

<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n4.21>

Reflections on the Psychology of Conversion: An Inquiry into the Life of Abdullah Adiyar Based on his Personal Narrative, *Chirayshalayil Irunth Pallivaasal Vare* (From Prison to the Mosque)

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the life of the famous writer and public figure of South India, Adiyar, later known as Abdulla Adiyar, who underwent religious conversion on June 6, 1987. Adiyar was a celebrated poet, author, playwright and journalist who was born as son of a communist father in a Tamil speaking community. Out of fascination for a new faith while being an atheist, he went through a drastic transformation in lifestyle, perception and vision of life. He authored several books on Islam, the most well-known being *Chirayshaalayil Irunth Pallivaasal Vare* (From Prison to the Mosque) and *Naan Kadhalikum Islam* translated as “The Islam I Love”. With a deeper exploration of his personal narrative, “From Prison to the Mosque” (translated into Malayalam by Abdul Jabbar Munniyoor as “Thadavarayilninnu Palliyilek”), this paper delves deep into the challenges encountered by the author, whose life journey eventually created widespread impact upon others too. Quests are central to most conversion narratives and identity crisis is often associated with them. Analyzing the motivational factors that affected his religious conversion, the psychological dimensions of faith change, and the influences of the author within the socio-cultural

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context that he lived in, this study discusses the personal experiences and challenges faced by Adiyar during his conversion.

Keywords: Conversion narrative, motivation dynamics, identity crisis, self-realization, cultural adaptation, spiritual awakening

Introduction

Conversion or faith change is understood as a complex phenomenon, yet unique and distinctive for different individuals. The outcome of most conversions is a gradual yet thorough transformation of the individual's overall outlook and perceptions on life. The objective of this study is to examine a few psychological dimensions of religious conversions. The deep and long spiritual quests of the person undergoing conversion, the struggles and the challenges of his/ her varied experiences reflect on the cognitive and emotional pressures encountered by them. This paper presents various facets of conversion including the psychology of the transformative process and the motivational factors that often result in resilience, growth and self-discovery. Religious conversions involve serious transformations in the life of an individual- mostly emotional, mental, social and psychological in nature.

Religious conversion is an immensely complex phenomenon. The term religious conversion comprises three experiences. It may be an experience of increased devotion within the same religious structure, a shift from no religious commitment to a devout religious life, or a change from one religion to another. (Kose 1)

Conversions are almost often life-changing experiences that are driven by certain motivations. The psychology of religious conversion is deeply driven from certain unmet needs which are categorically identified in the motivation theory of Maslow, Herzberg, McGregor and McClelland. It is these motivational factors that persuade an individual to undergo certain changes because of his long search for self-fulfillment. Out of the many needs that are identified by motivational theorists, the need for self-actualization stands out in matters related to one's religious disposition or faith. The other needs, mostly psychological, social, personal, egoistical etc., are equally important too.

Autobiographical conversion narratives have occupied a towering position over recent years owing to the great interest shown on questions of self and identity. Most personal writings are concerned with either quest or identity building. Hence a study on personal narratives becomes relevant and thought provoking. Abdulla Adiyar's narration on his journey to Islam is one such example of an intensely emotional and poignant spiritual experience. His work *Chirayshalayil Irunth Pallivaasal Vare* (translated into Malayalam as 'Thadavarayilninnu Palliyilek') clearly brings out his quest for seeking the right path to attain self-realization. His questions on life, its purpose, creation and existence etc. took him to Islam, giving up on atheism.

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Literature Review

Studies on religious conversion developed by theorists like Tracey, Snow and McGuire mainly focus on the motives, factors and processes involved in conversion. Several theories are employed according to the nature of conversion or de-conversion respectively. Scholars have been fascinated by conversion studies and analyze it from various dimensions. Existing literature on Muslim conversions show that numerous works are carried out in this field. A detailed overview on conversion and conversion models is presented in Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993). Ali Kose's *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (1996) brings out varied convert experiences and struggles. Prison Islam is yet another field explored by Hamm to show how imprisonment becomes a setting for religious awakening. There are several personal narratives especially like the one by Yusuf Islam (former Cat Stevens) and Joram Van Klaveren that highlight their journeys to spiritual fulfilment. The text by William James named *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1922) is another landmark study on Muslim conversion. Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) talks about suffering and how it can lead to spiritual depth. Conversions in South Asia are investigated in the context of caste dynamics, cultural anxiety and forced conversions too. In Adiyar's case, the transformation was neither driven by caste factors or other external motives. His conversion was self-motivated through his personal urge and desire to find answers to questions that troubled him.

