

CLASS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN WILL SELF'S *BETWEEN THE CONCEITS*

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ABSTRACT

Will Self's *Between the Conceits* in his collection of stories **Grey Area** involves the quest for meaning in the restrictive socio cultural context of the 21st century London depicted in the novel. In the story, creativity is rendered as the only reliable avenue as a source for acquiring and shaping meaning in an unimaginative socio-cultural context. The anonymous protagonist's soliloquy as he addresses the reader throughout the story relies on individualistic and imaginative strategies. His efforts in overcoming loneliness and ennui as he attempts to withstand closure and control through intellectual creativity demonstrates the inevitability of facing a social reality that is resistant to change. In this respect, the narrator attempts to build a sense of identity and purpose throughout his narrative in which he creates his own hypothetical society. Hence, the socio-cultural dynamics of this imaginary social order are utilized as a means for self expression and undermining the order he exists in. In the story, there are many socially constructed roadblocks that stand in the way of natural creativity and although it is implied that the ultimate aim is to have a purposeful life, this is questioned through the impositions of value criteria shaped by capitalism. As the characters face socially induced daily concerns, they are implied to be kept from experiencing their individualities and creative selves due to the cultural impositions of a society that makes its evaluations in terms of material measures. In this socio economical background, all creativity is diminished and rendered void. Hence, it is implied that our socially dominated mind-sets interfere with and dominate the process of our self identification as members of a society.

Key Words: Class, Social Identity, Will Self, *Between the Conceits*

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The purpose of this study is to look into the various cognitive and social aspects of the social identities, *Between the Conceits* in Will Self's collection of stories **Grey Area and Other Stories**.

Between the Conceits involves the quest for meaning in the socio-cultural context of the 21st century London depicted in the novel. In the story, intellectual creativity is rendered as the only avenue as a source for decadence and spiritual death. The anonymous narrator's soliloquy provides an

insight into the autobiographical consciousness as he attempts to overcome his sense of loneliness and ennui in a dystopian society.

The story is written in what Bakhtin (1929a) calls ‘free direct’ discourse, which means, there is no separate narrative voice from that of the protagonist. The omniscient narrator addresses his audience with a highly manipulative speech like, satirical rhetoric. As the narrator singles out only eight individuals in London, including himself, he gives an account of the lives of the individuals comprising his community while relating his socio-cultural values by means of a totally subjective discourse. The norms of group boundaries in the story are determined by socio-cultural values manifested in the use of language that serves as a tool for the expression of social identity in terms of cultural, national, professional, gender and political affiliations. Although the narrator pays great attention not to sound unjust or conceited in his social classification as he singles out eight individuals who make up his social circle, the depictions of these characters are greatly founded upon discriminatory socio economic value criteria. Hence, the imaginary universe the narrator creates, in which he is central, turns out to be a means for recognition in a society that rejects him as a worthy individual.

Valuation strategies, which define the contours of social identity, depend upon many criteria that define one’s social position. In this context, Melinda Yuen-ching Chen maintains in her article, *The Space in Identity* that “An identity is understood at least partly by its ascribed characteristics, including conceptions of what “we” do or don’t do, and what “they” do or don’t do, as well as how the “we” and “they” are defined in relation to each other.”¹¹ Identity construction is a dynamic process that is dependent on a variety of configurations. As can be seen in the depiction of the characters in the story, there are many factors marking social relations of inclusion and exclusion in the society depicted.

Between the Conceits is primarily about the desperation of the protagonist who needs to create his imaginative reality in order to defy non-existence/spiritual death through linguistic creativity in a predominantly materialistic and hierarchical environment. In this context, his situation can be compared to the predicament of the artist as described by Christine Brooke-Rose; “After many disappointments and frustrations his instincts force him to reject this society, to turn away from those destined to wound and possibly annihilate him. His only choice is flight, and his unquenchable thirst to learn, discover, understand, and create pushes him toward the outer limits of reality. But this is an unknown which cannot be found in another country, or in a new dream; its location is not external but internal. Ultimately, the artist must turn to himself, look into his soul, draw upon his imagination, and create his own world.”¹² Ironically, however, the imaginary world the narrator creates is a micro replica of the society he exists in, which implies the influence of the existing capitalistic socio-cultural norms in his subconscious. This outcome indicates the narrator’s attachment to the socio-cultural

¹¹ Duszak, Anna, *Us and Others – Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures*, University of Warsaw, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2002, p.96.

