

Shifting Subjectivities – A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The subjective construction on the ontological being of an individual by the individual is primarily due to the defining by the ‘other’, historical social constructions and oppressing situations they grow with. With every situation, the subjective construction of an individual alters. The gamut of injustices perpetrated on marginalized communities were instrumental in creation of a body of literature that propels individuals and communities to create an identity that is true to their own selves. But the process of creation of such an identity is not a singular and straight affair. The individuals undergo multiple experiences, influences and preferences before they concretize on an identity with which they are comfortable and harmonious.

Keywords: Subjectivity, In Search of April Raintree and Karukku & Comparative

Introduction

Subjectivity refers to that state of mind that decides / judges a situation in a very particular fashion. Every individual create his / her own subjectivities influenced through multi various domains that goes into the formation of their subjective persona. These influences are sometimes conscious and most of the times unconscious. However, the influences are not always overt and acknowledged.

One way of countering cultural imperialism that occurs due to ‘stereotyping, erasure and appropriation of a group’s identity’; (Heyes) is forcing to evaluate his / her positions contrapuntally with that of the society by creating texts. It is through these texts that they initiate a dialogue between the conflicting positions of forced identity and an identity that they intend to seek.

The literary discourses of the text help in transferring an individual’s experience to the community and from the community to the individual. It is these texts that reflect the prevalence of constant flux of subjectivity that is being shaped and reshaped. As Guattari opines ‘subjective factors often interact back’ (O’Sullivan) on the subject for its transformations from time to time. This paper intends to read the texts *In Search of April Raintree* and *Karukku* from the position of shifting subjectivities.

In Search of April Raintree

Memories. Some memories are elusive, fleeting. ... Others are haunting. No matter where you are, they are there, too. (11)

It is these memories that were instrumental in the formation of her subjectivity that Mosionier develops into a novel. The novel starts with the recollection of memories of that of April and ends with the memoirs / letters of her sister Cheryl which acts as a tool of transformation for April’s subjectivity.

The recollecting her mixed parentage, April positions herself and her sister as a Métis. With unassailable indigenous root, her observation of her father and indigenous visitors to her house who take to alcohol and infected with TB creates a sense of revulsion for her towards indigenous people. April’s description of children from Indian community and her choice of

words depict her emerging attitude towards the indigenous communities (children with all the foul smell and behavior.) These incidents strongly impinged in her memories that she had developed a strong antipathy towards the native people. While her love for her parents lingers, the revulsion towards their behavior hinders her relationship.

April becoming conscious of her looks, when she sees white girls, she envies them and imagined them to be rich living in big houses. (16) Setting off into the unknown as a child of the State, forcefully removed from her parents, April is conscious of the fact that they are leaving their parents for sure. But her helplessness is obvious and she understands the reality. Fearing the unknown in the orphanage, and later the receding image of her father from the orphanage has an imprint that is unassailable for April who decides the future course of action. The helplessness of her father against the Sisters reveals the power structures that operate in the society for April.

April liked the foster home of the Dion's. (29) With a good feeling, she imagines herself to be part of the family resulting in her receding emotional attachment to her biological family. (32) In contrast to that the Dion's, the next foster home which she encounters that of Mrs.DeRosier forced April to encounter a different reality. With all the negative stereotyping about the indigenous people in the house, she resolved to fight back and lie low when she finds that she could not counter the white community authority.

She was made aware of the despicable situation of the indigenous people by through the torments of the DeRosier's family: 'taking medicines' (alcohol) and the ignominy of being a half breed (46). She had a strong sense of feeling that she is not having a control of her own life (50). She did decide to react in a most passive manner. (53) Through her experience in hitchhiking to Winnipeg with Cheryl, she realizes, her part of the truth will never be acknowledged by the authorities and as a consequence, she was separated from her sister. She tells her sister Cheryl that they can't fight the battle with the white people. A sense of resignation sets in (64). While her sister became proud of their Indian heritage, April exerts caution about revealing her Indian identity. The classic use of a memoir within a memoir in the text as an essay on "What I want for Christmas" is a sure way of depicting her situation. It is through this essay; April breaks the myth of a happy foster family to the public at large and to her social worker (76). The urge to break the shackles of foster home and becoming independent has become an unshakable desire and a longing for April.

These experiences drove her to believe that being independent and alone, she can pass off for a white lady. Her positive disapproval of indigenous life and positive attraction towards the white community is consolidated when she became independent.