The Crises Experience- From Identity Displacement to Identity Building

Almost often, conversion from one faith to another and even de-conversion pose as exceptionally tough and effortful episodes in an individual's life. As far as Adiyar's life is concerned, his quest was not a smooth ride, yet he moved forward without stumbling until he reached his destination. Just as all converts, he had to tackle problems of displaced identity, instability, trauma and lack of support from family. It is in this context that understanding the psychological dynamics of his conversion becomes impactful. Most often, it becomes immensely challenging to uncover the factors responsible for life-changing transitions. It is for certain that an array of internal as well as external factors and influences may have facilitated such conversions. Some noteworthy theories associated with conversion include identity or attachment theory, psychological dynamics, human behavioral conditioning, conformity etc. to name a few. The struggle for self-identity, desperate attempts to cope up in a new environment post religious conversion, ways to reconcile previous beliefs with new faith etc. are indispensable parts of such personal journeys. Adiyar, originally born to a Hindu family at Tirupur of Coimbatore district in 1935, grew up learning Hindu traditions and practices. Yet, he kept asking questions, for he wasn't convinced about many things related to his faith. As a self-declared atheist, he continued to actively involve himself in politics, social activism, land reformation movements etc. He was also fond of literature, script writing and editorial tasks. Additionally, he was a well-known and eloquent orator noted for his rich contributions in the fields of media, literature, politics, films etc. His attraction

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towards Islam made him extensively research on it and persuaded him to delve into in-depth studies and writings. He was honored with the prestigious 'Kalaimani' literary award by the Govt. of Tamil Nadu for his abundant literary contributions. "Religious conversions may vary in the abruptness of the change, in the intensity of the experience, in the presence of a mystical revelation, or in the extent to which they are experienced as an act of will or of "self-surrender" (Clark, 1929; James, 1902; Starbuck, 1899; Salzman, 1953)

Resilience, Confrontations and Trauma

During Adiyar's pre-conversion days, he grew up hearing his father's harsh criticism about other religions and religious practices especially against Islam. Adiyar was into politics like his father and was himself surprised and remarked thus, "Since when did Islam start attracting me towards it even when I was fully and actively involved in politics? It is my imprisonment that would reply to this question." (Rashtriyathil muzhukipoyirunna enne epozhan Islam akarshikan thudangyath? Ee chodyathin thadavarayan marupadi parayuka, My trans.; Adiyar). Adiyar never could hate any person based on his caste or religion.

A father who is absent, withdrawn, harsh or rejecting may cause the child to wish to change these consequential aspects of socialization, and therefore induce a search for protection and a meaningful structure. Religious conversion may be an expression of an attempted solution for these consequences of inadequate fathering. Religion, however, provides guidelines for behaviour, inhibits impulses and produces structure and stability. (Kose 36)

Adiyar, being a socially popular figure, had involved himself actively in politics and social reformation activities. His interaction and confrontations with several people, his own thirst for books and curiosity for learning got him thinking about several religious views, finally finding conviction in Islam. Ali Kose points out that questions regarding 'social justice' could also be a significant motivating factor that influences the choice of some converts.

Quest and Spiritual Awakening

1987 June 6 was a crucial time for Adiyar, for it was on this day that he embraced Islam. In *Naan Kadhalikum Islam*, he explains the reasons for his admiration for the religion of Islam. Many of Adiyar's works have been translated into several languages and are immensely popular not just in India, but even across the seas. Adiyar's journey from atheism to Islam is a momentous one, and interestingly he was regarded as a fervent champion of Islam, even before becoming a Muslim. His memoir brings out his inner struggles inside the prison, when he extensively read about several religions. He believes that it was Islam that gave him strength to hold on and move ahead, eventually bringing him closer to Islam. Conversion, in many cases, was the outcome of a long search for meaning. "They re-examined the ground rules dictated by their culture. They were discontented with ambiguities in their lifestyles and society, and, therefore, were preoccupied with what was right or wrong, with universal questions of meaning." (Kose 23)