¹² Brooke-Rose, Christine; *Stories, Theories, Things*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge CB2 8Ru, UK, 1991, p.3.

norms through which he identifies himself with although they render him an outcast in reality. His efforts to recreate his self-identity in an imaginary situation temporarily assign him to a position that exalts him to the level of an omniscient God. In this context, Anna Duszak states that "Social identities are products of categorization processes that fulfill the human needs of organizing experience for future access and use."¹³ In the construction of social identities, socially and culturally relevant parameters such as ethnicity, nationality, professional status, gender, age and ideology all play an important part. As we align with a group of people, we build a sense of solidarity, creating a safe space for ourselves in which we can feel psychologically comfortable with some people while we distance ourselves from or exclude others. In this respect, the imaginary community created by the narrator in a virtual society that faithfully observes its own hierarchical order reflects his attachment to his cultural values and his need for social recognition as an individual.

As Roberta Seret draws a parallel between art as a form of deviation and means for constructing self identity she refers to the predicament of the artist, maintaining that, "Born into a world of callousness and apathy, nourished in a society of division and strife, he thus finds himself in a state of perpetual frustration. The only way to soothe his gnawing anxiety, to synthesize the dichotomies of his soul, is to create."¹⁴ In this respect, the narrator's plight demonstrates a resemblance to the situation of the modern artist, who experiences and suffers from opposing forces, conflicts of existing values, ideals and reality in his quest of life and search for a unique expression. Hence, the narrator utilizes his creative mind in establishing a temporary realm in which he can express himself with considerably greater freedom and autocracy.

Duszak argues that, "Indeed, while interacting with people, we look for signs of proximity and those of distance. Such signals include symbols, gender and ethnic appearance, apparent age, patterns of action, logos on T-shirts and most importantly, words that are said... the construction and the management of social identities are done through discourse and by means of various linguistic mechanisms and strategies."¹⁵ In this respect, the narrator's commentary on the intricacy of relationships in his society highlights the social system he exists in; "We all tiptoe around one another, dancing our little dance, the two-step of arrogance and conceit. One of us will orchestrate a calculated snub, and then the rest of us will respond. There will be a rapprochement, an olive branch offered by one of perhaps the two of us. A new clique will be constructed on the basis of mutually assured destruction."¹⁶ Obviously, in this social system based on socio-cultural hierarchical norms, it is implied that one's social position is assessed in comparison with another's in the social group. The eight individuals portrayed in the story are ranked primarily in relation to each other in terms of

¹³ Duszak, Anna, **Us and Others – Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures**, University of Warsaw, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2002, p. 2.

¹⁴ Seret, Roberta, **Voyage Into Creativity; The Modern Künstlerroman**, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York, 1992, p.1.

¹⁵ Duszak, Anna, **Us and Others – Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures**, University of Warsaw, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2002, p.1.

¹⁶ Self, Will, **Grey Area and Other Stories**, Penguin Books Ltd., 27 Wrights Lane, London, 1994, p. 5.

income as well as other social status markers. Erik Olin Wright, in his work *Class Counts* maintains that, “In capitalist society, the central form of exploitation is based on property rights in the means of production. These property rights generate three basic classes: capitalists (exploiters), who own the means of production and hire workers; workers (exploited), who do not own the means of production and sell their ‘labor power’ (i.e. their capacity to work) to capitalists; and petty bourgeois (neither exploiter nor exploited), who own and use the means of production without hiring others.”¹⁷ In this respect, *Between the Conceits* portrays the social interactions between the eight characters depicted in the story in relation to a variety of class markers valid in the contemporary urban British society.