The realization that she has missed a visit to her sister, "reinforced my belief that if I could assimilate myself into white society. I wouldn't have to live like this for the rest of my life." (76) Her determination to integrate into the white world is so intense that she started to scheme her way towards the goal of assimilation. Her priority shifted from being an individual with identity to create an identity that would ensure freedom. Moving into the city and enjoying the privilege of anonymity among the population and capitalizing on the looks, she believed that "being free was more important than anything else in the world."(79)

Also she was conscious of the fact that she needs money and that she is not interested in prostituting or landing up in skid row which is synonymous with that of being an Indian made her keep away from the Indian people. She charted her own course. Picking up courage to expose the mistreatment at the DeRosier's, April got a chance to escape from the foster home. She has started to mature (hippocratic / calculative?) – trying to keep her feelings to herself. (81) April created a past for herself to enable her to create an identity in the St. Bernadette's Academy for her to live with the Children's Aid. By this time she had stopped thinking them as Dad and Mom. (83) She even created a story that her parents died in an air crash were propagated to cover her past.

Her subjectivity altered to that of assuming herself to be a white person, she maintained an image about herself. Shifting her residence to a city (85) away from her sister Cheryl was a conscious decision as she did not want her identity as a white person to be jeopardized. She even postponed writing to Cheryl in order to keep up her façade. Earning her freedom from foster homes, she started to work to become a secretary in companies. Freedom became boredom for her. (89)

While her search for her parents took her close to the indigenous people, she was appalled by the squalor and considering that these factors would destabilize her identity, she decided to bring to an end the search for her parents – this she decided as the only way to survive. (91) She even refused to take Cheryl to her office as that would reveal her Indian ancestry.

Her desire to marry Bob Radcliff, a white man from Toronto (99) is a process of assimilation. When Cheryl warns about the marriage and the possibility of her begetting children with Indian features, April admits to Cheryl, "I can't accept ... I can't accept being a Métis. ... I have to go my way. (101) It is here April accepts that she is a Métis and that she has to hide the fact and make believe that she is a white person. She shifts her subjectivity from being a Métis to that of a white person. She ruminates what made her like what she is and how she thinks. (102)

The experience of April in Bob's household as a white man's wife and as part of the white society provided enough courage as she assumed stability of the society and rank made her talk with her sister Cheryl and reveal her position: "but to me, they (Indians) are a lost cause. I can't see what anyone can do for them, except the people themselves." (108) The decisive statement of April consolidates her position as one who observes Cheryl and all Indians from the perspective of a white person and the distant 'other'. She has not only assimilated but started to see the Indians from the perspective of a white person. In search of her parents, she says, "They are disgusting people. ... And if that's where we came from, I sure don't want to go back. That's why I'm happy with my life here." (110) She is alienating herself from her parents, ancestry and the community for the sake of her happiness and security both financial and social. The self image she has constructed about herself was a shift towards assimilation.

A self analysis of sort sets in when Cheryl leaves April. The boredom, restlessness, empty parties creates a sense of desperation to her. She had everything she wanted, but there is emptiness. (112) She realized that "I merely existed. Comfortable and surrounded by socially prominent people. But I felt that I really didn't belong. I didn't belong because I didn't care." (113) She willingly allowed Bob and his mother to control her social calendar and not worried as she thinks she is happy with wealth and position which she was not willing to compromise.

Her chance over hearing of the conversation between Heather and Mother Radcliff about the contempt they had for April and the knowledge that she is a half-breed and that Bob married April only to antagonize his mother violently shook her out of the slumber. Her bonhomie with the white world has crashed and she seeks her sister, only to get a rude shock of her life. She was raped by a bunch of white men mistaking her for her sister Cheryl. The reasons provided were preposterous. This made April sit back and ruminate again on her own subjectivity. The ignominy of being a rape victim for the sheer reason that she is a 'squaw' has reinforced her image that had she not been a 'squaw' they would not had raped her.

To Roger Maddison, she acknowledges her inner turmoil of her identity: It would be better to be a full-blooded Indian or full blooded Caucasian. But being half-breed, well there's nothing there. ... Being a half-breed, you feel only the shortcomings of both sides. You feel you're a part of the drunken Indians ... And if you inherit brown skin ... you identify with the Indian people more." (142-3) It is here April analyses her subjectivity. She has a white woman's appearance, but she is a half-breed. Her inability to balance on both theses appearances and her hereditary is forcing her to seek an alternative. Roger provides her with a possible solution towards the end of the conversation: "I'm not going to tell you to be proud of what you are. Just don't be so ashamed." (143)

What was puzzling to April was that how did the men mistake her for a 'squaw' as she had been always passed off for a white person. This was more insulting to her. "Except for my long black hair, I really didn't think I could be mistaken as a native person. Mistaken? There's that shame again." (146)

After attending a dancing session which romanticized the Indians at a reserve, April says, "I'll go back to see the drunken Indians on Main Street, and I'll feel the same old shame. It's like having two worlds in my life that can't be mixed. And I've made my choice on how I want to live my everyday life."

