

EXPLORING THE ‘ENCUMBERED SELF’ IN MICHAEL SANDEL’S PHILOSOPHY AND ITS LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT :- Michael Sandel’s concept of the "encumbered self," developed in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), challenges the liberal notion of an autonomous individual by emphasizing the inescapable influence of community, tradition, and moral obligations in shaping identity. This paper explores how Sandel’s philosophical critique of Rawlsian liberalism finds resonance in literary narratives that depict the tension between personal autonomy and communal ties. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining political philosophy and literary analysis, this study examines the representation of the encumbered self in works such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*. These novels illustrate how identity is not formed in isolation but is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and social contexts.

By analyzing the struggles of protagonists who navigate inherited histories, collective memories, and societal expectations, this research highlights how literature serves as a medium for examining the dialectic between freedom and obligation. Furthermore, the paper considers the implications of Sandel’s theory for contemporary political and ethical discourse, including issues of multiculturalism, civic responsibility, and national identity. The findings suggest that the encumbered self remains a relevant framework for understanding identity in an increasingly interconnected world. The study concludes by proposing avenues for further research, including comparative analyses across global literary traditions and explorations of digital identity in the modern age.

KEYWORDS:- Encumbered Self, Michael Sandel, Liberalism, Communitarianism, Identity, Postcolonial Literature, Nationalism, Collective Memory, Autonomy, Moral Obligation, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Toni Morrison, Amitav Ghosh.

INTRODUCTION:-

The nature of human identity and its relationship to community, tradition, and moral responsibility has been a central concern in both philosophy and literature. Michael Sandel’s concept of the “encumbered self” challenges the dominant liberal ideal of the autonomous, self-sufficient individual, arguing instead that identity is inherently shaped by social and historical contexts. In his influential work *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), Sandel critiques John Rawls’ vision of the self as an abstract, unencumbered agent, free to choose its commitments and values independent of external influences. According to Sandel, this conception of selfhood fails to account for the ways in which individuals are embedded within familial, cultural, and national narratives that shape their moral and political obligations. Instead, he proposes that identity is not something we construct in isolation, but rather something inherited, influenced by communal ties, historical legacies, and deeply ingrained moral frameworks.

This philosophical debate between liberal individualism and communitarianism has profound implications beyond political theory—it is also deeply woven into the fabric of literature. Many literary works, especially those dealing with themes of nationalism, historical trauma, and collective identity, reflect the tensions Sandel identifies. Whether through the psychological struggles of characters caught between personal desires and

communal expectations, or through narratives that depict the weight of historical memory on individual lives, literature serves as a compelling space to explore the philosophical complexities of the encumbered self.

Postcolonial literature, in particular, provides a rich ground for examining these themes, as it often portrays characters negotiating between inherited colonial legacies, cultural traditions, and modern political realities. For instance, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* presents a protagonist whose personal identity is inextricably linked to the national history of India, illustrating how historical forces encumber individual selfhood. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores how familial and societal expectations shape the lives of its characters, restricting their ability to exercise free will. Beyond postcolonial narratives, works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* highlight the weight of historical trauma and communal memory, demonstrating how past injustices continue to define personal and collective identities.

By analyzing these literary texts through the lens of Sandel's philosophy, this study seeks to illuminate the ways in which literature not only reflects but actively engages with philosophical debates on selfhood, community, and moral obligation. The encumbered self, rather than being a purely theoretical construct, manifests vividly in fictional narratives, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how identity is shaped, constrained, and negotiated in different cultural and historical contexts. In doing so, this research aims to bridge the gap between philosophy and literature, showing how the study of narrative can deepen our understanding of human identity and its inescapable ties to history and community.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: MICHAEL SANDEL'S 'ENCUMBERED SELF'

Michael Sandel's critique of liberal individualism, particularly as articulated in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), challenges the foundational assumptions of John Rawls' political philosophy. Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), conceptualizes the self as an autonomous, rational agent, capable of choosing its moral commitments independently of prior attachments.

His famous "veil of ignorance" thought experiment assumes that individuals, in a hypothetical original position, would design principles of justice without being influenced by their social, historical, or cultural identities. Sandel argues that this vision of the self—as an unencumbered, freely choosing entity—overlooks the deep-seated ways in which identity is shaped by historical narratives, communal ties, and inherited obligations.

