

Deconstruction of self and everything as metanarratives in the perspective of Buddhist theory: A comparative analysis through blankets

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Abstract: Deconstruction of Metanarratives is one of the important aspects of Postmodernism. In this regard deconstruction of permanence into impermanence as a Metanarrative is a result of temporality for due to continuous change the never-ending chain of circumstances occur one after the other. Many authors have experimented temporality in novels, graphic novels, illustrated novels and poems. Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) is a famous Postmodernist graphic novel that has focused upon the said aspect where not only the characters but also the events are transient and inconstant. This paper aims to explore the deconstruction of 'self' and 'everything' through the analysis of Craig's character (self) and his life events (everything). The research is conducted under the Buddhist Theory of Impermanence (Karunadasa, 2013) also called 'Anicca' or 'annica-vaado' in collaboration with Lyotard's (1984) *Deconstruction of Metanarratives*, which underlies the denial of truth and material substantiality of the world. This study is a comparative analysis of Buddhist notion of Impermanence and Lyotard's *Deconstruction of Metanarrative*. The findings of the study concludes that though temporality as *Deconstruction of Metanarrative* is one of the important aspects of Postmodernism yet it was long before pondered and taught by the Buddhist theory of Impermanence, which teaches human kind that the impermanency/temporality is the core of every animate and inanimate object or phenomenon. One must accept the reality of impermanence and cherish each passing moment as change is irresistible.

Key words: *Deconstruction; Metanarrative; Impermanence*

1. Introduction

Postmodernism is defined as a set of tendencies following Modernism. It is seen as a complete replacement of Modernism. The Postmodernists tend to play with the traditional concepts of stability, religion, and objective truth etc. as Metanarratives. Lyotard (1984) is one of the most identifiable Postmodernists who describes Postmodernism as an era and a condition of the present state of self, society, and culture. He is concerned with the role of narrative in human culture, especially after it has abandoned Modernism and entered a Postmodern condition. Baudrillard (1994) argued that the state we live in is hyper real, postmodern, post-everything where the media simulated reality has become dominant to such a degree that people now have prodigious difficulty to decide what in fact real is.

Postmodernism believes that nothing is permanent and goes under a series of continuous change what is considered a fact today tend to be false tomorrow. Temporality holds the central position in Postmodernist paradigm, which states that since the beginning of times, the creation is undergoing a continuous change. Postmodernists do not restrict their opinion to the authors rather they believe in subjectivity. Postmodernism is disbelief towards grand narratives (Eva, 1992).

In the later part of the 20th century Lyotard (1984) announced that the "postmodern condition" affects scholarship. This was defined by a suspicion of all grand or metanarratives of science, social science and culture that made absolute claims to truth. Instead, the postmodern condition was marked by doubts over the validity of truth-claims, and a willingness to entertain multiple parallel explanations of the social world. Deconstruction as a main aspect of Postmodernism deprives the text of stable meaning and ultimately dismisses the value of anything it touches. In other words, Deconstruction eliminates the center/margin dichotomy. In Postmodernism, the concept of self is abandoned. The individual becomes fragmented in a crowded, noisy world of endless data and competing ideas. The postmodern individual lets go of selfhood and engages in 'play' or the enjoyment of aesthetic experience itself to combat boredom.

Since centuries human kind has been in search of change and novelty. The humans are gifted by Nature with curiosity, questioning, and resistance. Such changes like those brought by Einstein, Galileo and others were an eventual collapse to the beliefs of the medieval times. Diversity is the spice of life, and the stagnant gives an unpleasant smell. Belonging to the 21st century, the sense of unavoidable crisis follows the mind of its generation as an effect of the two wars. The deadlock between the material and

the spiritual, the permanent and the impermanent is a continuous process. There is a continuous struggle between the two that has left an individual to question and decide which way to adopt according to his perception of reality.