"Yeah, but the Indian blood runs through your veins, April. To deny that, you deny a basic part of yourself. You'll never be satisfied until you can accept that fact." (152)

However, it is the shame that does not dissolve overnight. She is unable to resolve the difference.

When April and Cheryl visited the Friendship Centre, they met an Elder. Cheryl had told the Elder that April is her sister and that she has a clouded vision. The Elder, White Thunderbird Women, took April's hand and looked into her eyes. "I felt humbled. At the same time, I had this overwhelming feeling that a mystical spiritual occurrence had just taken place." ... "When my vision cleared ... Would it ever? And would it mean that someday I would come to accept those Main Street people?" (159) A serious self analysis was triggered by the visit of the Elder in the life of April.

However, her idea about the Indians had been shaken when she heard that her sister Cheryl was a prostitute. Cheryl in an intoxicated condition reveals April to herself: "You are a bigot against your own people." (175) You are a snob. You have double standards. You prostituted yourself when you took Bob's money ... You loved his money... you were going to be Miss High Society. (179) The startling moment of truth dawned on her when she lost her

sister and read her diary. She had at last accepted her identity which she had denied to herself all these years:

“The denial had been lifted from my spirit. It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl’s death to bring me to accept my identity. ... I would strive for it (better tomorrow) For my sister and her son. For my parents. For my people.” (207)

Karukku

The text has articulated an individual’s journey along with the timelessness of the issue that is being negotiated. In the process of finding out a path for herself, Bama had traversed many spheres and altered her subjectivities in the hope of achieving a harmonious life. The paper is attempting to identify the shifts in the subjectivities, the prompts and the process. The text being a non-linear narrative and discursive on the various attempts to concretize her subjectivity, the paper attempts to view it on a linear time frame.

The text opens with the description of her native village and its surroundings, while the narrator is conscious of her mandate in her opening paragraph that she has to say a lot about the castes and communities (1) the focus of the text, she also introduces various characters of her community to establish herself as a part of a cohesive community. She does that by establishing her relationship with people of the community by way of naming the relationship Maama, Patti, etc. At the outset, Bama establishes her pride in being part of the community.

Society

While it is soothing and comforting and harmonious for her to be part of the community, her community’s relation with other communities in the society is juxtaposed in the subsequent chapter. Her exposure to the realities of the prevailing social structures jarred her conscience while she witnessed the humiliation of her people.

The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadas. (13)

What appeared initially to be a comic affair, her brother sensitized her towards the reality of untouchability that she had ‘seen, felt, experienced and humiliated’. (11) Affected at a tender age of may be at eight years of age, it has altered her subjectivity and her subjective relation to the society.

In yet another incident that has jarred her sensibilities is when she heard her brother’s reaction to a person who is from the Naicker community. When they were both walking, the Naicker wanted to know who he is. Defiantly, her brother proclaimed who he is, which has shaken the Naicker community’s one-upmanship. It is her *Patti* who had to seek pardon for her grandson’s behavior which was construed as arrogance by the Naicker community. (15) At the same time she realized that education is well respected when her brother informed her that how the local librarian received him when he knew he had a MA degree. (15) These contrasting realities force her to peg respect to education - a deep imprint on her subjectivity that propels her to take up education in right earnest and to educate children from her community. These incidents have altered her approach to the castist conundrum. She realized that education can provide a break from the subjugation of the subjective being both from within and without.

Academia

However, the structures of the society are so stereotypical that even an educated person has little thought outside the confines of the societal structures. The headmaster of her school announcing to her in the assembly: “You have shown your true nature ... you stole a coconut” (16) while the contrary being true which tantamount to stereotyping. This stereotyping of an individual is a constant hammering on her subjective perception on oneself and the society. The humiliation at the hostel (17) in the bus (18) battered her subjective evaluation to a greater degree that she had resolved to excel in education an opening she believed would soften the societal blows. It is her academic merit in the SSLC that propelled her to take up higher education.

Her hope that educated ‘other’ would recognize the value of education was also shattered when she witnessed the very same system operating at that level too. Her seeking a subjectivity that could be respected by others through her education had become a mirage in the precincts of the academic world. She realized that the academic world is not disassociated from the structures of the society. Her movement to the school and college where she encounters humiliation – she goes in with a subjective expectation that she will gain a new identity or that her identity would be treated on par with others in the community. But she is shocked to see a different reality that showcases an undisturbed and ever pervasive castist reaction.

