

## SELF CONSTRUCT - DECENTERING IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICATING SELF IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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**Abstract :** “WHO AM I, but *really?*” is a question that is becoming increasingly relevant if we pause enough to contemplate our various realities and our constructed selves, especially in the light of today’s almost mandatory digital presence and personality. The postmodernist wave has crested and broken over us. In its wake we are caught between several realities of our self. The Self is no more a fixed definition...nor is it a destination. Anchorless and rudderless we attempt to construct different versions of our selves at different ports of call. Self-realization and actualizing self are passé. As our lives intersect the lives, beliefs and passions of others, our profiles, our avatars, our constructs are constantly updated. It is in the backdrop of this state of flux that this paper hopes to delve deep into the poetry of the psalms and draw out answers to vital questions of identity in these times of decentering identity even as it makes a sincere attempt to decipher the self-authenticating stand of the Book of psalms which this researcher sees as vital in these times of the depreciating value of the individual. Through this paper the researcher aims to inquire and analyse the various reasons behind an individual having to create various constructs to maintain and purport his or her continued relevance. This paper also attempts to position the Book of Psalms as an appropriate postmodern text because of its various inherent qualities that mimic the qualities and characteristics of the postmodern poetry of our times.

**Keywords:** Self Construct, Decentering Identity, Self, Post Modernism, Psalms,

**Self Construct - Decentering Identity And Authenticating Self In The Book Of Psalms:** In the postmodern fashion runway Construct and Decentering are the haute couture pieces that catch the eye with their multihued patchwork and kaleidoscopic applique work but the highlight of the show, the showstopper is definitely Identity with its cloak of shimmering iridescent colours. All eyes are on identity as it slowly takes the catwalk, saunters down the ramp, pouts, pirouettes and...disappears in a blaze of glory - a sudden gust and billow of rainbow coloured smoke and Identity is gone. In today’s postmodern world, Identity as we know it is no longer an easily discernible concept. Identity has morphed and returned in an avatar that is no longer recognizable to the previous generation. Identity crisis is a very real factor today.

**Self Construct:** Even as Construct and Decentering raise questions like: Are you a sum of parts or are you different parts of a You? Are you yourself a construct or is your Self a construct? These are questions that can bedazzle us leading us gently into a quagmire. Self construct itself is a pun referring to how in today’s world the Self is but a construct and also referring to how we seamlessly, construct different selves of ourselves as we move in and out of different social and cultural contexts some of which may even intersect and thus cause our various selves to overlap. To construct is to build by putting parts together. So to self-construct, is the putting together of many parts of our identity, to create a construct of the self. Decentering is defined by the Psychology Dictionary as “dissolving the unity between self and identity.”

This dissolving no doubt leaves us with many questions.

**Considering Our Self:** Who am I? What *am I then?* What am I heading towards? What would happen to me when I die? Why am I the way I am? Where lies the basis of our responses and the fount of our emotions? These are all loaded questions that we need to pause and reflect on periodically as our self grows and our identity changes. But first what creates our identity? Is it our parents, our family background? Our work? Our religion, our caste, our gender, our culture, our nationality? Our race? Is it the irrational pride we have in being associated with such different categories? How does one define Identity? Can identity be defined? Say we pause for a minute to consider the deceptively simple question of ‘Who are you?’ Socially acclimatised beings as we are, we would tend to resort to the most simplistic answer, ‘*we are, what we do most,*’ at least for the most of us, as we generally tend to define ourselves by what occupies us extensively: our responsibilities in a relationship or rather our occupation but, is that who we truly are? Can what we do really define us? I, me and myself are concepts of identity that we are familiar enough with on a superficial level but these are questions that beg a certain level of self-knowledge and understanding. Fortunately these are concepts that are not just confined to the upper echelons of society and academia. It holds relevance to everybody...every human and not just the literate few.