Buddha has proposed three basic facts of existence valid for all the animated that is from microbes to the human mind. These basic facts include Impermanence/temporality (anicca), Suffering (dukkha), and Not-self (anatta). The existence can be understood only if these three are comprehended especially by one's own experience. Anicca is derived from a pali, a combination of two words: 'nicca' and the privative particle 'a'. 'Nicca' that implies the idea of permanence. Anicca means the absence of permanence. It is a universal law and can be applied to the present phenomena of the universe, most commonly to all the sensual experiences. (Nourie, 2013).

Anicca being the prime fact of Buddhism believes that every existence is transient and inconstant. Everything is subject to decline and destruction; things come into being and through the flux of change they have to dissolve. Nothing last forever and eventually decays. This inconsistency, uncertainty and temporality is deeply embedded in the root of reality. Furthermore, this aspect is not regarded as a limit rather an expression of the boundless creativity present in the whole universe. Everything is limited to certain duration and consequently liable to disappear hence, everything is temporary. Relationships, ideas and opinions are temporary. It is human nature that he is afraid of dying and wants to cling to the things he assume to be permanent. Moreover, the concept of 'Not-self' is also based on 'temporariness'. Even the idea of 'real you' has no authenticity (Sartre, 1943). An individual is not solid but is dynamic in nature, more fluid rather than clinging to the ideas that are static. Through meditation and daily life experiences this temporality of everything becomes more obvious. According to Buddha one has 'self' but with a variation of dynamic nature. Similarly in Lyotard's (1984) perception 'self' is constantly constructed followed by deconstruction.

The *Blankets* (2003) is an autobiographical graphic novel by Thompson that is focused on the life events of the author from his childhood to adulthood from the abuse of a baby sitter to the experience of first love along with the ups and downs of life in an Evangelical Christian family. Temporality is one of the main themes in *Blankets* (2003) conveyed through the main character Craig (self) and his life events (everything), which lead him into a state of anxiety and confusion that compelled him to question the physical and spiritual world.

2. Literature review

Impermanence refers to anything that is fleeting, not permanent, transitory and dynamic in nature. Different philosophers and authors have described it according to the context it connotes. Theories based

on impermanency are proposed by different theologies, philosophers and theorists even more than 2500 years ago. According to the Buddhist perspective Impermanence is the major and foremost fact of Existence (Ekman et al, 2005). Buddhism declares that there are five processes on which no human being has control and which no one can ever change. These include the process of growing old, dying, decaying of what is perishable, falling sick and passing away of what is liable to pass (Thera, 1981).

Everything that occurs in the world, animate, inanimate as perceived by human kind is inherently subject to decay, as soon as it appears (Hutchison, 1998). According to the three marks of Existence in Buddhism, everything is temporary, impermanent and suffering is part of the existence for animates (Nourie, 2013). Moreover, this theory also focuses upon the 'Not-self', which states that the Buddhist teachings based on 'Not-self' explore the reality of inanimate and animate in depth like no other teachings. Nothing that exists, including you, exists in and of itself, without dependencies, and as a single, permanent thing (Nourie, 2013). The understanding of 'Impermanence' can benefit the individuals in two important ways. Firstly, it can improve human relationships and activities. Secondly, it can encourage people to follow the Noble Eightfold Path (Thera, 1981).

People are bound to be self-centered if they think that the self is permanent and independent. They will not only feel constantly threatened by situations and people, but will also feel compelled to protect themselves, their possessions, and their opinions, at any cost. Once they realize that the self is just a convenient name for constantly changing physical and mental factors, they will no longer cling to it in fear and insecurity. They will find it easier to grow, learn, develop, and to be generous, kind and compassionate because they will no longer need to be constantly on the defensive (Thera, 1981). All the religions contain a set of belief or truth that endure over time, the Postmodern phenomenon just like any theology emphasizes that beliefs and truths are contextually anchored and impermanent (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013). Influenced by Heidegger, Sartre was profoundly skeptical of any measure by which humanity could achieve a kind of personal state of fulfilment comparable to the hypothetical Heideggerian re-encounter with being. In Sartre's account, man is a creature haunted by a vision of 'completion' (Sartre, 1943). Sartre contends that our conscious choices (leading to often unconscious actions) run counter to our intellectual freedom. Yet we are bound to the conditioned and physical world—in which some form of action is always required. This leads to 'failed dreams of completion', as Sartre described them, because inevitably we are unable to bridge the void between the purity and spontaneity of thought and all-too constraining action; between the 'being' and the 'nothingness' that inherently coincide in our 'self' (Sartre, 1943).