After the initial statement, “There are only eight people in London, and fortunately I am one of them,”¹⁸ the narrator goes on to make paranoid claims about the thousands of Londoners controlled by the eight who count. He claims, “The eight of us – the eight that matter, that is – are like the tectonic plates that cover the earth. If one rubs up against any other we produce mighty forces that reverberate, affecting the other six.”¹⁹ As the narrator places himself somewhere in the middle in his social circle consisting of the characters Lady Bob, Lechmere, Dooley, the Bollam Sisters, The Recorder, Colin Purves, he creates a similar order in which these characters adhere to and represent the socio-cultural norms of the real world he exists in. He states that, “We believe in it at the time. Believe that this collusion of interests is forever, as thick as family blood that has coagulated over centuries. Yet invariably it will all be picked away at within days, weeks at the outside, creating a ragged, exposed patch, a new area of potential healing.”²⁰ The eight characters are also maintained to have their own social circles who interact with each other, which makes it a highly intricate virtual social web dominated by the cultural norms of the 21st Century contemporary London.

Şükriye Ruhi, in her article *Complimenting Women in Turkish* maintains that “The construction of otherness can also generate perceptions of the individual or groups of individuals as not belonging to the group, that is, social otherness.”²¹ In this context, the narrator’s hypothetical society provides the basis for an alternative realm in which one can establish one’s own order and set his own socio-cultural parameters. In this respect, the social structure the narrator creates is a reflection of his desire to express himself without constraint. Christine Brooke-Rose claims that, “the modern artist’s final goal is creativity and the unlimited expression of his soul... The focus is placed on the need to eliminate inevitable conflicts arising from the sensitive artist’s desire to express himself in a society hardened to

¹⁷ Wright, Erik Olin, **Class Counts**, Cambridge University Press, The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2000, pp. 13, 14.

¹⁸ Self, Will, **Grey Area and Other Stories**, Penguin Books Ltd., 27 Wrights Lane, London, 1994, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²¹ Duszak, Anna, **Us and Others – Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures**, University of Warsaw, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2002, p. 403.

individual needs.”²² Therefore, the narrator's imaginary world serves as an alternative realm in which he can not only express himself freely but also impose his rules upon the other members of the society.

In the story, it is implied that the ultimate desire is to find some existential meaning, which is rendered impossible due to the limitations of a deceptive social order, contingent upon rigid social hierarchical norms. Cultural impositions of a capitalistic social structure are implied to keep these characters from experiencing their individualities. In this socio economical background all creativity is diminished and rendered void due to socially constructed roadblocks. It is implied that our culturally dominated mind-sets inevitably hold us back and hamper the possibility of asserting our individualities, our true selves. Hence, the outcome is implied to be a restricted and bleak human experience.

The narrator's confession that he has given up his job at the bookshop to look after his mother who is old and bedridden complements to the idea of inertia and spiritual death in the story. In fact, social inertia pervades the story, accentuating the willingness to accept the inconsequential, daily politics involving the characters. Even though the narrator, who is obsessed with social status and zeynepp suffers from paranoid delusions regarding his social position, does not see his mother his equal, he nevertheless confesses that they are so close now that he "... can sometimes guess what she's thinking just by looking at her.”²³ The mundane existence the narrator and his mother lead foreground the sense of dullness that dominates their way of life. It is also ironic that the narrator claims to deplore snobbery while maintaining that he is good at his job, manipulating the population of London. He states; "I simply believe that there is a natural order of people just as there is of things. A kind of periodic table on to which every element within every person can be fitted.”²⁴ It is significant that he claims his job to be not only very difficult but also far from being rewarding, yet seems to enjoy its authoritative position. As he monitors the other members, he professes to act "...with absolute probity. Attempting to make sure that there is a kind of organic unity in London, that people have their right position and estate.”²⁵ He claims that he has the right to fulfill this duty, to control the social scale and check that everybody is in his correct place. He also states that he enjoys the idea that one day someone in his community might discover the truth, the fact that actually "... their freedom is a delusion; but that, furthermore, instead of being the hapless tool of some greater deity, shoved up on a towering Titian-type cloud, they are instead jerked this way and that by a pervert in Bloomsbury, or a dullard in the Shell Centre, or an old incontinent in Clapton.”²⁶ Hence, ironically, he not only admits to being an instrument within the discriminatory class system but also proudly declares that he governs it. Also, as the narrator makes his reader his confidant, the ultimate repository of the trivial intricacies of his world, he intentionally dismisses the reader as an outcast. The narrator's obsession with order

²² Brooke-Rose, Christine; **Stories, Theories, Things**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge CB2 8Ru, UK, 1991, p.2.

