



# LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND FRAGMENTATION -AN UNFINISHED PROJECT: LACANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT:

*This research article is based on the Jacques Lacan's theory of "The Mirror Stage" his perspectives on the development of human identity and the process of the identity formation His major contribution is to show how human identity is constructed just via language, how human development and human identity is contingent on the language. Language itself is in flux, constantly fluctuating. He actually conducted a mirror test placing a child in front of the mirror and watching the child gradually learned to recognise itself in mirror. Thus this test lead to the development of the theory of "The Mirror Stage" It is important to discuss the Lacan's theory of the mirror stage as it emphasise the development of the human identity, how this stage contributes in the language acquisition process as well as how the whole process of identity formation and language acquisition remains an unaccomplished project. Lacan brings to light the idea of formation of "I" as we experience in the psychoanalysis. Lacan's main formulation is it the lack of something that causes the gain of the signifiers. Thus language is always connected to the loss of the object and the desire. Language itself is about lack, as signifiers do not lead to any final meaning but more signifiers.*

**INDEX TERMS – Identity, Mirror stage, signifiers , signified , language**

Fragmentation, Identity, signifiers, signified , the mirror stage, development,

## I INTRODUCTION

Jacques Lacan is renowned psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, thinker who advocated "return to Freud". His ideas had a significant impact on Post-Structuralism , critical theory , linguistics, as well as French philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century .By "return to Freud" he meant not rigidly following the Freud and his theories but he formulated return to the basics of the Psychoanalytic school. Lacan was greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud the most significant psychoanalyst, who gave the concept of unconscious controlling consciousness, our actions. Psychoanalysts employed a therapy called psychoanalysis that aimed to cure mental disorders 'by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements of mind. The method of psychoanalysis is to let the patient talk freely so that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing problems can be brought into the consciousness. Lacan's work apart from Freud shows the influence of the great thinkers and philosophers, he studied Nietzsche, Kierkegaard , Marx, Hegel, Kant, Descartes, Aristotle, Plato, Newton, and numerous others. Lacan's major contribution is to show how human identity is constructed just via language, how human development and human identity is contingent on the language. Language itself is in flux, constantly fluctuating.

## II SELF RECOGNITION

In 1936 Lacan delivered his first lecture on "Mirror Stage" in response to Sigmund Freud's notion of ego based psychology. Although Lacan never admitted or attributed the theory of "The Mirror Stage" to any person but he did draw on the work of the Psychologist Henri Wallon as five years before the theory given by Lacan. He actually conducted a mirror test placing a child in front of the mirror and watching the child gradually learned to recognise itself in mirror. Thus this test lead to the development of the theory of "The Mirror Stage". Our idea of self is rooted in the illusion because mirror is itself is not able to reflect the real reality. Lacan tries to show that human child is delighted to see his own image in the mirror that itself is a construction. A child identifies with just an image a reflection in the mirror. It is important to discuss the Lacan's theory of the mirror stage as it emphasise the development of the human identity , how this stage contributes in the language acquisition process as well as how the whole process of identity formation and language acquisition remains an unaccomplished project. Lacan's works show the impact of the French linguist Ferdinand De Saussure who stressed that language is nothing but a play of signifiers one leading to another and the meaning is postponed in an unending chain. Lacan gave central importance to language in investigating unconscious and the developmental stages of human life. Lacan's major contribution is to see how

we are caught up in language and our idea of identity is structured by the language we use and the whole idea of identity is a fragmented project.