Sandel posits an alternative understanding: the **encumbered self**—an individual whose identity is not freely chosen but rather embedded within a network of social and moral relationships. Unlike Rawls' notion of an abstract self that exists prior to and independent of its affiliations, Sandel's encumbered self is constituted by its communal and historical contexts. He argues that our sense of self is formed through relationships with family, culture, religion, and political traditions, which impose responsibilities that cannot simply be discarded at will. Identity, in this view, is not an act of autonomous construction but an ongoing negotiation with inherited roles, duties, and expectations.

The **role of community and tradition** in shaping moral and political identity is central to Sandel's thought. He contends that liberalism's emphasis on individual autonomy risks undermining the significance of communal bonds that provide meaning and moral direction. For instance, ethical and political commitments—such as loyalty to one's country, religious devotion, or familial responsibilities—are not mere voluntary choices but integral aspects of identity. In this sense, the encumbered self is not just shaped by community but also carries an inherent moral obligation to uphold its values and responsibilities.

Sandel's argument aligns with other **communitarian thinkers** who critique liberal individualism. **Charles Taylor**, for example, argues that identity is dialogical, meaning that it emerges through interaction with others rather than in isolation (*Sources of the Self*, 1989). He emphasizes the importance of cultural narratives and historical continuity in defining personal and collective identities. Similarly, **Alasdair MacIntyre**, in *After Virtue* (1981), critiques modern moral philosophy for detaching ethical reasoning from historical traditions. He

asserts that individuals are “storytelling animals” whose moral choices are intelligible only within the context of inherited social narratives. Both thinkers, like Sandel, argue that the liberal self is a fiction—that real human identity is always embedded in communal frameworks that shape moral reasoning and political life.

By situating Sandel’s philosophy within this broader communitarian tradition, this study will explore how literature serves as a medium for illustrating the encumbered self. The next sections will examine how various literary texts—particularly those grappling with themes of historical trauma, nationalism, and familial duty—reflect the tension between autonomy and communal obligation. Through this analysis, the research will demonstrate that the encumbered self is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived reality, vividly captured in narrative form.

LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ENCUMBERED SELF :-

Literature has long served as a medium for exploring the tension between individual autonomy and community identity, illustrating how personal choices and self-perceptions are deeply influenced by historical, cultural, and moral obligations. Through storytelling, authors depict characters whose identities are shaped—sometimes constrained, sometimes enriched—by the communities they belong to, reflecting Michael Sandel’s concept of the encumbered self. The following literary works—*Midnight’s Children*, *The God of Small Things*, *Beloved*, and *The Shadow Lines*—offer compelling portrayals of this struggle, showing how individuals negotiate their sense of self within complex social and historical landscapes.

In **Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*** (1981), Saleem Sinai epitomizes the encumbered self, as his personal identity is inextricably linked to the historical trajectory of post-independence India. Born at the precise moment of India’s independence, Saleem’s fate is symbolically tied to that of the nation, and his sense of self is constantly shaped by political upheavals, communal strife, and nationalistic discourse. His telepathic abilities, which connect him to other children born at the same moment, further emphasize the

communal nature of identity—one that is neither purely individual nor fully autonomous, but instead a product of historical forces beyond his control. Through Saleem’s fragmented, unreliable narration, Rushdie suggests that identity is not a fixed essence but an evolving construct shaped by collective memory, national history, and inherited responsibilities.

Similarly, **Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*** (1997) examines how socio-cultural constraints and inherited identities define individual destinies. The novel’s protagonists, Rahel and Estha, are deeply affected by the rigid caste and gender hierarchies of Kerala, which dictate the boundaries of love, agency, and belonging. The novel critiques the liberal notion of an unencumbered self by showing how history, family legacies, and deeply entrenched social norms shape personal identity. The tragic consequences of transgressing these boundaries—particularly in the case of Velutha, an untouchable man who defies caste restrictions—underscore the ways in which individuals are burdened by historical injustices and communal expectations. Roy’s novel challenges the liberal ideal of self-authorship, presenting instead a world where identity is a negotiation between personal desires and collective constraints.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) offers another powerful exploration of the encumbered self, particularly through the themes of memory, trauma, and communal responsibility. Set in the aftermath of slavery, the novel follows Sethe, a former enslaved woman, whose identity is profoundly shaped by the collective history of racial oppression. Her act of infanticide—an attempt to prevent her daughter from enduring the horrors of slavery—demonstrates the weight of historical trauma on personal agency. Sethe’s sense of self is not an individual construct but a legacy of generational suffering, moral responsibility, and the ties that bind her to the enslaved community. Morrison’s use of non-linear narrative and shifting perspectives reflects the fragmented, haunted nature of identity in a world where the past continues to encroach upon the present.