²³ Self, Will, **Grey Area and Other Stories**, Penguin Books Ltd., 27 Wrights Lane, London, 1994, p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

and control parodies the ease with which the social dynamics of memory are manipulated as he claims that none of this will be remembered by the reader soon after finishing reading his story. His underestimation of the mental capacities of his reader rises the question of autonomy and the likelihood of manipulation by those superior in the social hierarchy.

In *Between the Conceits*, the society depicted, in which the British class system is parodied, is implied to be a metaphorical prison. Its inhabitants are not only prisoners of the social system but also physical limitations related to age and health. In this symbolic prison, Self also draws an analogy between the drug trade and the capitalistic social order through his depiction of Dooley, a neurotic, someone addicted to "...prescription drugs: sedatives, hypnotics, tranquillizers."²⁷ Dooley's way of handling his social exclusion is through sedatives, which is another form of escapism. In this context, the chemical industry that is a subsidiary of the capitalist system manipulates relatively disadvantaged individuals like Dooley. The narrator's negative assumptions about Dooley reveals his secret fear of being his equal in the society; "Of course, the reason why I don't know exactly where Dooley lives is because I don't want to. I don't want to know the precise location of any of them. Some might say that this is because I want to hold fast to my cherished illusion. But what does this illusion amount to really? That at such-and-such a time I might choose to see myself as a little more than an equal? A third amongst eight, rather than simply as one of eight? Well, why not? I've never ever attempted to elevate myself above Lady Bob or the Recorder, but, by the same token, I'll never concede an iota of distinction to Lechmere, Colin Purves or the Bollam Sisters. They could all rot in hell before I would give any one of them the satisfaction of believing that I think them quality."²⁸ These deliberations reveal how carefully the narrator places his characters in his hypothetical order with the people of his choice. It is striking that even though the narrator's tone of rhetoric is highly satirical, he is obsessed with this social hierarchy in which he admits to being equals with Lady Bob or the Recorder, he refuses to accept any affinity with Lechmere, Colin Purves and the Bollam sisters, who occupy the lowest social status in the story.

As the narrator depicts the Bollam sisters, for instance, as "...virtually psychotic twins from St Nevis who sit all day, every day, in a Streatham bedsit knitting dolls of 'The Redeemer', and who share a bizarre kind of joint mind (speaking in unison, prescience and so forth) – should despite everything feel capable of being slighted socially! As if anyone would ever invite those two to any social function whatsoever,"²⁹ he delegates them to a highly disadvantaged social level, allowing them a very limited existence and social space. However, among the choices between Dooley and the Bollam sisters, the narrator carefully designates Dooley a lower status than the Bollam sisters as he maintains; "Even his family – I know that he had one, at one time – must have felt that being closely

²⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

related to Dooley was like being trapped next to someone on a long plane flight, and having them force a glancing acquaintance into intimacy.”³⁰

Another character who the narrator depicts with scorn in his imaginary social ladder is Colin Purves, whose, “...more rentier character-traits make him utterly and incontrovertibly unsuitable company for someone of Lady Bob's breeding.”³¹ In fact, contrary to the unglamorous characters portrayed in the story, Lady Bob is depicted with striking distinction, which elevates her position in the social scale. On the other hand, the narrator expresses his genuine dislike for Lechmere due to his “...pretensions towards a higher kind of refinement. What with his collection of old silverware and his hunting prints. Lechmere, leaning against his invitation-encrusted mantelpiece, hands plunged deep into his grey-flannel bags, so he can jingle with his small change of maiden aunts and titled second cousins. Lechmere, who has the faint – but for all that distinct – whiff of new money about him.”³² The narrator's repulsion for Lechmere reflects his aversion towards a society that prioritizes materialism and the image culture over cultural and moral values.

