

I-Thou or I-It: A Glimpse on 'Relations' in the Post-Pandemic Digital Age

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Abstract: 'Covid-19' is the word that everyone is averse to hear it nowadays. The pandemic has caused havoc in almost all the spheres of human life and the world is still trying to get back into the past. The world is not anymore, the same. Amidst the chaos, one can see the booming of digital media and gadgets that have become the norm of building and defining relationships. While the technologies through apps bring people together, one can see a decay of human dignity and respect in the interpersonal relationships. A perspective of the other as 'I-It' (in Buber's words) in this digital age has fueled crimes of all sorts. Blooming of technologies and gadgets have boomeranged in distancing one from the other. This article is an attempt to redefine human relationships on 'I-Thou' rather than 'I-It' in this digital age which alone can concretize the 'future' of the human society.

1 INTRODUCTION

Gautama Buddha in one of his famous discourses said, "three things can no longer be hidden, the sun, the moon and the truth."¹ The world is still waking from the darkness of the pandemic and its aftermath. The pandemic has revealed many truths about the disparity and the vulnerability of the world, inhumane behaviors of millions, intricacies of the human relationships and the sharp rise of violence in all its forms. Survival of the fittest was the mantra of hospitals, welfare programs, rehabilitation centers, government policies and this mantra defined human relationships in almost all the spheres starting from family. Thousands lost their loved ones and thousands were left to die due to hunger and lack of timely medical attention. Principle of utility was the only ethical principle that influenced decision making especially by medical practitioners, oxygen and grocery vendors. The world is still recovering from the havoc and maladies of this pandemic and a few countries have stooped to economic regress and some others are facing irremediable consequences at various levels. Amidst all these hard realities, the world has witnessed digital boom and sudden rise in the usage of media and gadgets. Digital media are supposed to build human relationships but unfortunately, what we are witnessing is not the

narrowing of the barriers but widening the gap of relationships. In addition, what really disturbs is the attempt to color the truth with the prism of lies. In this article, we are going to evaluate human relationships philosophically taking the concepts of I-Thou and I-It (of Martin Buber), and the author proposes the need for redefining human relationships which alone can assure a better future for the coming generations.

1.1 Moral Degradation in Human Relationships

The pressures of the series of lockdowns at regular intervals caused human persons to invent and discover new avenues of letting out one's frustrations. It is not a secret that almost all the countries especially growing countries like India have seen a sudden rise of internet users and some of the chatting apps like Instagram, telegram, and WhatsApp besides dating apps. One would imagine that such apps help the frustrated individuals to build up like-minded groups and platforms to share and to express one's opinions, but unfortunately what we have seen is not coming together of humanity but these avenues were used to divide and instill negative feelings towards the other. Thus, the society at present is not the society of moral strength but of moral decadence. I would like to borrow the three main strategies of Zygmunt Bauman in evaluating the moral decadence

¹ <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/buddha-133884>.

in the post pandemic society. He identifies three strategies as: 1) denial of proximity 2) effacement of face and 3) reduction of traits.

The human society has seen apathy of thousands of migrants, poor laborers walking hundreds of miles, a starving man feeding off a dog carcass on the Delhi-Jaipur highway, more than ninety-seven passengers found dead in Shramik Special trains, etc. Hunger, thirst, poverty, loss of jobs, economic discriminations causing denial of food grains, and oxygen cylinders, more than all these, a sense of unwantedness and rejection coupled with the division of 'mine' versus 'the others'- all these are the observable phenomena of the post pandemic society. Why does a human not see the other in proximity? Why does the human person choose to deny the proximity of *the other*? Bauman observes that proximity means the realm of intimacy and morality. 'The Other' is a 'face' that gazes prompting a moral impulse and triggering a moral responsibility. The 'face of the other' invites a subject to treat the other with mercy and compassion. But what has happened in our society is, the subject denies the proximity of the other knowing very well the implication of withdrawing from moral and social responsibility. We can see this *denial of proximity* in the social discrimination with regard to high or low caste, majority versus the minority based on religion, companies sacking the employees at the wee hours without owning up the responsibility of the employees and their families, etc.

