



DECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY POLITICS: A STUDY OF JOAN CRATE'S *BREATHING WATER*

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Abstract

*The role of literature has been very crucial in all sense right from the process of human civilization. Projecting all domains human life is associated with, it has provided a depth of understanding of class, race, culture, psyche, politics to readers at large. Post- colonial and post-modern literature specifically speaks of numerous socio-cultural and political concerns; victimization and subjugation in the hands of power. In addition to this, gender issues have attracted many authors to stage the voice for so called 'second' gender-female. Quite naturally, rebellious nature of writers specially women is witnessed in the literature produced during in these times. Being revolutionary in nature, Joan Crate elaborately pronounces suffering of women, the way in which women are oppressed and the manner of their being politicized. The present research article takes in to account such theme as can be seen in her *Breathing Water* wherein the protagonist Dione in a sense dies to prove her 'self' to the world. Throwing off the limitations imposed upon women, Dione successfully creates her own world without any sort of intrusion of male politics.*

Keywords

Human Civilization, Role of Literature, Identity Politics, Victimization, Male Politics, etc.

Full Article

As aptly quoted by Beyonce, "Your self-worth is determined by you. You don't have to depend on someone telling you who you are", the entire struggle of individuals today is to project the 'self'. Yet, in the situations where identities are politicized, it becomes, however, obligatory to break the silence. Literature has always paved the way for readers and authors to experience social, cultural, political, and psychological issues over the centuries. Besides providing knowledge, Literature has been sensitizing the world towards the dilemma and concerns of the people on the global scale. In the midst of colonization, mindset of the colonized faced trauma and literature reinforced and became instrumental in affirming superiority of the white over natives. The natives in the colonized cultures were often criticized, objectified, and were shown through the lenses of colonizers' standpoint; inferior. Naturally, the natives could hardly enjoy 'Subject' positions in such narratives for their identities were absolutely smudged.

Revolt through literature has been regular linocuts that has not only put aside subjugation but proved to a powerful weapon for writers to speak for oppressed class and section of the society in general. One of such authors, Joan Crate explores the loaded being of those with Indigenous lineage. The definition and understanding of burgeon represented identities, the fragile position - socially and politically -of Indigenous Canadians. Stereotyping is simplification as it is an detained, off-putting form of representation. Moreover, the women in such presentations were seen as exotic and as sexual objects. The complex and crippled psyche of women led to so much of disasters- 'self'. The protagonist in *Breathing Water*, Dione suffers from a similar complex. Her



attachment to her child, her intense preoccupation with the physical well-being of the child- all portrays her as a perfect mother. The portrayal of Dione as a sexual figure in a complete reification of the stereotype is an extension of the masculinist construction of the other.

The stereotype which the colonizer had constructed to retard or contain native image is implicitly the place where Crate engages in battles and negotiates strategies of resistance. Assertion of identity through the creation of a strong subjectivity is a major task undertaken by post-colonial writers. On the other hand, post structuralism has consistently concentrated on the subject in order to question its traditionally privileged epistemological status. Barthes conceives of subjectivity as exactly an infinite and infinitely mobile connection of subject positions in cahoots with given discourses but never entirely given over to them. Today the subject comprehends itself elsewhere and subjectivity folds back upon another point in the spiral: the loosed one.

Hence, the writers- specially from colonized territory- felt it very substantial and prerequisite to stage the voice of oppressed group so that the real and authentic images of the colonized will be represented to the world. Crate's attempt in *Breathing Water* is clearly to find a way of escaping the realm of the imaginary, to continually displace the identification that settle there and fix them. One of the obvious ploys she uses is to write her narrative in fragments and to operate within those fragments the widest possible variation of relationships and personal pronouns. The writing subject here shifts between me and her. Paradoxically enough, attempts to strength and disperse identity are seen in this novel.

The major conflict in the novel is the one between the Indian in Dione and her so-called sophisticated self. In other words, she is unable to relate her urban self to the native self. The disappearance of her father from the family creates a vacuum which is keenly felt by Dione. Her frequent mental journeys to the past, memories of the happy childhood days spent in the company of her Indian father, the stories he narrated- all reveal the Indian in her. The submergence of her Indian 'self' disrupts the very subjectivity of the protagonist. Everything that is associated with her day to day life brings forth her intact and deep unconscious Indianness in her.

At one more aspect in the novel, Crate makes an effort to strengthen the private in her writing. The emotional and the sexual aspects of heroines are celebrated in the narrative. Dione's site of discourse, her domestic status is in the conformity with the idea that "women writers who explore subjectivity through domestic or familial relations may be just as political as those who analyze issues of war, state control, and foreign policy" (Edith, 1996). While celebrating the private domain, Crate also breaks away from dominant social and literal conventions. Male-authored texts have often attempted to represent women as occupying domestic spaces; their tendency have been to limit the movement of their women characters referred to as 'immobilization of women', such plot structures are often linear in form and revolve around the patriarchal family configuration and its ensuing prohibitions.

