is method in it."* (Act II, Scene II)

To conclude, the play Hamlet powerfully presents how an individual's identity can be attacked, destroyed, and erased by circumstances, events, and significant others in one's life. The play presents the case of a character that has fully developed his identity but is unable to claim and protect it.

### C. *Imposed Identity as a Theme: The Pygmalion*

In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Eliza Dolittle is introduced to the audience as a personality that is consistent with her birth-based identity. Her ragged dress, dirty face, and foul language present her as a flower girl born and destined to live in a forlorn neighbourhood. She meets Higgins, a Professor of Phonetics, and his analysis of her capabilities brings out the other Eliza, a part of her identity that had been completely unexplored thus far.

*"You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party."*

The audience can see here an emphasis on underdeveloped identities that can be developed in our adulthood. Eliza's struggle in the play also suggests that it is extremely challenging and difficult to develop an identity that is radically different from the identity acquired in childhood.

The audience of the play rejoices in the 'succe-ss' of Eliza. Indeed, Eliza goes to an elite garden party and the members of the elite accept her as a 'duchess'. The transformation in her character underlines the fact that language is far more than just a medium for communication. The transformation brings out the power of language to create as well as to destroy. While the linguistic training provided by Professor Higgins creates a new identity for Eliza, it also destroys the old Eliza. Eliza could never be the same old Eliza again.

Just like Hamlet, Eliza has the power of eloquence to to articulately describe herself and her inner conflicts. Both Hamlet and Eliza have the ability to differentiate themselves from their surroundings and from other people in those surroundings. This ability is used to such as extreme that they

are left alone to their devices creating a void and emptiness in them.

*Aha! Now I know how to deal with you. What a fool I was not to think of it before! You can take away the knowledge you gave me. You said I had a finer ear than you. And I can be civil and kind to people, which is more than you can. Aha! That's done you, Henry Higgins, it has.. Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself.*

(*Pygmalion*, p. 103)

Eliza is successful in acquiring a new identity, but is unable to claim it. She experiences emptiness and loss at the end of the play. She tries going back to her roots, to her old neighbourhood, only to realise that she does not belong there. The play highlights that we can never close the gap between essence and expression, between form and substance, between outward appearance and inner reality. Eliza's sense of emptiness and vacuum arises from her newly acquired midfulness that there are no essential differences among various human beings. In Act V, she tells Pickering:

*You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up, the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated."* (*Pygmalion*, p. 93)

The play emphasizes the fact that construction of an identity relies not on an individual but the way others define us and treat us. Thus individual autonomy (to create, claim, and protect one's identity) is entirely reliant on the 'significant others' in our lives. To some extent, an individual has autonomy to choose these 'significant others', just as Eliza chooses Higgins, and later rejects him for Freddy. Hamlet is unable to exercise this autonomy to choose significant others, since he is torn among different loyalties to mother, the late father, the 'ghost', his love, his friends, and other influential members of his community.

### D. *Erased and Imposed Identity: Discourse of the State and the Media*

Texts and discourse play an important role in the development and protection of individual identities. In this section we analyse a case related to a tragic event in India to explore the power of the State and the media in imposing, constructing, and in erasing identities. Let us first consider facts of this case as reported in Wikipedia.

Facts: *"The 2012 Delhi gang rape case involved a rape and fatal assault that occurred on 16 December 2012 in Munirka, a neighbourhood in South Delhi. The incident took place when a 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern, Jyoti Singh,[2]was beaten, gang raped, and tortured in a private bus in which she was traveling with her friend, Avindra Pratap Pandey. There were six others in the bus, including the driver, all of whom raped the woman and beat her friend. Eleven days after the assault, she was transferred to a hospital in Singapore for emergency treatment, but died from her injuries two days later."* (Wikipedia)

Under Section 228 A of the Indian Penal Code, revealing the identity of the victim of sexual violence is a cognizable offence. In the case of Jyoti, the rape victim's name and identity are known in her home town in Ballia and, through

grapevine, in the entire state of Uttar Pradesh. In Delhi, it was said that the victim's family made no effort to conceal her identity and everyone related to the family knows the identity of Jyoti and has been openly discussing the chain of events. Further, there is no indication that the family is facing any trouble because of these revelations. The family members of Jyoti have stated that they are in favour of open disclosure and are not in any way shy of living on as the family members of a rape victim. The mother said:

*"My daughter's name was Jyoti Singh and I am not ashamed to name her. The heads of those who commit heinous crimes like rape should hang in shame, not that of the victims or their families."*

Singh (2013) explains, *"The Delhi Police, whose dubious conduct in the whole affair is not a secret, went overboard to protect the identity of the rape victim and zealously guarded the truth from coming out on the pretext of a law which prohibits revelation of identity in the larger interest of the victim. There is no doubt that the decree to protect the rape victim's identity is guided by a pernicious social mind-set which attaches blemish to the victim rather than the perpetrators of the crime."*

As Mishra puts it forward, *"The moment we created Nirbhaya, we killed Jyoti, we allowed the fictional to overwhelm the original and a pseudonym to box the real character into the shadows. Jyoti, who? Don't blame yourself if you cannot locate her in your memory. The state in conspiracy with the media has managed to erase her from the collective consciousness."* (Mishra,2015)

To conclude, in the case of Jyoti, the state and the media conspired and worked in tandem in a bid to erase the identity of the rape victim. The conspiracy further constructs a culture that protects men in rather than women, and the abuser rather than the victim.

## V. CONCLUSION

The four cases analysed in this paper demonstrate the fact that texts and discourse play an important role in the development and protection of individual identities. Texts and discourse can also be abused by media to destroy and erase identities. Media, society, and groups of individuals have constructive power to develop identities. If such power is unequally disbursed, the result can be abuse of the constructive power to impose, destroy or erase identities. Laden (2001) attributes imposition of identities to 'asymmetrical distribution of constructive power'. When constructive power is asymmetrically distributed, the imposition of identities cannot be resisted by those on whom such imposition is attempted. Refusal to accept the imposed identity may be perceived either as an act against the nation, social structures or as an act of irrationality, lack of understanding or even a psychological disorder.

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