'A face' gives someone an identity. When someone is denied of one's face, one loses his/her identity. During and post pandemic era, we have seen thousands of lives were lost and the bodies were dumped without any dignity and no one really bothered to have even the count of them. Why so? These were the so called 'faceless'. When there is no 'face' one is not obliged morally to care for these and thus today, there is diminishing of moral responsibility and zero guilt even if an individual or the government has not done what they are supposed to.

The third element in Bauman's analysis is reduction to traits. This is a process to neutralize the moral impulse and to destroy the object of action as a moral self. This moral self is not in totality but is typically dissembled into traits. So, no moral self and no moral responsibility. There is also another aspect. An individual is not considered as a subject in totality but rather from the perspective of utility. A subject reduces the other into an aspect of usefulness and therefore excuses him/her self from moral responsibility. Such attitude in relationship takes us further into the explanations propounded by Buber.

1.2 I-Thou and I-It: 'Relations' Questioned

For Buber, there are two attitudes with which we relate with other realities (God, world, the other); *I-Thou* being a dialogical relationship and *I-It* being reduced to merely an experience. These two attitudes are generally found in all the relationships especially interpersonal human relationships in the society. I find it apt to discuss these in the background of post pandemic digital age wherein the subject relates with the other mostly not with the attitude of *I-Thou* but that of *I-It* which is the cause of relational maladies of the present day.

I-Thou is the relation of subject to subject. A subject is aware of *the other* as having unity of being. Therefore, the dialogical relationship blooms with each other considering each one's whole being. In the *I-It* relationship, the subject perceives the other merely as having certain qualities which are useful or instrumental. In the *I-Thou* relation, there is growth due to mutuality and reciprocity, whereas in the *I-It* relation, there is stagnancy due to separateness and detachment. This stagnancy is the cause of moral decadence and violent outbursts of all its kinds. In the *I-Thou* relation, there is a sharing of caring, respect, commitment and responsibility.

Based on these two perspectives of relations, let us discuss further the evolution of 'relations' in the post pandemic digital age. The online platforms without any doubt enabled personal interactions, facilitated comfort, individuals found support in the like-minded online groups. Companies were forced to adapt to the module of 'work from home'. As a consequence, relationships in general, person to person relations in various spheres (companies, factories, families, educational institutions, etc.) in particular have gone through an evolution. But this evolution in relationships raises two main questions; is it for better or worse? Second, can we reverse into a humane relation rather than the periphery (instrumental or valuable) even in this post pandemic era?

Virtual environments as a result of digital technologies have impacted the very essence of relationships (be it in organizations or any other work space). Pandemic has forced people to profoundly review values, purposes, and norms which basically have defined relationships in the past. As we find ourselves in this hybrid module of relationships, as philosophers, we need to redefine 'relationships' in order to accommodate and achieve 'human well-being'.

2 CONCLUSION

Famous Immanuel Kant built his philosophical treatise on the assumption that “moral law is inside the subject.” Emmanuel Levinas had observed that if the moral law is inside the subject, that should reflect on the individual’s relation with *the other*. Moral responsibility certainly involves being for the other before one can be with the other. Buber also asserted that love is the defining criteria of subject to subject relationship but he also cautions that this love is not instrumental or of utility but that shapes the unity of being. We are aware that we can never revert back into time. This pandemic has taught a number of lessons for the humanity by exposing the truth of our own selves. The challenge before us is, what kind of a world, are we going to create? Is it a world defined by relationships promoting the unity of being or is it a world divided by fragmentation and instrumentalism? Digital media and their effort to bring out the truth should never underscore the fragmented reality of truth and of the subject but that of aiming to achieve the unity of being taking into consideration the moral responsibility in every human act.

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