**Identity In The Past:** Literature however does help in paving the way to a better understanding of the self. The concept of Identity is increasingly becoming

a topic of deliberation and analysis in today's world of fluid identities. However these autogenous ponderings are not entirely contemporary: postmodern or modern for that matter. The attempt to decipher the concept of Identity has preoccupied philosophers, theologians, academicians and artists

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Undoubtedly it is a question that has preoccupied many minds and much study has been undertaken to understand what identity truly means and what it constitutes. Society itself plays a huge impact on our creation of our selves. Our ethnicity, racial, religious, socioeconomic and even familial status has a role in the formation of the self. But the question is can we define our identity in conjunction with external entities or other such standards. Not too long ago Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) initiated the idea of a “decentered subjectivity composed of multiple, socially constructed and context-dependent identities” this multiple identity has become more relevant to us as we attempt to navigate and integrate through the multiplicity and diversity of today's world. While we are still deliberating (through theorizing and research) the implications a decentered identity, positive and negative as it may be, the fact remains that it is here to stay, especially as our technologically driven, socially networked adolescents grow up to take over from us, amidst deepening social, cultural, political and gender diversities the world over.

**Age Identity:** Age is the next natural corollary to consider. Age identity? Can our identity be related to our chronological age or rather to how old or young we feel. Researchers conjecture from a psychological perspective that “motives such as self-continuity and self enhancement may shape age identity. Self-continuity refers to the desire and motivation to remain the same person over time. Identifying with the younger ages one has been thus results in a feeling of consistency with one's past. Self-enhancement refers to the motive to maintain or increase a positive image of oneself. Youthful identities are a way to satisfy this desire in a culture that associates aging with decline and associates

down the centuries. It is a question that has no doubt mystified centuries of plebeians too as they pause on rare occasion from their toil, perhaps it has passed the mind of many a poor farmer resting amidst his toil as Grey poignantly immortalised in his elegy,

youth with vigor and physical attractiveness, reflecting prevailing negative cultural images of old age.”

**Social Identity :** What then about relationships? In 1910 William James defined Identity as a social self with respect to our relationship with others, “We come to know ourselves through our interactions with others.” But we have now gradually moved to an individual centric definition of Identity as in “The self is viewed as emergent, as a ‘selfing’ process, whereby an individual both shapes and is shaped by the situational and cultural contexts within which social interaction takes place” But unfortunately it is this sense of self that is slowly coming apart. We are so context driven that we are at home everywhere (but not truly ourselves anywhere) being different beings in different contexts. “One of the most fascinating stories in contemporary cultural history is how the social conditions of the modern (and postmodern) world and postmodern philosophy have conspired to destabilize our sense of self.

**Personal Identity:** The postmodernist wave has crested and broken over us. In its wake we are caught between several realities of our self. The Self is no more a fixed definition...nor is it a destination. There was a time in literature and philosophy, both of which duly reflected history, when knowledge of the self was considered the highest form of knowledge. The adage ‘Know Thyself’, inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, reverberated in the dialogues of Socrates and in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. It became the cornerstone of western philosophy and consequently English Literature. Thus we also have Shakespeare the National Poet of England echoing this in *Hamlet* (1603) his ‘most analysed play

This above all: To thine own self be true,  
for it must follow as dost the night the day,  
that canst not then be false to any man.

Even as Benjamin Franklin contemplates in 1750 "There are three Things extremely hard, Steel, a Diamond, and to know one's self." Fortunately Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1831 and Coleridge propose a different route to the journey of self-discovery and

identity. Emerson's poem titled *Gnothi Seauton* ('Know Thyself') encourages us to focus on a different direction altogether. Emerson's idea was that to know oneself meant knowing God better

And since the soul of things is in thee,

Thou needest nothing out of thee.

Coleridge's poem "Self Knowledge also subscribes to

the same view urging us to gain our identity by attempting to know God better

Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God!

More recent studies have further distilled the concept of Identity as "in psychology, identity is the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person (self-identity) Unfortunately in the postmodern world that we live in qualities, beliefs, personality are all fluid. Truth is a nonentity. There is no absolute truth in postmodernism. Postmodernists are inherently suspicious of all definitions as language which is a vehicle for ideas is itself circumspect as it cannot effectively convey reality. Thus Rick Wade concludes that in a postmodern society "human nature can't be defined, so for all practical purposes there is no human nature. There is more, though. Not only is there no human nature generally, but there are no individual selves either." Choice is the new mantra. The provision of choice fosters more constructs than ever before. Progress has brought along with it freedom, access to technology, medical interventions, purchasing power and a wider influence of media. This has ensured that the modernist view of achieving one's potential has given way to the postmodernist way of constructing one's own identity. Today it's all about the image and perception. Not so much about the age, relationship or other realities of the self. The psychologist Erik Erikson who coined the term Identity crisis explains Identity as a "constant reproduction of images of self, experienced and put together by an individuum." He goes on to elaborate on his explanation propounding that, "Identity is a dynamic fitting together of parts of the personality with the realities of the social world so that a person has a sense both of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world." It is this sense of 'internal coherence' and 'meaningful relatedness to the real world' that the book of Psalms so ably provides. In fact the beauty and utility of the book of Psalms is that it goes further

