

**A Symbiotic Reality: Societal Hegemony, Deindividuation and
The Reemergence of the Silenced Moral Self in John Boyne's *Stay***

Where You Are and Then Leave

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Abstract

Human reality is governed by two differential constructs of the individual in isolation and the individual in a group called the society. The novel *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* (2013) presents a well knitted society of individuals thrust into a war narrative. This paper aims to subject to scrutiny the unlike reactions of the separate paradigms of the individual and the collective society within the plot, respectively, to the unwelcomed external stimuli presented by the war circumstance proliferated by the larger organization of the government. To compare and contrast the reactions of each construct based on the diverse methods used by the third party to incur the submission to their agenda. To critically analyze possible reasons for the observed vulnerability to the external manipulation. To analyze the detected consequences of breaching the balanced symbiosis between the constructs of the individual and the society upon human existence.

Keywords: Society, Individual, Conformity, Ideological Hegemony, Interdependence, Propaganda, Social Engineering, Manufacturing Consent, Deindividuation, Cognitive Dissonance, Morality, Symbiosis, Balance.

Introduction:

The reality of the individual human exists through its indivisibility from the individual collective called, the society. Norbert Elias in his Process Sociology suggested that "The individual and society are inseparable, interdependent units." (Society of Individuals, 12) like entities representing two sides of the same coin parallel to the idea where there cannot be an 'I' without a 'We'. An individual's cognitive reality is a product of the assimilated rules and regulations present within the society the individual is thrust into. And the society on the other hand, is the produce of human strategies and plans to ensure the survival of the human race. It is a profound and complex symbiotic existence where both the entities have to maintain a balanced existence so as to procure an ideal life.

The individual is evidently alive and begins operating alone by thinking, planning and fashioning survival. Along the progression of the process of life, a mandatory requirement appears, where the solitary individual is forced to intermingle with other individuals. Interactions and relations become a necessary survival tactic allowing the creation of a sense of relatability where alignment, attachment and dependence on likeminded individuals generate and the inevitable byproduct of the collective form of the individual's existence, that is the society is born. Hossain and Ali suggest that, humans have "psychological safety, social recognition, loves and self-actualization needs only fulfilled within the course of living in society." (133). The more the society develops, the more it act like it is alive than simply being a construct. It behaves like a single organism with its own plans and motives as proposed by Buda when he called society "a certain autonomous – autopoietic and autotelic whole" (18). It evolves into having its own requirements that sometimes contradicts the needs of the individual who contributed to create it.

The novel *Stay Where You Are and then Leave* (2013) by John Boyne was an apposite representation of the tension between the solitary individual reality and the collective individual reality labelled the society. The plot development depicted the symbiosis between the individual and society to be in a constant tug of war trying to manifest and affirm their respective natural mandates. The individual was seen to lean towards exploring uniqueness and maintaining moral agency whereas the society propagated one's need to belong and the maintenance of a united safety. The novel was set in London during the beginning of World War I, where the characters were subjected to acquiesce to ideas of duty, responsibility, honor and shame against their conscience and the yearning of their family members. The crucial peculiarity of their reality was that, both the individual or the society were not allowed consensual privilege to form opinions, decisions or alliances concerning their war circumstance. They were not explicitly forced but were subjected to shrewd third party strategies where they had to face elements like propagandas, and manipulations that primarily served not the individual or the society but the ideals of the third party, namely the government.

Background:

The central characters were the four members of the Summerfield family where the father Georgie, volunteered to become a soldier against the behest of his wife Margie and his mother, Granny Summerfield subjecting his son Alfie into a confusing, harsh, few years of poverty, loss and trauma. They lived in number twelve at Damely Road where all the families had formed a closely knit society. The community convened regularly for common occasions like birthday parties which became the perfect platform for interactions, relationships, exchange of information and the exchange of influence to ensue. The individual collective was intimately bound together to share sentiments like keeping up the good name of Damley Road. The society's behavior as a single entity was revealed in moments like, when everyone

had rallied against Joe at number seventeen for having painted his door a different color as compared to the others. The Damley Road societal structure kept the individual agents well within its circle of similarity and relatability as propagated by the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens, displaying “the idea of interdependence between agents and structures.” (Bartholomay, 13)