### III . PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT

Lacan studies the process of human development , language acquisition as well as identity formation in a child. He studies the process of human conditioning and socialising a child through the process of the language acquisition. Lacan in his mirror stage talks about how an infant sees his image in the mirror and starts recognising his own self as different from the mother. Lacan observes how a child first recognises himself as the separate from the other . The process of self recognition or in other words identity formation starts from the age of 6-18 months when an infant sees his reflection and recognises himself as a distinct individual. Lacan distinguishing human infant from the other intelligent animals like chimpanzee and monkey argues that as soon as they recognise their own image in the mirror they lose interest as the experiment conducted by psychologist Köhler shows. Where as compared to the human infant who shows an attraction and interest in his own reflection in the mirror. Lacan emphasises the importance the recognition of his own reflection in the mirror as the first step to the learning his own distinct and separate identity and further contributes to the identity formation of the child. Thus the process of identity formation does not start when an individual grows but starts as such a tender age. Thus this stage plays a vital role in the development of the individual. Lacan brings to light the idea of formation of “I” as we experience in the psychoanalysis. As Lacan describes in case of monkey once an image is mastered it is found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in the series of gestures. A child experiences a relationship between the movements of his limbs and their reflection in the mirror. Lacan describes the experience of an infant who has yet not learnt to walk, taking a support fixes himself and his gaze on the mirror and is very much attracted by his own image in the mirror.

### IVThe FORMATION OF THE SELF

Lacan takes a Freudian term Libido which implies a sexual energy that fluctuates and can be directed towards any number of objects. In narcissism the ego itself is invested with Libido. Lacan believes his stage as a part of machine like process of psychological growth that reinforces the belief in “Paranoiac Knowledge” that helps in the formation of the self that we experience by looking into the mirror. Lacan takes up a Latin term “Imago” to refer to as reflection an individual sees in the mirror , the term was actually used by C.G Jung to refer to image or identity formed by an individual. By identifying with images that emerge from the collective consciousness, a shared reservoir of mythical figures and scenarios. Lacan argues that the child first recognises oneself as a separate individual what he calls as the “Ideal-I”.

...the function of the mirror stage as particular case of the function of *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality- or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.

But there always remains a gap between the psychological projection of ‘I’ create ( the outer world) and reality ( the fragmented inner world). Because Lacan goes on to say, the subject is always marked by fragmentation. Lacan’s main idea is that the subject is never complete but always fragmented. As postmodernist argue that an individual always tries to present himself through the language but he always lacks in that, he is unable to achieve that. As French linguist Saussure argues that language is never complete , it is just a play of signifiers a complete meaning is never completely achieved. Postmodernist emphasised the idea that if we can only know ourselves through language, thus we can never fully know ourselves. As one signifier leads to another and it continues to be an unending chain. Lacan as Postmodernist believes that there cannot be a single identity that can be referred to via language. Freud believes that we are in the control of our mind, the unconsciousness that the subject is totally unaware of. Lacan argued that “our unconsciousness is structured like a language”. As unconsciousness is actually structuring one’s consciousness via language thus the idea of understanding one’s identity is dispersed over sliding signifiers. His idea of the subject constructed by language is basically influenced by neo Marxists such as Althusser and Žizek. The idea of lack of completeness lack of complete identity is postmodern and post-Structurlist idea. Post modernism believes in the idea of completeness is ungraspable.

### V. SELF IDENTITY FORMATION- UNFINISHED PROJECT

Lacan believes that mirror stage has a significant role in the psychological growth and it further reinforced his belief in “Paranoiac Language” P.K Nayar in his Contemporary History and cultural theory points out Lacanian model of the identity formation. The first stage of the process is the The Imaginary in this stage a child identifies with the reflection in the mirror and also associates his own limbs and movements in the mirror with himself. Lacan compares the mirror stage as the conception of the relationship between the child and the mother. As a child does not see a difference between his own reflection in the mirror and the mother. When a child sees his own reflection in the mirror he does not see a difference between his own self and the mother. When a child sees his own reflection in the mirror he does not see a difference between his own self and the reflection in the mirror. Thus the idea of the self identity , idea of the self is always contingent on the idea of the other. One recognises one’s separateness from the other in this way the idea of the self identity comes into being. The idea of self identity always remain disjointed, an unaccomplished project.