than Erikson and other philosophers, and psychologists for that matter, as it helps us carve an identity that is not temporal but eternal.

**Introducing The Psalms** : The identity of God is ever shrouded in divine mystery but aspects of his divine inspiration and identity are revealed in the Bible and quite abundantly in the Book of Psalms. Although it is impossible to obtain exact figures, there is little doubt that the Bible is the world's best-selling and most widely distributed book...recent estimates put the number at more than 5 billion. It is significant to note too that the book of Psalms is the most popular books among the other books in the Bible. "Through the Psalms man learns to communicate in God's own language. It is the personal encounter between God and man. Psalms are education in prayer The Book of Psalms, one of the most intriguing books of the Bible is a collection of 150 poems. The psalms have also been called Poetry on Fire.

**The Psalms As Postmodern Poetry**: The Psalms is a polyvocal book because it is a compilation of poems by several poets, in fact its composition roughly spans thirty centuries with some of its composers living three thousand years apart the earliest being Moses. Most of the Psalms, around seventy three of them are ascribed to Hebrew king David. Like all good poetry the Psalms reflect and express the emotions and thoughts of the individual and the community. The Psalms can be considered as an apt book of poetry for our postmodern times as it embodies many of the poetic features of postmodern poetry like Pastiche, Intertextuality, Fragmentation, Petite Historie, Polyvocality, Iconoclasm, Populism and poetry for the subjugated, marginalized minority. The message of the Psalms is very clear. In Psalm 8:4-5, the Psalmist affirms the position of man in the entire scheme,

What is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
and crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under his feet.

These lines provide a quiet form of reassurance and serenity that is undoubtedly evoked when you know what you are about. From this sense of a glorified

image of the self, the Psalm also provides a temporal view that balances out our Identity beautifully.

"O LORD, make me know my end, and what is the measure of my days;  
let me know how fleeting I am!

**A Secure Identity** : Identity theft is a reality that we cannot ignore as it becomes increasingly common all around the world. The book of Psalms promises us an identity that is not only secure but also enduring. An identity that is enduring and permanent because its

constructs are not temporal but eternal. The psalmist explains what makes life worthwhile and purposeful and we find one of his solutions in Psalm 119. He ratifies the use of thought and considered action which reveals a certain amount of requisite discipline,

a conscious decision when he says, *I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.*

The Psalms urges us to live a righteous life rooted in God, not just going with the flow but making a conscious choice aware that God is watching us and watching over us if we seek his protection. *He who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do.* The Psalmist also takes into account the postmodern angst of feeling like an outsider and expresses the same when he says, *I am a foreigner to my own family, a stranger to my own mother's children;* Once we realize the fragmented parts of our decentered identity the Psalms paves the way for our journey towards an enduring self construct. The basis of this construct, and the most important one in the Psalms among the many other constructs that the book of Psalms offers, is the enormous love God has

for you. *His love is as high as the heavens are above the earth.* Love has the ability to transform a person, God's love has the power to save your soul, God's love is an all-encompassing, embracing love, a redeeming love, a love so tender and compassionate that it can reach out and wipe your tears, drive away the anguish, heal the hurt, forgive the guilt and forge a new identity that is centered in him. Thus self construct is a process, a journey of realizing how purpose driven our life can be once we realize that God is our destination. His wondrous love has the power to transform us, reclaim our lost identities and be more centered as we continue to construct our self: a better self, fulfilled, humble, generous and non-judgmental, with an all-embracing quality and the ability to channel the unconditional love of God to our fellow beings.

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