The central narrative was about the situation at Damley Road and the plot revolved around the inhabitants within it. The infiltrating third party that brought dread, apprehension and unrest into the quaint, peaceful reality was the government with its rumors of war. Suddenly, gatherings like birthday parties turned from being fun and games to adults huddling in a corner whispering about the possible changes they would have to endure in the near future. The sentiments of the government had nothing to do with the individual or the small society formed at Damley Road. Their entire purpose aimed to facilitate the needs of a separate, larger organization. They employed propagandas like newspaper articles, printed political speeches, posters, slogans, campaigns, false promises about a short war, and the reward of a, supposed unrivalled honor to soldiers. This was to first infiltrate and entice the vulnerable construct of the society for their own cause aiming to later pierce its heart that is the individuals contained within it. This civilizing process employed by the third party was effective because "A social precept becomes... a second nature of the individual... an automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control." (Elias, 191)

Societal Hegemony: The Collective Conscription:

Initially, for the society at Damley Road, the idea of war was simply a noise in the background that was constantly mentioned in newspapers. It was never a personal concern. Eventually, it turned into a daunting topic meant only for the adults to discuss during community gatherings where the women cried and the men sighed. The society felt fear and

apprehension at the approaching ordeal that might upturn their comfortable reality. Comments like “it was going to start any day now and they’d have to be ready for it ,” (Boyne, 7), ““You’re better off signing up now before they call you”” (Boyne, 8) , ““Might not have a choice, Mum,””(Boyne, 8), ‘We’re finished, we’re all finished!’”(Boyne, 9) reflected the society’s dread, desperation, duress and resignation to the external stimuli.

The incomprehensible shift in the society’s perception of war came when all the men of Damley road gathered together, proclaiming duty and responsibility when the conscription notice was sent. The men acceded to a bandwagon effect of seeking honor whilst unconsciously forming a cognitive defense against isolation from the security of the collective societal majority. Asch promulgated that “When consensus comes under the dominance of conformity, the social process is polluted and the individual at the same time surrenders the powers on which his functioning as a feeling and thinking being depends.” (35). An aspect of fear, now incurred pride, integrity and masculine expression. This was a glaring contrast from the initial resignation and despair they had felt at the thought of leaving their homes and families, to fight. When they finally signed up, their collective mental spaces entered into a state of ideological hegemony and painted a picture of honor and duty upon their choice to don the soldier’s uniform. The women who showed instinctual horror at the men’s decision ultimately submitted and participated in their own volunteering by willingly confirming to the idea that they were sending off brave men to the front for a noble cause.

The society further conformed to war ideologies by completely abandoning all their personal experiences and opinions. This was reflected in their blatant rejection of the Austro-Hungarian neighbor they had known all their life. Mr. Janeck who was from Prague, who had never been to Germany all his life had to suffer through consecutive broken windows, spy accusations and was tragically hauled away with his little daughter by soldiers to the Isle of Man. The only ones who wished to stand against the judgement of the society could not bring

into execution their personal motives owing to their incapacity to project an action against the collective society. The government encouraged this separation and isolation so as to maintain the pseudo reality of the evil nature of the enemy to justify the propagated duty of soldiers to freely practice cruelty and murder. The society entered a state of an irrational groupthink where everyone found solace in belonging and conforming to the perceived normal by censoring their own logical perceptions to combat personal guilt. Groupthink created “a distorted view of reality, excessive optimism producing hasty and reckless policies and a neglect of ethical issues.” (Hart, 247)

The ultimate departure of the individual persona from the construct of the society was displayed in the Damley Road inhabitants’ decision to shun Joe Patience who firmly chose to become a proud conscientious objector. Buda suggested that society “builds its autonomy by excluding and repelling everything devoid of a social character” (18). The autonomy of the Damley Road society was stabilized by labelling Joe a coward, and by accusing him for holding true to his trauma induced non-violent policies. Granny Summerfield’s deflection into the attitude of the Groupthink to suppress the contemplation of the ethical aptness of Joe’s decision was especially heartbreaking, as she had been a personal witness to Joe’s sad past with domestic violence. She perfectly represented the voluntary desertion of the society from individual moral agency to embracing the externally injected dichotomy of the heroic soldier and cowardly conchie narrative. The entire society stood against anyone who dared to defy and deflect from their perceived ideal.

The society resigned to the unashamed weaponization of false honor where plain folks were utilized to convey strategic messages to manipulate the society into believing that the message was the outcry of their own community and not from an unknown politician’s desk. One such method utilized were the vile white feather campaigns where women were encouraged to hand a white feather to every man they happened to see in public, in anything

other than a soldier's uniform. It was a silent projection of the entire community's highest form of humiliation and judgement upon a man for being less than a man by walking away from his responsibility. The society fell prey to such tactics and participated in its own killing, away from the frontlines.