The child looks into the mirror and thereby giving himself some meaning. He thinks he can substitute himself with the mirror image. As Nayar points out that Lacan uses the term ‘meconnaissances’ which implies misrecognition, the smooth, whole and coordinated reflection that he sees in the mirror.(75)

Lacan stresses that in the mirror stage the image an infant sees in the mirror does not correspond to the actual physical reality the infant experiences. Thus the infants recognition of his or her own reflection in the fact of ‘misconnaissance’.

Language as a tool for Expression of Identity

Nayar goes on to describe the second stage as ‘the Symbolic’. This is the stage when the child acquires language and a significant formulation in Lacan. With the language acquisition stage a child enters the society and the social relations. Language is actually a tool that helps to express one’s own self one’s own ideas, thoughts. Language is believed to be a significant pillar of the identity formation. A child



enters the language and recognises himself as different from the other. 'I' and 'they'. In language a child discovers the society as well as social relations, father, mother, and as well as his own self 'I'. Taken away the most important instrument language and 'I', it becomes next to impossible to define oneself. A child recognises himself with a name given to him that is also possible because of the presence of the language. A child discovers himself as separate from the others. The third stage is 'the real', this is the order that both the imaginary and the symbolic try to control. This is the stage where the imaginary and symbolic seek power and the imaginary and symbolic seek power and the psyche is struck between the 'lack'. Thus the 'real' is actually ungraspable, unattainable. Lacan argues that we are so caught up in language that it is difficult to express oneself outside the language.

## VI. CHAIN OF SIGNIFIERS

Lacan also believes that our desires are actually the desires of the others. Desires that we call our own are actually the constructed desires. Whatever we desire is actually the desire that is not our own but the desires of society, desires of our relations passed on to us. He argues that the reality is that desire that is linked to a lack and in fact lack is a desire. Lacan turns to linguistics and suggests that language and identity formation is basically a fragmented process. As all the signifiers in the language actually gesture toward a chain of signifiers and the actual meaning is never captured to fill the lack. We actually pursue more signifiers. As in language we are never able to reach the final end signified.

Lacan's main formulation is it the lack of something that causes the gain of the signifiers. In the case of language, the language is always connected to a loss of the object of desire that is the mother. Thus language is always connected to the loss of the object and the desire. Language itself is about lack, as signifiers do not lead to any final meaning but more signifiers. Language does not come from within the subject. But actually language process does not start with the birth of an individual but an individual enters the process of language that is already continuing. Language that an individual uses to express his own self as well as that makes him enter the social world is the language of the other.

## VII. FRAGMENTED IDENTITY

Not only a child's identity is a fragmented but Lacan also talks of female identity that is also constituted because of the lack. Females are defined as the other what males are not. So the female identity is also identity that has originated from the lack. Lacan wants to highlight the Derrida's concept of these binary opposites, both dependent on each other. It is not that female is constituted outside the language but only in particular ways as a negative. Thus Lacan brings out the idea that a child's identity is based on the differences from the other. And the Mirror stage works as the threshold that works as an entrance to the language system. Language system helps him to separate him from the mother, as the mother exists for him in a language system. Even our idea of our own identity exists because of the presence of the other, the moment we try to understand the idea of human identity as independent and separate from the other the whole idea of identity is shattered. Language itself operates on the principle of difference from the other. Without the other a person cannot define himself, thus the whole idea of defining own self depends upon the other, who is different from us, who we are not, the moment it is abstracted to make it stand alone it falls. So idea of complete identity is mere illusion.

Language actually exists in a desire. The desire is the desire for the final meaning. One signifier follows the other signifier which makes the identity formation a continuous and an unfinished project. Language will always be a 'sliding of the signified beneath the signifier'. Signified that fill the desire are actually inaccessible. They slip from our hands. For example when an individual goes to define his own self the first and the foremost instrument that is required is language. A person takes the help of 'I' to define his own identity and whatever goes a person goes to define actually add to the chain of his identity recognition but the real meaning actually goes beyond our reach. In the mirror stage the child creates the 'I'. However Lacan points out that the pronoun 'I' is an unstable and an empty entity, it takes meaning only from the context of its utterance. Language always refers to something not present in the sign. This means that a language always operates by the absence. A human subject always lives under the illusion that desire/ meaning will finally be attained and achieved in the end or fulfilled in the end. Language and the desire actually postpone this end signified.