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In *Chirayshalayil Irunth Palli Vaasalvare*, Adiyar observes that nobody can acquire Islamic wisdom just from his birth or birthplace, nor can it come merely from love or compassion towards it. Rather, there are some pertinent aspects that should facilitate one's learning, knowledge and understanding of a new religion that he/she was hitherto completely unfamiliar with. Adiyar's doubts on life and its purpose took him to the Quran which showed him the path of righteousness. The first book that came handy while in prison was the one gifted to him for his wedding. T.'Kasim's *Nabinayakan* gave him a clear idea about the Prophet's life and lifestyle. He was surprised to know that a common man could lead a life akin to the kind of life advocated in the Quran. He was astonished how there could be such a connection between the words of God and the history of a man! The fact that this man who became a prophet was an orphan child with a very humble origin made him more impressed. Adiyar was also an orphan like the messenger, while inside the prison and he knew what it meant to be one! The reply that the messenger Muhammed would give to those who praise him sky-high filled Adiyar's eyes with tears. "I'm an orphan child of a poor widow and grew up eating dry bread and dry dates." (Unakarottiyum Kaanyularnna karakkayum thinnuvalarnna pavapetta vidhavayude makan aan nyan, My trans., Adiyar)

For Adiyar, the Prophet's life was the story of a unique personality that he had never come across in life. This was the first cause of admiration he had in his mind for Islam. He learnt more about Islam and monotheism from prison. He came to understand that Islam is not just a religion, but a complete way of life. All his misconceptions about Islam were removed from books and he became more receptive towards religious learning. Adiyar had become a totally different and transformed being with an open mind and broader vision since then. A series of articles one after the other came out in Adiyar's newspaper named 'Neerotta' and it was these articles put together that took the shape of his much-accepted work *Naan Kadhalikum Islam* (translated as "The Islam I Love"). In spite of several writings on Islam, he came to realize that Islam was a subject still worth discussing.

Imprisonment and Enlightenment

Conversion experiences within prison settings occupy a central part of such narratives. They offer rich insights into the psychological process involved in conversion. Adiyar's prison days were crucial in his self-realization. It was from his vast reading inside the prison that Adiyar gained enlightenment. He read almost all religions, especially Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Prison plays a huge role in his psychological transformation. Research on prison memoirs and prison conversions are also on the rise; the setting of a prison puts the inmates in a state of mental emptiness. Some people attempt to heal emotionally through spiritual solace. *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women* (2002) by Simone Davis and Alija Izetbegovic's *Notes from Prison* (1938-1988) are two famous examples of prison memoirs.

Adiyar was an active political activist. During the time when Indira Gandhi was defeated and DMK won the polls, Indira Gandhi had put political leaders behind bars. It was during this

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imprisonment that Adiyar became emboldened and outspoken. He was bold enough to resist the brutal torture they had to face. The physical torment that he and his fellow inmates went through was exceptionally painful. He was put in a state of fear and terror, and it was then that his soul started to crave for solace. Imprisonment made him think about the Universe, creations and the purpose of life. He did not get satisfactory answers from books on Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism etc. Ultimately, he found peace in Islam. Some of his most pressing needs like belonging, security and meaning were met because of imprisonment, where he endured loneliness, despair and existential crisis. Hence Adiyar's prison experience took him to Islam, thereby enabling him to meet one of his higher psychological needs of self-actualization. It becomes a life turning point leading him to spiritual awakening.

Travel Motif and Spiritual Awakening

His knowledge about Islam widened with his extensive travels to other states and foreign countries. He closely observed the lives of Muslims and wished to be like one. The travel motif which recurrently occurs in life narrations often leads to reflections and self-discoveries. Adiyar's travel experiences also opened newer insights about Islam and made him more knowledgeable too. "Just as the sky that is too vast to be held in the grasp of this book, Islam radiated all over and spread its smile everywhere." (Ee pusthakathinte kaipidikkum othungatha aakasham pole vishalamayi virinyinnu Islaminte punchirithooki, My trans.; Adiyar) His decision to convert can be seen as driven by very strong intrinsic motivation to find autonomy and self-esteem through faith change.