In case of Dione, one can see her throwing off family ties and lead a life of adventure in the outside world. Laws of patriarchy do not matter to her at all. Her frequent visits to shopping mall, her sexual adventures with the artist, her trip to the bar to drink in the company of Mayor, Witch and Buzzard, her trip across the border with Buzzard, the visit to the strip-show- all topple our preconceived notions of feminine behavior.

Moreover, in this novel one finds many obstacles being laid out in the path of the female protagonist. By inverting hitherto female-held position of the obstacle, Crate attempts overhaul male/female roles. Here it is Dione's husband who functions as an obstacle in her path. Quite early in the narrative, Dione offers her reasons for agreeing to marry Jorge for he becomes the mould on which Dione could test her numerous stories connected to justify her absences from home. In Dione's quest of self discovery. It could be rightly concluded that her husband emerges as an obstacle.



Breathing Water could be regarded as possessing a recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of the traditional scripts of heterosexual romance characterized by female passivity, dependence and subordination, and one could easily discern an attempt on the part of the author to develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity could be located.

The beginning of the novel introduces a negative model, an image of female alienation. Dione is a housewife whose entire horizon is circumscribed by the daily drudgery of catering to her domestic duties. Her confinement to the private domain denies her chance of going after her spiritual needs. Her decision to break the walls of her drudgery is an attempt to come to terms with herself. The domestication of Dione leads to further distancing from her Indian self and often she perceives herself to be dreaming. After spending the night with an artist near the mall, Dione does not quite remember it, "Perhaps I dreamed the whole incident in that basement room" (Crate, 32). Even the child she carries with her during all her escapades becomes a nonentity at times. Standing in front of a glass door, Dione catches her reflection with the child around her waist. She thinks, "Something is attached to my waist, a little frog kicking blue legs" (Crate, 85). The sense of remoteness from a performed destiny which the protagonist feels helpless to alter is best described as a splitting of inner and outer self, the heroine experiencing a powerful estrangement from the external appearance by which her social status in a patriarchal culture is largely determined.

The key transformation in the novel takes the protagonist from the stage of alienation, of a sense of lack, to a conscious affirmation of gendered identity. Rather than offering a negative critique of society by depicting the annihilation of the protagonist, Crate delineates a form of opposition through the resistance and survival of the heroine. Dione's inward recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of existing gender roles is expressed externally in the narrative through Dione's act of leaving her husband. For, "some form of at least temporary separation from traditional heterosexual relations is a necessary precondition for any gain in self-knowledge". The life of the recluse in her sister's house does not last long. The shift in physical space offers her new insights into marriage and life. Dione's return to Jo-Jo marks a period of psychological transformation. Dione's new self knowledge creates a basis for future negotiation between subject and society. External exploration both parallels and contributes to the discovery of the inner self. Multiple identities assumed by Dione in Breathing Water –Madonna, squaw, female on a quest, schizophrenic, wife -pose a threat to construction of a strong subject.

This could be suicidal for a native woman for whom construction of identity would have been a very significant move. Moreover, the intersections of these multiple self identities create what is called 'border consciousness' in the speakers. None of these identities attempt to subvert the other. Rather, the multiple tropes of identification could be regarded as instances of post structuralist, post-modernist representations of the non-unitary self. Crate seems to share Judith Butler's view that it would be better to see 'women' as an undesignatable field of differences' rather than as a totalised 'identity category' so that the term can become 'a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. All the identities- mother, squaw, wife, adventuress, Indian, vamp- portray the contradictions of womanhood. The deconstructionist position taken up by Crate regarding the question of rigid identity is in keeping with the views of radical feminism which states that a woman's identity lies outside the realms of patriarchal language.

Embracing plural identities can be a liberatory practice for women who find themselves committed to multiple subject positions. This could be seen as a tragic to subvert the conventional subject positions which could be end up as stereotypes. By engaging herself in the liberatory process of assuming multiple identities to the protagonist in Breathing Water also seeks to imply a



multiplicity of positions from which she is driven to grasp or understand herself and her relations with the real.

To conclude, as it is said 'in a world where you can be anything, be yourself', the protagonist Dione, quite naturally creates her own way of living throwing off all kinds of impositions laid on her gender in general and sees off traditional patriarchal set of norms which have long been subjugating women. A new 'life', a new 'self' is created by Dione so that her liberty and identity will not be endangered by external forces. Crate, through this ground-breaking and her first novel comes on scene that provided not only an opportunity for her as a potential novelist but a woman crossing unjustifiable obligation on women.

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