The third party socially engineered the masses through popular trends inoculated into the society through the influence of media to adhere to a national schema that had nothing to do with the interests of the individual or the society. The propaganda managed to catfish men by essentially manufacturing their consents into willingly enlisting for war compromising their personal safety and morality enough for the movement to become a widespread fever amongst the young men collective. Manufacturing consent was a concept presented by political economists Herman and Chomsky which was achieved in this narrative through media outlets like newspapers, flyers and public speeches censored distributed information "through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises." (298) to keep the agents well within the manipulated boundary of the elite manipulators. The society's consent was easily accessible through the power of the law to enforce enlistment which was seconded by the unrecognized and instilled fear of the only alternative choice to war, which was the self annihilation from belonging ever again.

Deindividuation: The Expurgation of the Self:

The decent of the society into the war agenda dragged the non-consenting individual into the pit as well. They were each subjected into a process called deindividuation where they were stripped off their self-awareness, autonomy, moral agency, and personal obligation. As itemized by Le Bon, individuals in a group "could lose their capacity for rational thought and mental conjoin in a "crowd mind" or crowd "spirit" which would rapidly diffuse through

the group through “suggestion or contagion” (Parsons, 14). These contagious fractures upon their self and cognitive stability subjected them to be automatically absorbed into the identity enforced by the society. Each individual had a varied version of progression into the manipulation. Some entered into the agenda of war, completely oblivious to the manipulation, believing in the propagated lies. Some realized the nature of war but submitted anyway, owing to the inevitability. A few regressed from willing submission to the realization of wishful regret later on in their narrative. While others desperately held onto the safety of the lies indorsed by the collective individual of the society to avoid their suppressed guilt and accountability.

Georgie Summerfield represented all the men of Damley Road who were manipulated using the supposed bright side of war. When his individual conscience was intact, he showed despair at the onset of war sharing the sentiments of his wife, Margie and his mother. He genuinely believed that “Europe was far too civilized to start a scrap that no one could possibly hope to win.” (Boyne, 7) reflecting his personal aversion to war. Unfortunately, when reality proved otherwise, he disregarded the desperate concerns of his wife and mother for his life, and enlisted to be a soldier. Georgie’s capitulation was not out of fear or desperation but was evidently procured by a concept sociologist called the malleability of the masses where an individual forsakes all demands and cautions of the self to achieve a superior sense of secure belonging to the popularized collective normal. “He is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.” (Le Bon, 36) Georgie’s decision was completely sheeple and never personal like a few other men who had volunteered.

Cognitive solidarity in alignment but physical compromise owing to the circumstance was the condition of most women portrayed in this war time narrative. These individuals lived in disagreed harmony with the society. Margie Summerfield was an apt image

demonstrating the choiceless state of most women, like Mrs. Podgett. The unique feature of Margie as an individual living within the collective was that, she had never once agreed or aligned herself to the manipulation of the government or with the compromised decision of her husband within the premises of her mind. She saw war for what it was and never gave into the lies keeping her heart and mind intact. This was displayed in moments like arranging a party amidst war rumors, her vain but desperate efforts to protect Mr. Janeck and Kalena when they were being dragged away, and how she had never once accused or judged Joe Patience for having chosen to be a conchie. Margie drew a firm line between her individual persona and her place in the individual collective of the society. This was her survival tactic to counter the harshness of her circumstance, the third party manipulation and her society's compromise.

A few individuals chose to adhere to the mandates of the manipulation simply for survival but failed to separate the foundation of their individual construct from the societal alliance, which unconsciously infected their individual persona, influencing opinions, judgements, alignment and actions. Granny Summerfield had willingly conformed to the supposed honorable side of war, by proudly sending off Georgie as a means to endure the sorrow of having to imagine the possibility of him risking his life everyday and the despair and guilt she had felt for being unable to stop him. This in turn festered into her detestation of Georgie's best friend, Joe Patience for his refusal to enlist owing to his policies. For years, she had mercilessly accused him of cowardice and encouraged others to shun him from the society contrary to her initial disapproval of Georgie's decision to go to war. If she had the opinions of her individual persona intact, she would have been the best candidate to understand Joe's traumatic aversion to violence as she had been a witness to it. Unfortunately, she ended up hurting a man who was like her own son for having had the courage to do exactly what she had wished her own son could have done. The individual's

willing submission to the policies of manipulation, for survival without a necessary boundary around her personal opinions and experiences, allowed the enemy to infiltrate and persuade the participant to trade her personal truth for theirs which resulted in her inhuman treatment of a loved one.