Assimilation and Integration into New Faith

Another important motive for faith conversion could be the feeling of attraction to the teachings and practices of a particular faith. This occurs in one's attempt at finding a belonging or sense of community or connection with a spiritual order. Adiyar was particularly fascinated by the way the Muslims greeted one another with praises of peace, their way of shaking hands when meeting others, their kind nature and hospitality. He recalls the invitation he received from Kerala for the launching of his book *Naan Kadhalikum Islam*, a collection of 17 articles, from Dawat Nagar at Malappuram. Adiyar was wonderstruck over the huge reception and was surprised by the way a Tamilian was received in the Malayalam soil. Brotherhood amongst Muslims and their hospitality towards others left him spellbound, he exclaims, "That congregation was a heavenly abode of brotherly feelings." (Sahodarya vikarathinte swargiyaramamayirunnu aa sammelanam, My trans.; Adiyar)

Some of the spectacular events on that day could never be forgotten. He had fallen for Islam in every sense of the word. Later one fine day, when he visited Pakistan, he had to face this question- Why Adiyar who spoke so much about Islam was not a follower yet? This question changed his life and left him wondering what held him back from making such a crucial decision. Adiyar was also impressed by the way Muslims rushed for namaz when hearing the call of Adhan.

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He was convinced that they had submitted themselves before the Lord. About his acceptance of Lord, he says, “My embrace of Islam is in the womb stage, like a pregnant woman nearing her delivery. Soon the delivery will take place.” (Ente Islamashleshm ippol, garbavasthayilaan. Prasavamadutha oru garbiniyude nilayilaan nyanullath. Vaikathe prasavam nadakkum, My trans.; Adiyar)

Quite surprisingly, soon after he dreamt of taking the Shahada, on June 6, 1987 at Chennai Ma'mur Masjid, he became a believer. He took the name Abdullah since then and continued his journey with strong faith and beliefs. His conversion was the outcome of his interest and efforts to study Islam comprehensively. He accepted Islam heart and soul and gained in-depth knowledge about monotheism, the shortcomings of atheism, the divine and man-made laws, the science behind divine laws etc. He also started to enjoy the aesthetics in Quranic recitation and the namaz. About performing namaz, he comments, “Ever since I started to experience the pleasure and warmth of namaz (prayer), I tell everyone I meet – Brother, this is a gentle breeze, Come and enjoy, come and savour the taste of honey from it.” (Namaskarathinte suganubhoothi aswadikaan thudangya naal muthal kanunavarodellam nyan parayunnu: 'Sahodara, ithu mandhamaruthanaan. Aaswadikan varu; punthenaan nukaran varu.' My trans.; Adiyar)

Psychological and Motivational Factors influencing Conversions

The psychology of conversion is an interesting subject in this discussion. Several intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors may be responsible for one's decision to convert. Adiyar was in every sense an open-minded personality who loved to delve deep into various conversions and can be taken as a strong case of quest orientation. It is for certain that most converts grapple with issues like identity crisis, lack of purpose and belonging etc. They are constantly in search of a meaning in life and are motivated towards a reorientation of life's goals and values. Adiyar effectively used his imprisonment days to gather answers to the queries that were troubling him regarding creation, existence and purpose of life. This may be owing to his earnest urge to fulfil his basic survival needs inside the prison. Maslow's hierarchy of needs in motivation theory emphasizes basic safety and social needs. Ultimately, his conversion to Islam could be the result of his drive for personal growth and his moving to self-actualization. There are several angles with which the psychology of religious conversion is studied. The theorists Glock and Stark popularized the psychodynamic approach which emphasizes various unconscious aspects like identity and existential crisis. Similarly, the cognitive and social identity theories were also recently developed to study the emotional cognitive issues in converts.

Conclusion

In short, Adiyar's conversion experience provides deep insight into the process of conversion in general and help in understanding social, personal and motivational factors that influence one's decision to convert. This critical reading on Adiyar's personal narrative throws light on the several complexities involved in the process, along with new experiences of resilience,

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confrontations and trauma. The paper tried to investigate the ways that their personal experiences reflect on their psyche and on the importance of analyzing such narratives in this light. The challenges, social pressure, societal restrictions etc. shape their psyche and mental wellbeing. The findings from the study can contribute to further discussions on the interplay between faith and psychological issues that come with it, especially in South Asian literature. The work as a cultural artefact also reflects broader political and social contexts, wherein the authors' relationships with individuals of other religious backgrounds, their indulgence in interfaith dialogue etc. may also be explored. The paper has analyzed issues of displacement, discrimination and cultural dislocation with acceptance of a new religious faith, initially even causing traumatic and tragic outcomes. Hence the paper tries to reflect upon the experiences of the author, the multifaceted nature of transformations and the richness of diverse experiences he encountered. To conclude, the study explores complex interplay of several elements and suggests various avenues and scopes for further research in the field.

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