Lacan in his 'The Insistence of the Letter', first delivered in 1957 begins by highlighting the importance of the language and the intellectual dominance of the language studies. As Lacan argued that the language is central and this is so because in investigating the unconscious the analyst is always both using and examining the language. Peter Barry points out that lacanian notion such as the constructedness and the instability of the subject or the subject as linguist construct a language as a self contained universe of discourses can be seen in action in the texture of the work of fiction.

Identity formation is another desire that remains unfulfilled in the case of human beings. Every human being longs for his own recognisable identity, he wants to be recognised as superior individual, he wants to gain attention by showing his superiority in one way or the other, he wants to highlight his own importance as significant individual. Thus the desire for the self recognition and identity formation are the desires that provide an individual with aim in the life. If we take a simple example of a child playing a game every child wants to take an important role such as wants to become a teacher or doctor he wants a significant role even in the game. Even another example that be taken is of an infant who starts crying when he finds that in the conversation of the adults he is not paid attention. Thus the desire for the self recognition is innate and inborn in all the individuals, since childhood they want to draw the attention of the others. But the gratification of having achieved identity is prolonged as an individual always looks forward for some new role to play. Identity gratification or identity formation is achievement is a continuous search and remains an unfinished project. In Lacan's presentation of the mirror stage, the infant experiences his or her body as uncoordinated, vulnerable, and insufficient.

This sense of frustration with physical limitation propels the infant towards identification with the apparently unified and stable imago of the mirror. The 'I' that forms as result of identification continues to be haunted by the contrary image of the fragmented body, or the fundamental vulnerability of the body, which crops up in dreams of losing body parts. Lacan also gives an example of the renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch in connection with the fragmented body, Bosch's paintings depict a variety of pierced, wounded and dismembered figures.

Imitation plays a significant role in the identity formation. Children start imitating the roles from their childhood. Girls always try to imitate mothers and try to identify with them where as a boy always tries to identify with a father who is a male figure in the family. Thus process of identification, a process of identity formation is a desire given to him outside the subject. When an individual grows he tries to identify with some role model or some celebrity. Thus throughout the life an individual tries to identify himself with others. May be adoption of the different roles can be taken as an example of identity formation. In relation to the same Lacan uses a term called *altruism*, the term is Nietzschean concept, which means a desire, an attempt to gain power over the others. Thus every individual throughout the life strives for an unattainable an unachievable identity. Lacan does not believe in the concept of 'self awareness' but the idea of 'I' that is achieved by an individual is regarded by him a misunderstanding, an illusion, a mirage. Thus this illusion never allows us to have an escape to the outer world and the recognition of the real identity.

An individual always prefers Gestalt refers to a 'pattern' or 'figure'. As a psychological concept, Gestalt refers to our perception of its components. A Gestalt is always better than sum of its parts.

### VIII CONCLUSION

Thus Lacan's whole project is to show how human identity is constructed, operated and conditioned by society. Language is a construct and human subject enters into the process. Human beings always strive to achieve a complete identity but the whole process remains a fragmented project. Lacan tries to show the human language comes into being after a significant process of self recognition through "mirror stage". Human child is engaged in the series of ideas, identification with others. Language is also a discourse of the other and we enter into this discourse. Human beings are always troubled with the idea of complete identity which remains an unfulfilled and unaccomplished project. Lacan's major contribution is to show that unconsciousness is constructed like language. He tries to show how all individuals are caught up in the trap of language, once we reject the idea of language it becomes impossible to define ones's own self and identity. Language and self identity are inextricably woven together. Lacan emphasised the idea that if we can only know ourselves through language, thus we can never fully know ourselves. As one signifier leads to another and it continues to be an unending chain. Lacan as Postmodernist believes that there cannot be a single identity that can be referred to via language. Thus achieve a complete identity remains fragmented as well as an unaccomplished project.

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