Blankets (2003) is a Postmodernist graphic novel that projects the major theme of Impermanence that is the impermanence of self and impermanence of everything through the character's struggle to achieve the purpose of life and cling to the animate and inanimate for the completion of his being and fear of losing any of them.

This research revolves around the following research questions to be focused upon after the review of literature: How the deconstruction of 'self' and 'everything' as metanarratives is depicted in *Blankets* through the conceptual framework of Buddhist Theory of Impermanence and the Postmodernist Deconstruction of Metanarratives? How does the analysis of *Blankets* exemplify a comparison between the Buddhist Theory and the Deconstruction of Metanarratives? In order to search and analyze the Postmodernist disbelief in Metanarratives this paper aims to deconstruct the notion of 'self' and 'everything' as Metanarratives in the novel *Blanket* through the paradigms of Postmodernism and Buddhism. According to Postmodernism there are no grand stories, which can give meaning to everything and define what is true or real. Truth and reality are subjective phenomenon that negates the idea of objective truth. According to Lyotard (1984) "postmodernism is incredulity towards metanarratives".

A conceptual framework is designed by the researchers to do a comparative analysis of the above mentioned theories. Consequently, to represent that the Postmodernist Deconstruction of Metanarratives is not a novel phenomenon rather centuries before it was the part and parcel of Buddhism known as Impermanence or 'Aniccam'. The researchers have built a conceptual framework of Lyotard's (1984) deconstruction of Metanarratives and the Buddhist Theory of Impermanence (2013) for the analysis of the selected novel. The research is a descriptive qualitative textual analysis of the main character and his life events as narrated in the novel.

This study is delimited to the analysis of Craig's character both as self and everything based on his life events in the graphic novel *Blankets* (2003) although the novel has other characters too whose actions add to the story.

The Buddhist theory of Impermanence of 'self' and 'everything' also known as aniccam, proposed centuries ago is applied to a Postmodern graphic novel the *Blankets* in collaboration with Lyotard's Deconstruction of Metanarrative that explain a certain set of phenomena, but don't make any claims to the universal truth. Moreover, it is a comparative analysis of Postmodernism and Buddhism in order to suggest that the idea of impermanency/temporality also known as deconstruction of Metanarratives is inherent in the universe since the beginning of times whereas the Postmodernists have adopted and reincarnated it from a new angle namely, 'Deconstruction'. This is again the essence of Postmodernism to deconstruct the old into new and novel. The study is equally significant for the

analysis of a graphic novel *Blanket* that is a Postmodernist genre of 21st century literature.

3. Critical discussion

The two wars have left the generation in a constant struggle to find satisfaction, and happiness and grip it but everything in the universe is temporary. Happiness and satisfaction are short lived, and passes away with a passage of time, leaving human kind into a confusion of inconsistency. From a single cell to the human mind, change is a continuous process. Beliefs, attitude, feelings, thoughts, attachments and emotions are fluid in nature. What is accepted today may be challenged tomorrow. The novel *Blankets* by Thompson is one of a kind where through the protagonist it is delineated that 'self' and 'everything' are temporary thus, it projects a notion of deconstruction related to the phenomenon of permanence.