In **Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*** (1988), the intersections of personal and national history further illustrate the concept of the encumbered self. The

novel's protagonist, an unnamed narrator, reconstructs his understanding of identity through fragmented memories and transnational connections. The narrative explores the impact of political borders on personal identity, particularly through the partition of India and the communal violence that follows. The narrator's relationships with Tridib, Ila, and his grandmother reflect the struggle between individual aspirations and inherited histories, demonstrating that identity is never an isolated phenomenon but is always embedded in familial, cultural, and national narratives. Ghosh's novel challenges rigid distinctions between self and society, illustrating that our lives are inevitably shaped by historical forces beyond our control.

Through these literary case studies, it becomes evident that the liberal ideal of an autonomous, self-determined identity is frequently disrupted by communal and historical forces. Each of these works showcases how individuals navigate their encumbered selves, balancing personal desires with inherited responsibilities, and illustrating the profound ways in which identity is shaped by memory, community, and historical consciousness.

THE DIALECTIC OF FREEDOM AND OBLIGATION IN LITERATURE:

Literature often serves as a rich terrain for exploring the dialectic between personal agency and societal expectations, illuminating the ways in which individuals struggle to reconcile their desires with the moral and communal obligations imposed upon them. Characters in various literary works frequently grapple with this tension, illustrating the complexities of identity in contexts where freedom is circumscribed by historical, cultural, and social forces. Through narrative techniques such as non-linear storytelling, unreliable narration, and intergenerational memory, authors depict the encumbered self as a site of conflict, negotiation, and transformation.

One of the most striking ways in which literature captures this dialectic is through **characters who are caught between their own aspirations and the constraints of society**. For instance, in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, Sethe's act of infanticide embodies the harrowing choices faced by those burdened by historical

oppression. While Sethe exercises personal agency in deciding to kill her child, her decision is dictated by the legacy of slavery—a communal and historical reality that she cannot escape. Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's love affair with Velutha transgresses rigid caste and gender norms, leading to tragic consequences that highlight the inescapable weight of social expectation. Both characters underscore the idea that individual autonomy is never absolute but is always shaped by historical and cultural forces.

Narrative techniques play a crucial role in representing encumbered selves, emphasizing the fragmentation and multiplicity of identity. Unreliable narrators, such as Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, blur the line between personal memory and historical truth, suggesting that identity itself is constructed through subjective and collective experiences. Non-linear storytelling, as seen in *The Shadow Lines*, reflects the way personal and national histories intersect, reinforcing the idea that the self is shaped by both past and present realities. Similarly, intergenerational memory in *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things* highlights the ways in which historical traumas and inherited responsibilities influence individual choices, demonstrating that personal identity is deeply entangled with collective history.

The historical and cultural contexts of these narratives further shape the experiences of the encumbered self, illustrating how freedom is mediated by obligation. In postcolonial works like *Midnight's Children* and *The Shadow Lines*, the trauma of Partition and colonial legacies create identities that are fragmented and conflicted, caught between old traditions and new political realities. In *Beloved*, the aftershocks of slavery continue to define the lives of characters, demonstrating that the past is not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping the present. Likewise, in *The God of Small Things*, the rigid caste system and patriarchal structures of Indian society dictate the characters' fates, reinforcing the constraints that limit individual choice.

Through these literary portrayals, the dialectic between freedom and obligation emerges as a central theme, challenging the liberal notion of the autonomous self.

Instead, these works suggest that identity is always relational, shaped by historical memory, cultural traditions, and moral responsibility. By examining these narratives, literature not only critiques the constraints imposed by society but also explores the resilience and agency of individuals navigating their encumbered selves.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL AND ETHICAL DISCOURSE:

Literature has long been a powerful medium for exploring the tension between individual autonomy and community identity. Through narrative structures, character development, and thematic concerns, literary works engage deeply with Michael Sandel's concept of the **encumbered self**, reflecting how identity is shaped by history, tradition, and collective belonging. Several novels provide compelling case studies for examining this dynamic, illustrating the struggles of characters caught between personal agency and societal expectations.

One of the most striking examples is **Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***, where the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, embodies the **interconnectedness of individual and national identity**. Born at the exact moment of India's independence, his personal history is inextricably linked to the fate of the nation. His fragmented identity, shaped by family heritage, political upheaval, and cultural hybridity, mirrors the broader struggle of postcolonial India to define itself. Similarly, **Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*** explores how **socio-cultural constraints and inherited identities dictate individual fates**, particularly through the experiences of the twins Estha and Rahel, whose lives are shaped by caste, family honor, and historical injustice.

