

Identity as a Rational Choice: *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*

Amartya Sen

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Reviewed by Rehnuma Sazzad, Warwick University

As an 11-year boy, Amartya Sen could not stop the distressing death of Kader Mia, a day labourer who had to look for work in riot-torn Dhaka against the danger of death in the 1940s and face a miserable destiny, as a group of fanatics attacked him mercilessly just because of his particular religious identity. Years later, the young boy did change the way of economics almost as a tribute to Kader Mia so that the world got to see that economic development is essential for human liberty, indeed even human life. What Sen hopes to further change through *Identity and Violence* is a person's perception of identity so that s/he retains the "Freedom to Think." He writes this book not as a Nobel Laureate Economist, but as a humanist to embolden people's rationality while judging "others" with seemingly different identities.

Sen's writings focus on human development, rationality, freedom and identity, as the titles of his previous books illustrate: *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, *Resources, Values and Development*, *Inequality Re-examined*, *Development as Freedom*, *Rationality and Freedom*, *The Argumentative Indian* etc. The Oxbridge academic is one of the most influential intellectuals of our time whose writings have had an extraordinary impact on development and politics. What makes his philosophies (on economics and other issues) so formidable is that he argues for ethics and humanism with convictions based on his life experience and learning.

From this perspective, Sen, like Edward Said, one of the redoubtable thinkers of post-colonialism, stands for interconnected cultures and civilizations. Sen's book echoes Said's resistance against reducing identities into two contradictory camps of the East and West. Said's focus was on a critical consciousness through which people could judge cultures dispassionately, as if from an exile's perspective. Sen's emphasis lies on reason, as opposed to obsession; he insists on rationally justifying and upholding pluralistic identities. This is why Sen completely rejects Samuel Huntington's dividing people into different cultural categories in *The Clash of Civilizations*. Like Said, Sen sets out to prove the opposite: civilizations do not clash when we underline centuries of human bonding

across boundaries of nations and cultures through art, history and science. His arguments are spread out in the nine different chapters of his book.

Sen reminds us that identity can rightly be a source of pride, joy, and strength, but unfortunately, the pride can also lead to a belligerent sense of belonging. Sen sets out to nullify the foolhardiness of this singular sense of belonging. We have various sets of affiliations, not just one, and none of the diverse categories can be regarded as our sole circumference. Denying the opportunity of a “critical examination” (10) of these affiliations in order to define our priorities translates into our becoming blind conformists to groups and falling prey to the violence of illusion. Making sense of identity presupposes the idea that reasoning is not exclusively intellectual and that it has social significance: “It is not so much that a person has to deny one identity to give priority to another, but rather that a person with plural identities has to decide, in case of conflict, on the relative importance of the different identities for the particular decision in question” (29). Differences of identities are not necessarily incompatible. The chapter entitled “Civilizational Confinement” directly challenges Huntington’s representation of a monolithic and superior West by reconstructing the rich history of correlations between the West and the Rest with a view to bridging the gap between them. Similarly, Muslim identity cannot be reduced to its religious dimension alone. Sen points out that Muslims, though they belong to the same religion, have taken very dissimilar positions on politics, society, confrontation and tolerance. For the sake of pluralistic identities, Sen does not endorse the Anti-Western point of view; according to Sen, “the limited horizons of the colonized mind and its fixation with the West—whether in resentment or in admiration—has to be overcome” (89).

Sen grants that culture matters, but warns us that it should not matter so much as to make us captives of its power. In an enlightened interpretation of culture, cultural diversity “will follow directly from the value of cultural liberty, since the former will be a consequence of the latter” (115). From this point of view, faith schools are unfair to young children, as they dictate identities for them before they are even given any options to select their priorities from. Furthermore, globalization is mistakenly rejected as a tool of Western imperialism, though global interaction and exchange over millennia have fostered “the dissemination of knowledge and understanding” (126). The anti-globalization movement has to be in effect against the global inequality and poverty, rather than the global economic and cultural correlations. Poverty and humiliation have nothing but a more confrontational world order to offer us. However, multiculturalism without the liberty to choose from open and diverse cultural options can boil down to “plural monoculturalism” (165) as in Britain where disparate immigrant communities still preserve their segregated existence.

Sen concludes that the cultivation of divisions has to come to a stop. High sounding theories which expound civilizational divide, Islamic

exceptionality and community based segmentation have to be invalidated through reasoning. Global voices have to play a crucial role in this regard, because “in resisting the miniaturization of human beings, with which the book has been concerned, we can also open up the possibility of a world that can overcome the memory of its troubled past and subdue the insecurities of its difficult present” (185). Sen pleads for a changed world where people’s multiple identities are naturally recognized and rationally valued for the benefit of harmony and respectful co-existence.

However, in an article published in the *Guardian* on 5 August, 2006, “Thinking Out of the Box,” John Gray finds this emphasis on rationality to be totally idealistic. Gray argues that violent people who attacked Kader Mia could not be forced to rationalize their shared identity with the victim, just as the Nazis failed in the Second World War to do so for countless innocent sufferers, because they were blinded by the interest in power. For Gray, such instincts are simply not ruled by reason. But the sole objective of Sen’s book is to make us see that we have to rise above these instincts. Idealistic or not, this is a powerful book which rescues identity from the field of impulses to re-inscribe its lawful position in reasoning, and as such it offers a much awaited and timely argument towards reconciling the different parts of humanity with itself.

Sen dedicates the book to his children, therefore, to the new generation, with the hope that they will override the dark instincts of passion with the light of reason. He draws on the thoughts from the East and West to locate identity within the boundaries of reason. The great Mughal emperor Akbar, who left an indelible imprint on Sen by prioritizing reason over faith and/or tradition, is recalled. The Western philosopher David Hulme, who talked of “expanding the reach of our identity” for the sake of progress and justice (147), is cited. Clearly, a mind enriched by reason and compassion will embrace a broadened horizon that includes dissimilar cultures and peoples.