The plot of *Blankets* starts from Craig who belongs to an Evangelical Christian family. Craig along with his brother has been a victim of child abuse by his male baby sitter. He met Raina his first love in a Bible camp, which unfortunately did not last long. Being a good Christian at one time, Craig soon found himself not a Christian anymore. As a graphic novel *Blankets* has a combination of text and visual images that convey the explicit and implicit messages of temporality related to the universe. The following analysis projects the deconstruction of self and everything as Metanarratives of permanence. As mentioned before the analysis is done through the conceptual framework of Postmodernist Deconstruction of Metanarratives and the Buddhist theory of Impermanence. The textual analysis is done through Craig's character and his life events that are represented by different lines and passages.

4. Deconstruction of 'self'

According to Buddha one has 'self' but it is fluid and dynamic in nature. As a Postmodern aspect 'Not-self' is one of the major themes running throughout the storyline. Craig as a protagonist is found inconsistent from his childhood since he was in grade three till the end when he returns after he abandoned Christianity.

Craig and his younger brother Phil shared the same bed in their childhood often they use to fight for space. Phil is caught by their father disturbing Craig and taken to the cubby hole. Later, Craig's attitude of being selfish changes, "I should have been taken to the cubby hole that night...because I was a pathetic older brother" (Thompson, p.8). When Phil is taken by their male baby sitter to the separate room, Craig did not stop him, which he regrets later, "I neglected my protective role in dangerous situations" (Thompson, p.8). His day to day experiences brought different changes in his 'self'.

Craig is going through a 'Not-self' dilemma since his childhood when he was sexually abused by the

male baby sitter, "...since a child, I was always displaced from my body" from my 'self' and "I saw it only as a receptacle for my soul" (Thompson, p.291-292). Craig and Phil were close when they were young they use to sleep in the same bed, playing and drawing together, but as the time passed, Craig felt that the closeness was not the same as it had been, "...he is just a total stranger to me now" (Thompson, p.461). He is three years elder from Phil and regrets his behavior towards him, "...but perhaps worst of all, I'd constantly threaten him with my discouraging discoveries of the 'real world' as if my three years of seniority made me an expert" (Thompson, p. 19).

Life was never easy for Craig. As a child, his experiences at school and at home made him afraid of life, "I thought that life was the most horrible world anyone could ever live in and that there had to be something better" (Thompson, p, 38). Further the helplessness made him to escape to a place where he could avoid being mistreated by life, "...every night I would scheme of running away....how far to California?" (Thompson, p, 39). The reality of the world is not always smooth, hard times come, good times go. Craig never had a positive feeling towards this fact and often felt being threatened by it, "...that the real world could only deliver new threats" (Thompson, p. 40) but simultaneously his 'self' is constantly changing and he believes, "... and that I should be GRATEFUL for the security I have" (Thompson, p.41). Being an elder brother Craig did not share much of his time with Phil because of the age gap, but when he did, he felt his 'self' complete, "and indeed when we drew together, often collaborating on the same page, I felt connected to Phil" (Thompson, p.44). Throughout the novel Craig is seen in a constant competition with his own self instead with the world. He wanted to decipher the meaning of the world, his existence and purpose in the temporary stage called earth, "...but I knew I wasn't competing with him, but against myself and 'in that sense, I always lost'" (Thompson, p.134).

Craig has an interest in drawing but is discouraged by his teacher that one cannot keep on drawing for eternity. Losing all hopes, he walks towards the postbox and finds Raina (his beloved) who gives him a letter that motivated him to draw again "...and her letter renewed my faith in the notion of making marks on paper" (Thompson, p.142). Since his childhood, Craig has been watching his mother as a staunch Cristian, which also has a strong influence on him. Thinking about God, Jesus, Heaven, sins, forgiveness has been an important part of his routine. He wanted to attend the Christian college but soon he undergoes through a phase of change when Christianity loses its inspiration for him, "I don't think I could ever tell Mom and Dad that I'm not a Christian anymore (Thompson, p.531)". Simultaneously, Craig is in a state of ambivalence. He cannot confess his lack of faith to his parents instead he pretends that he has one, "I can't deny my Lack of Faith either, I still believe in God; the teachings of Jesus even, but the rest of Christianity..." (Thompson, p.532). Lyotard's (1984) set of micronarratives that

explain a certain set of phenomena but don't make any claims to universal truth is reflected through the 'self' of Craig, doubts hinder his faith in Christianity too so Christianity as metanarrative cannot hold the center. "...leafing through the pages of Bible, I marveled at the "OR's" doubt is reassuring" (Thompson, p.563).