When the narrator having gone through the toils of in educational institutions, lands in a job where she started to earn a living her subjective evaluation that economic independence would alter her societal relations. “It was really good to earn enough ... I became aware that if you have a little money in your hands you can gain some authority, and status and prestige.” (66) Seeking economic independence for her and her community became a prime mover for her and she had refined her search towards economic independence that provided her much needed ‘authority, status and prestige.’ Though this has become partly true, her concern to her community at large, and realization of wide spread poverty and their struggle to fill their bellies came before education. She thought the only way to elevate the community is through education.

It is this concern for the community that pushed her to take a rash decision of joining the convent in order to alleviate the situation of the children in her street. She imagined that she will be able to serve the physical and educational needs of the children. But the reality in the convent was otherwise, the Sisters were found serving the rich kids in the school, and they themselves lived a posh life which poor children dared to dream about.

Convent life had changed me fundamentally. I who had once been bold had become an extremely timid person, fearful of everything, ready to burst into tears, and without any strength. I felt orphaned, as if I had no family. I felt too shy even to communicate with people in normal way. (67)

Even in the convents, the narrator finds that the system of caste is overpowering the spiritual order. It was a slow realization that her concept of devotion and belief of God had changed radically due to the conflicting positions of the believers and the structures that propagated the belief. She speaks out more vehemently:

I felt in my heart that I could go and speak directly to God without their intervention. ... I came to realize that you could see God through the mind’s eye, in nature, and in the ordinary events of every day. So all the rituals that I had followed and believed in so far

suddenly began to seem meaningless and just a sham. The desire to become a nun fell away from me entirely at this time. (88)

Church

Her subjective proposition that the Church is neutral and her becoming a nun would alter her position and would ensure an egalitarian society was again jarred. She witnessed that the caste system had made deep inroads into the Catholic Church was a shock beyond her expectations. Her attempt to alter her subjective ideation about herself was jarred when in the convent,

“... every single one was anxious to find out to what caste I belonged. One day, one of them asked me straight out. When I answered her honestly, she would not believe me. ... a Sister told us that in certain orders they would not accept harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere.” (22)

The Sisters of the order who are supposed to work for the poor were seen pampering the rich kids in the school and she was made to work for the benefit of the rich kids from upper castes. Bama wanted to be a nun with a difference. But she is made to understand that the systems that operate are different from what they preach. (89) She also understood that “The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness.” (90) The subjugation that is being reinforced even while they are imparted values and spiritual tradition is highlighted by Bama.

Her reading of the Bible and her expectation that the institutions are for the betterment of the poor, proved a mirage and her entering the nunnery made her realize that the ubiquitous caste system had deeply embedded in the precincts of the institutions that are supposed to work for the poor.

She realized the fact that they are oppressed, marginalized, and were used as stepping stones, structured as slaves, and now they have realized that “... these others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods.” (94)

The moment she stepped outside the confines of a convent, she is back to square one among those structures that operate the society. The convent had cut her down, sculpted and damaged her to a greater degree. (104) She had decided at last that “rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears.” (104) This is most distressing signal that has ever emerged from a person who was shunted from faith to hope, expectations and failure in structures that was built over generations.

Existing structures can never be re-engineered as instruments of change. Her hope and wish to liberate the structures of the society through her entering the convent were shattered as the convent was found to be based on the very same structure of the society. It was only the change in the institution and not the structure. (93)

Conclusion

April and Bama in their attempt to operate the structures of the society alter their subjective orientation towards one or more instruments of the society in order to harmonize themselves into the system. But it is facile to believe that assimilating into one of the existing structures by the indigenous / marginalized would ensure harmony. The society demands negation and surrendering of an independent identity.

A drive for associating themselves with ideological apparatus that is external to their system in which they were born led to an internal conflict of their identities. Both these characters have altered their subjectivities in order to assimilate into the ideological apparatus but in vain. It proved a wasteful exercise as they found to their dismay that the institutions which they believed to be bereft of these structures had in them these structures.

April assimilates and finds it in a hard way that she can never assimilate and become a white person. Bama on the other hand did foray into the structures that provide a façade of liberation from the structures but the building blocks of these 'alternate structures' rose from the very same social structures that permitted it to exist.

Rather than cocooning them into an oppressive structure, they liberate themselves through accepting, appreciating and celebrating the structure albeit with education and economy. It is this acceptance and celebration of an identity that they once decided to relinquish in order to overcome the imbalances of the system that provided solace and support towards the end.

It is the survival mechanism that is being employed by the individuals to survive in an otherwise hostile world. This technique of survival by altering their subjectivities results in disorientation in the end leading to seek a concrete basis a *raison d'être* for their existence an ideological standing to establish an identity that is true to their own selves.

Mosionier and Bama attempt to extricate themselves out of the vortex of subjugation by way of writing out these imbalances - seeking a personal freedom through expression of reality from their perspective and in the process recording their shifts in their subjectivities in the process of redefining one self.

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