On the other hand, Dooley's verbal deficiency foregrounds his isolation, accentuating the pathological situation of his social isolation. In this case, a language barrier signifies exclusion such as other general distinctions of race, age, social status, education and so forth. In this context, Nayar notices that, “...inadequacies in the use of English are often interpreted as some kind of general deprivation, whether cognitive, intellectual, social or emotional.”³³ Melinda Yuen-ching Chen also maintains that “...identity is tied implicitly to position, and further,...to a defined spatial perspective”. In this context, Dooley's verbal deficiency, on top of his pitiable depiction, hampers his participation within the society and renders him an outcast. Lacking the intellectual, cultural and financial means to change his situation Dooley accepts his doom: “Not for Dooley, the subtleties of the snub, the cold shoulder, the dropped gaze and the backbite. He has no need of them, because he has no ambition save to remain as he is: Lord of the Underclass.”³⁴ Hence, Dooley is implied to be the narrator's ultimate fear of being his social equal in any possible manner.

Colin Purves's depiction as a character with a desk job in a subsidiary of a multi national oil company represents the narrator's obsession with authority and power. The fact that he keeps “...close to him the London phone directories, and the computer discs that hold pirated copies of all the electoral registers for London's constituencies,”³⁵ makes the narrator envy the command held by this character over the population of London through official documents on population credentials. Holding documentations and records on the city population by means of an official desk job

³⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

³² Ibid., p. 7.

³³ Duszak, Anna, **Us and Others – Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures**, University of Warsaw, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2002, p. 24.

³⁴ Self, Will, **Grey Area and Other Stories**, Penguin Books Ltd., 27 Wrights Lane, London, 1994, pp. 12, 13.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

presumably provides these characters the power through which they can manipulate the others. In this context, the narrator defines the London phone directory as a source, endowing its holder with social supremacy. He confesses; “I like to hold the directory that contains the listing of the biggest chunk of the people I am manipulating at any given time. It gives me the feeling that I am in some sense holding them, caressing them, tweaking the strings that shift their little arms and little legs, their little mouths and little heads.”³⁶ This fantasy, in which he portays himself as an all powerful Godlike figure indicates his desire for autocracy over his imaginary community.

On the other hand, the kind of rhetoric produced by a culturally dominant member such as Lady Bob demonstrates the rigidity of the the socio-cultural barrier existing between the members of the society depicted. The narrator’s exalting depiction of the character Lady Bob indicates her dominant position over the other members within the group. In fact, the narrator’s obsession with this privileged character by means of which he estimates his own social level reveals his fear of losing his prioritized position in the social order. In fact, the narrator reveals his fear as he maintains; “Sometimes, lying awake on stormy nights, with the street lamps outside shining through the raindrops on the window, and making a stippled pattern across the floor of my bedroom, I begin to get the fear. The fear that somehow Lady Bob has mixed me up in her mind with Dooley. That she hasn’t been paying attention to the infinite deference with which I have courted her favour.”³⁷ These thoughts indicate the tentativeness of social status and any privilege related to it. Hence, individual identity is constantly revised and reaffirmed in a complex linguistic and social situation. The possibility of a shift in the social hierarchy is implied to have an impact of the rest of the community. Krisadawan Hongladarom, in his article, *Discourse About Them* maintains that; “Through discourse, things are labelled and categorized; group relations are defined, and identities are created and negotiated. Farr (2000:67) notes that identities are closest in their contrast with the depiction of *others*. In defining who we are, we exclude those who are not members of our group. The formation of group identities, the creation of us and them, is therefore, never an outcome of a natural process; rather, it is a cognitively-framed phenomenon which operates at the intersubjective level of community (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 24).”³⁸ Thus, group membership affirmation is implied to be identical to the acknowledgement of self identity.

All in all, in *Between the Conceits* the narrator’s imaginary society which compels its people to cultural conformity indicates his defiance of a social order that is indifferent to his individuality. In this respect, the implied criticism towards socio-cultural norms is reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism of the modern popular culture, “...which they see as being produced and disseminated by a massive culture industry whose goal is to numb the minds of the populace with a constant flow of banalities and thereby render them incapable of the kinds of critical abstraction

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 13.

³⁸Duszak, Anna, *Us and Others – Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures*, University of Warshaw, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2002, p.324.

required to mount a meaningful challenge to the official ideologies of modern society.”³⁹ In this respect, Self's story demonstrates the idea that popular culture subtly imposes mass conformity at the expense of individuality and creativity, while imposing consumerism upon the society. Hence, the hypothetical, hierarchical reality depicted in the story is a reproduction of the 21st century socio-cultural structure of London in which the omniscient narrator renders his world subject to his imagination through the usurpation of the desired authority.

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