Joe Patience on the other hand, was the only individual who had chosen to align with his personal acuties and moral standards over the ones propagated by his own society. Even at the risk of estrangement from everyone he loved, he never relented to the propaganda and earned rejection and isolation within his own society. He was subjected to intense inland atrocities at prisons by other prisoners, in public by women who handed him white feathers, at night by violent, drunk vandals and at home by loved ones who hated, and ignored him. The society collective operated in such a way where they had replaced every personal memory concerning that nonconforming individual with the narrative injected by the society imbibed propaganda. Joe had to resign to operating as an individual who had lost his qualification to belong, to depend and to engage with the humans who had removed him from their shared secure space. Irrespective of the loss of security within the society Joe had his individual faculties intact, which had ultimately, protected his mind and soul.

Each character who had compromised their individual self and moral centralities for procuring a normal, secure sense of belonging had to face the tragic demise of their newly acquired perception, alliance and decision. Georgie and the other men of Damley Road had their narratives change from resembling a long holiday trip, fun at the training grounds, adventure, pranks and shared stories to guns, bombs, blood, trenches, death, cruelty, murder, guilt, horror and madness. Granny Summerfield had to finally settle into the reality of the cowardly Joe saving her mad Georgie. Alfie who had initially found his father's war uniform, cool, was quickly disillusioned by the void generated by his absence that had penetrated deep into the perfection, that was his family. Mr. Podgett's pride in regards to his general son's war

achievements culminated into an underlying regret for having exchanged all of it for his kindness and humanity. The only ones without regret, despair and traumatic guilt were Margie and Joe who had held onto their individual mindsets, experiences and truth over the external inducements.

Societal Dissolution and Individual Realization:

The collective society, representing Damley road, aimed to provide immediate relief by subjugating all the individuals nested within it to the outside propaganda through the supposed solidarity of the pseudo freedom rendered by the dispersal of guilt, "where all are guilty, nobody is," (Arendt, 28). The thinner the string of guilt was stretched amongst all the voluntary carriers of the burden, the lighter was its weight upon one individual, which was further enhanced by the security and sense of belonging the supposed superior majority managed to render. The individuals, on the other hand, were deindividuated to conform to the society's new absurd, having to compromise all their personal effects like the self, the family and communal ethics irrespective of the willing or unwilling nature of their submission. The individual faculty of trained response to the compromise of personal morality was rendered ineffective owing to the influence of the honor fever of war. Only a few individuals dared to defy the proliferated societal norm like Margie and Joe Patience. They never compromised their individual conscience and moral principles, where Margie represented the silent rebel and Joe became the unflinching radical.

An essential Symbiotic Balance:

The society and the individual are inseparable paradigms permanently connected where one cannot exist without the cooperation of the other. They remain at an equilibrium when the needs of both entities are met. But when one is being fed and the other starved, the human involved suffers repercussions. Variables in life create disruptions in the connection

due to the differential human cognitive tendencies observed whilst they are within a group as opposed to while they operate as a solo individual. The war situation at Damley Road caused the constructs to occupy polar opposite positions severing the balance which in turn caused the destruction of the human reality. The compromise of the symbiosis allowed the distinct being of the society to function in isolation exposing the individuals involved to the infection of the dispersal of guilt for compromise of central moralities and sheeple like tendencies.

Punishing Return of Individual Morality:

The enforced state of ideological hegemony allowed the society to exercise a power so strong to subject the individuals involved to be deindividuated into embracing a self sabotaging reality. Nevertheless, the individual displayed a powerful psychological counter which was witnessed through the changed opinions of all the individuals who had allied with the society. As opposed to the display of the individual's propensity to triumph through Margie and Joe Patience's narratives, the construct of the individual managed to procure a reaction from the willing participants as well. Georgie, Granny, Alfie's and Mr Podgett were forced out of their induced trance about war, when the veil of the glory, honor and adventure came off. The individual conscience thrust them into a cognitive dissonance where every decision made, generated heavy, mental consequences like guilt, regrets and traumas resulting in a moral hangover.

Conclusion:

The triumphal return of the repressed individual through the manifestation of guilt induced trauma declared that the victory of the societal collective as a causative for the destruction of the individual which in turn renders the society, nonexistent. The removal of one negates the other. Therefore, the society and the individual ought to remain within a well balanced symbiosis that protects the moral boundary within the conscience of both the

constructs. Upon unavoidable circumstantial imbalance owing to an external stimuli, the society's power to influence and dominate will be ultimately, surpassed by the consequential influence of the individual's conscience that will later manifest along with the appearance of cognitive dissonance and moral realization.

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