'Self' is Craig's constant companion still he wavers between facts and desires. As suggested by Sutra there is no self, soul or world and nothing lasts forever. This element of inconsistency and temporality is made obvious through meditation as well in the novel. "How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface, to make a map of my movement... no matter how temporary" (Thompson, p.582). Thus, through the above analysis of 'self' analyzed by the character of Craig it is evident that just like any other phenomenon human self has no stability as it keeps on changing due to the cycle of transformation one has to pass through. The notion of impermanency is represented through the quoted lines and text of the novel that suggests Craig is continuously going through different phases of change and development. The experiences of his life from childhood to maturity are instrumental to change his sense of self; therefore, the permanency of self is a false claim.

5. Deconstruction of 'everything'

The Postmodern condition is marked by doubts over the validity of truth-claims, and a willingness to entertain multiple parallel explanations of the social world. Similarly, according to the Buddhist Theory of Impermanence, everything whether animated or unanimated is temporary and will dissolve somewhere in the universe. "Our bodies are temporary". "That means they can get hurt like Douglas collar bone and they can die. We all are going to die" (Thompson, p. 48, 49). These lines are said by Craig's teacher that reflects the same approach towards the temporary nature of 'everything' as defined by Buddhism. The events of day to day life spin up and down, from happiness to sadness and from hope to hopelessness. "...the life we live in is not always fair" and "people you care about can get sick and hurt" (Thompson, p. 48). Furthermore, he also reflected upon the temporary life of a man on earth, "...compared to eternity, our lives on Earth are only a tiny dream we fall into..." (Thompson, p. 50) From a single unit of cell to the human kind and everything in the universe is going through the episode of temporality. Similarly, the miseries of human life are temporary and do not last long eventually they dies off. Craig dreams to get rid of his miseries and every single teaching at school makes him strive for peace, "I grew up... an eternal world...that would wash away my temporary misery" (Thompson, p.51-52).

Every created being comes into this world, contribute its part to be played and leaves. This life does not last forever. Craig is often seen thinking of his life and the world, "...this world is not my home; I

am only passing through" (Thompson, p.53). Anything that is permanent has a meaning, but the temporary nature makes it meaningless. Craig is also often seen struggling for the meaning of his life, "Pleasure is meaningless, Toil is meaningless, Wisdom is meaningless, and everything is meaningless" (Thompson, p.56). If one looks at the natural phenomena they also have a temporary nature. Weather though it is a blessing from God to his creation is also temporary. With the arrival of one season the other leaves and ceaseless change continues. For Craig, summers and winters were never favorable. "During summer...the heat that found its way....and settled in a suffocating mound" (Thompson, p. 68) and "winter was worse when our room became unbearably cold" (Thompson, p. 72). After a huge snowfall, Craig finds the city "Everything's so clean and pure" but Raina soon reminds him of its impermanent nature, "yeah, but shortly it'll be stained with the city and be an awful, poop-brown, slushy mess" (Thompson, p. 242). The snowflakes, sparks of light (static electricity) as inanimate, are also even prone to dissolve after a short span of time. "A snowflake alit my nose -and melted" (Thompson, p.92). Craig and Phil find static electricity in their blanket, chasing it but it also disappears, "when we returned to bed, the sprites were gone" (Thompson, p.252).

