GANDHI AND THE EGO IDEAL

Michele Gibney
GANDHI AND THE EGO IDEAL

If the individual self is not equal to the subject self and “agency”, as Wimal Dissanayake defines it, is seen as the link between the two: can the agency of Gandhi be described as utilizing the Freudian mirror stage development to overthrow subjectivity? I believe that, in fact, Gandhi’s reaction to British imperialism projects a reflected ego ideal which is used to combat the subjectivity of colonization and create an Indian “self”.

In Dissanayake’s introduction to Narratives of Agency, he describes the interaction between “self”, “subject”, and “agent”. He puts it best when paraphrasing Paul Smith, “a person is not merely an actor who follows a pregiven ideological script, as the concept of subject suggest, but is also an actor who reads it with the aim of inserting himself or herself into it,” (1996, x). The subject is confined by this script to which the agent attempts to insert the self. Agency serves as a method of resistance to social and cultural factors, and as Dissanayake relates on behalf of Paul Smith, “He sees agency as exceeding subjectivity,” (xiii). The possibility of agency being able to compete and even win against subjectivity is just what I am interested in with the case of Gandhi versus British imperialism.

In a way, subjectivity in the historical sense can be correlated with those who have been colonized. This is the case in India as the subject of colonial rule by British masters, wherein both the subject self and individual self are “constructed in the colonial situation, in the imperial embrace between British masters and Indian subjects,” (Fox, 1996, 107). According to Ashis Nandy who Richard Fox references in this chapter of
Narratives of Agency, the subject and individual selves which are created in a colonized society are recessive characters. In fact, Nancy postulates the following:

…a culture has a “dominant” conception of the self, which, however, coexists with “recessive” conceptions. Circumstances in the world, such as colonialism, can alter the balance between the dominant and the recessive. (109)

The dominant strain in Britain created a recessive one in India to which the early Indian nationalists were powerless to resist. I would argue that this dichotomy of dominant and recessive can also be viewed in light of Freud’s theory about the mirror stage in human development.

In the mirror stage, a child sees his reflection for the first time and believes it to be the ideal representation of himself, which Freud calls the ideal ego. Later on in life this ideal ego is superimposed on to those the individual views as superior to himself, but as he now knows they are merely a reflection, the ideal ego outside the self is reintroduced to the self as the ego ideal—and the self can now identify with the ideal ego as a reflection of the ego ideal within, (Mulvey, 1986, 201). Dominant conceptions of the self for the British are seen as the ideal ego, and as they identify themselves with the dominant, they develop a “hypermascuinity” according to Nandy, (109). Thus, the ideal ego reflection of themselves as dominant is reintroduced and expounded on in the ego ideal. Dominance and superiority lead to hypermascuinity and to what I would term aggressive aggression.

The colonized, on the other hand, become recessive in reaction to this extreme ego. They cannot counteract due to the projection of hypermascuinity as superior. They cannot successfully identify the British as a reflection of themselves (thus creating an equal ego ideal), nor can they create a dominant reflection of their modern collective
ideal ego with which to combat the British one; or at least they cannot until Gandhi. Gandhi identifies the past Indian culture as the ideal ego and gives new life to the Indian self-image. Fox supports this by listing the ways in which Gandhi “constructed a conception of the Indian conception of the self” by basing it on its “ancient or ideal state” and its “ancient traditions,” (112). In the end, Fox claims that, “in contrast to this vision of an India perfected in the future by resurrecting and then improving on its past, [Gandhi] condemned the individual selfishness and possessiveness of the West,” (112).

By creating an equally powerful dominant projected ideal ego, Gandhi reinserted a culturally distinct sense of self (ego ideal) back into the Indian collectivism. Through his philosophical stance of non-violence, I would also argue that Gandhi created a third category into the dominant/recessive dichotomy which could be termed submissive aggression in contrast to the aggressive aggression mentioned above.

Though subjectified and dominated, Gandhi used his agency as an individual to combat the British powers. Dissanayake argues that agency is not awarded enough consideration in modern critical approaches to cultural understanding. Although I cannot say if that is true based solely on my reading of his introduction, I hope I have given a good account of the power of agency in my discussion of Gandhi.
List of Works Cited