The notion of memory, community ties, and moral responsibility is central to **Toni Morrison's *Beloved***, where Sethe's haunting past and her obligations to her ancestors define her present identity. Morrison illustrates how **historical trauma and communal memory shape the self**, reinforcing Sandel's argument that identity is not an isolated construct but embedded in collective experience. Similarly, **Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*** examines the intersections of **personal and**

national history, depicting how the protagonist's sense of self is deeply entangled with political events, cultural traditions, and family legacies.

Beyond these Indian and postcolonial examples, several other literary works also reflect the concept of the **encumbered self**. In **Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***, Okonkwo struggles between **individual ambition and tribal expectations**, ultimately demonstrating how identity is deeply tied to communal values and traditions. The arrival of colonial rule disrupts these ties, forcing him into an existential crisis, much like Saleem Sinai's struggle with India's fractured identity. **George Orwell's *1984*** presents an even starker vision, where the state actively erases individual identity to enforce ideological conformity. Winston Smith's battle to reclaim his personal autonomy in a **totalitarian collective** illustrates the dangers of an unchecked nationalistic identity overriding personal freedoms.

Modern diasporic literature also engages with Sandel's ideas. In **Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***, the protagonist Gogol grapples with **his inherited Bengali identity and his American upbringing**, reflecting the challenges of cultural hybridity and the negotiation between personal choice and familial duty. Similarly, **Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*** portrays characters whose identities shift due to migration and geopolitical instability, showing that the **encumbered self is shaped not only by familial ties but also by global forces**.

Dystopian fiction like **Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*** and speculative narratives like **Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*** further push the boundaries of this concept. In Atwood's novel, Offred's identity is stripped by an oppressive theocratic regime, reducing her to a role dictated by patriarchal and political structures. Ishiguro's novel, on the other hand, presents clones whose entire existence is predetermined by societal needs, challenging liberal notions of self-determination. Both works critique the idea of an **abstract, unencumbered individual** by demonstrating how identity is always shaped by external moral and institutional forces.

Lastly, **Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*** illustrates the **inescapable nature of history**

and collective memory in shaping identity. The Buendía family's recurring patterns of fate symbolize how individuals remain tied to their historical and cultural contexts, aligning with Sandel's view that identity is shaped by intergenerational obligations and communal experiences.

Through these literary explorations, we see that the **encumbered self** is not merely a philosophical abstraction but a lived reality, manifesting in diverse historical, cultural, and social contexts. These narratives challenge the liberal ideal of an autonomous self by highlighting how identity is shaped by **tradition, political structures, historical memory, and communal belonging**. By engaging with Sandel's critique of individualism, literature deepens our understanding of the **delicate balance between personal freedom and social responsibility** in shaping human identity.

CONCLUSION:-

The exploration of Michael Sandel's concept of the **encumbered self** through literary narratives reveals a profound tension between individual autonomy and communal belonging. As seen in works like *Midnight's Children*, *The God of Small Things*, *Beloved*, and *The Shadow Lines*, literature serves as a powerful medium to examine the ways in which identity is shaped by history, memory, and societal expectations. These texts illustrate that no self exists in isolation; rather, individuals are deeply embedded in familial, cultural, and national contexts that define their moral and ethical choices. Sandel's critique of liberal individualism challenges the notion of an independent, self-sufficient identity, arguing instead for a self that is **shaped by obligations, traditions, and historical legacies**. The literary representations analyzed in this paper affirm that **identity is not merely a matter of personal will but a product of collective experiences**. Whether through generational trauma, nationalist ideologies, or socio-political upheavals, these narratives reflect the intricate ways in which human beings remain connected to the past while striving for autonomy in the present. For future generations, the lessons drawn from both Sandel's philosophy and literature hold significant implications. In an era marked by rapid globalization, digital identities, and shifting social structures, the

challenge of balancing personal freedom with collective responsibility remains more relevant than ever. Younger generations must critically engage with questions of **belonging, ethical responsibility, and cultural continuity**, ensuring that individual aspirations do not come at the cost of communal well-being.

Moreover, the **importance of empathy, historical awareness, and ethical engagement** should guide future thinkers, writers, and policymakers in shaping societies that respect both personal liberties and shared moral responsibilities. By fostering a nuanced understanding of identity—one that neither rejects community nor suppresses individuality—future generations can work toward a more inclusive and ethically conscious world. Literature, as a reflection of human experience, will continue to provide valuable insights into these ongoing struggles, encouraging deeper introspection and collective dialogue on what it means to be truly free while remaining meaningfully connected to one's roots.

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