Relationships are temporary and end when they lose their essence and worth. Sometimes gaps in these relationships are also temporary, may be caused by the role of fate. If these relations provide pleasure, satisfaction and happiness they simultaneously give pain. When disturbed for any reason they seem to be short lived and the agony lingers on. Craig and Raina had no contact for some time, "A momentary lapse in Raina's and my correspondence only intensified my illness" (Thompson, p.154), and "I could feel a wall separating us, I could feel time passing" (Thompson, p.341). Raina's parents were not doing well and to avoid fights, her father had to move somewhere else for some time. Raina's father tells Craig about it, "I mean we were fighting a lot.... So, I'm temporarily living in a one-bedroom apartment...temporarily" (Thompson, p.242).

Transition is better than being static. Each passing moment of life is temporary, short lived and ultimately ends. Waking up at Raina's place, Craig is unable to comprehend the time properly, "...and because I couldn't trace the transitions...from day to night to wake to sleep to dream to wake again" (Thompson, p.228). All the earthly labels assigned to human kind will end too. Relation of brother, sister, husband, wife, mother and father are temporary and will change in heaven, "...and the isolation from others established by these Earthly labels will be eliminated" (Thompson, p.365).

Craig and Raina got habitual of each other and the essence of impermanence starts to fade off from their lives. For Craig to discover new things seems exiting but that too ended somehow. Raina feels, "I guess what I'm trying to say is that everything ends...

"end" is too graceful a word....everything degenerates, crumbles" (Thompson, p. 371), "and slowly the snow began to melt" (Thompson, p.371). Relations, thoughts, feeling, moments, attachments, desires, wishes, animate, inanimate, everything is temporary. Everything will vanish leaving behind temporary traces this thought is very beautifully represented in the novel in the following line, "...what was left of the snow was hardly snow at all; Rather scabs of ice" (Thompson, p.509). Thus, the essence of nothingness or impermanency is equally exemplified by Craig's life events. The analysis of his life events suggests that just like self 'everything' else is also transient and temporary for nothing lasts forever.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of *Blankets* (2003) with respect to 'self' and 'everything' depicts impermanency/temporality as a major theme and one of the most significant aspects of the Postmodern era as proposed by Lyotard. Through the character and life events of Craig, the author has not only thrown light on the temporality of 'self' but also on the temporality of 'everything' that suggests nothing is absolute or Metanarrative. Life is not fair enough to any individual. Time and tide waits for no man. Every animate and inanimate is liable to perish. Craig did not have a fair childhood. Being abused by the baby sitter was a nightmare but it did not last long. Although he was close to his brother once yet soon he finds out that one-time closeness does not last forever. The regrets of childhood haunt him everywhere for being selfish towards his responsibilities as an elder brother. He is constantly undergoing through a transient state. Confusion and anxiety are part of his life. Craig belongs to an Evangelical background, studying and following the teachings of Jesus should be the priority of his life, but he finds out that doubts and 'OR's' overcome his faith. His feelings, thoughts and priorities are not permanent and change with each sunshine. Craig used to draw in his childhood but finds it to be the waste of time and eventually burns them all, "I wanted to burn my memories" (Thompson, p.59). As soon as he meets Raina, he feels that his muse has arrived and resumes his old habit. Furthermore, in the company of Raina, his love flourished, but that was also for a short span of time, temporary in nature. Their relationship ended, 'end' is too graceful a word. To live in peace, it is important to let go of the chains of fear and losing what is liable to perish. Craig accepts this fact and eventually let go of Raina and the memories attached to her. In the end, he is seen walking on the snow, "How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface, to make a map of my movement... no matter how temporary" (Thompson, p.582). Hence, it is amply represented through the character and life events of Craig that none of the narratives whether self or everything are grand or Metanarratives. Similar patterns of deconstruction

are also brought to the limelight by the application of Buddhist Theory of Impermanence.

A comparative analysis through the above critical discussion suggests that although Impermanence as a Deconstruction of Metanarrative is one of the important aspect of Postmodernism but it was long before pondered and taught through the Buddhist theory of Impermanence also called 'aniccam', which teaches human kind the fact of universe that is the impermanency of every animate and inanimate. Instead of clinging to these temporary desires and carrying fears to lose, one must accept the reality of impermanence and cherish each passing moment.

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