

# DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN FRIDA KAHLO'S "SELF PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR"

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**ABSTRACT--** Frida Kahlo was a Mexican artist, who was considered a remarkable impression in the panorama of aestheticism. She used art as a great weapon to express her physical and mental challenges. The role of an activist admired her as an icon of female creativity in the Feminist movement. "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" was considered to be revolutionary work, as the portrait posits to break the conventions that prevailed in her age. The paper analyses how the concept of doubleconsciousness gave birth to an astonishing art enriched with meanings beyond expression. It also explores the contributions given by the mental conspiracies resided in Frida Kahlo the production of such outlandish creation of art. The patronizing mentality of the society towards the female representatives is being questioned through her art. This article also scrutinizes whether the male overshadowing is required for the freedom of female expressions.

**Keywords--**Double consciousness, female creativity, mental conspiracy, patronizing mentality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Painting as art plays a great role in the expression of emotions that are concealed in the artist's mind. The expressionism of emotions is arbitrary as it depends on the perspectives and experiences dealt with by the artist. The artist uses various styles to express their ideas like expressionism, abstract style, mural paintings, and oil paintings, graffiti, etc. According to medical studies, painting breaths out anxiety and depression and the negative energy posits as an advantage to be more creative. This creation of visual art found to be triumphant in the reduction of stress for homebound illness and creative art, bypasses the limitation to beckon the strength from within. Art can communicate the basic human emotions and the notion of beauty, something that pleases aesthetic senses. Legendary artists of time elaborate that art doesn't always need to be pleasant either to convey its message or to be pervasive of the underlying emotions. Similar to what Leo Tolstoy exclaims, "By words, one transmits thoughts to another, utilizing art, one transmits feeling." Just like the arbitrariness of expressionism emitted out from an artist, that much subjectivity will take place when the art has reverberated into the aesthetes. Art can be stoic, unpleasant, intimidating, vibrant, etc still it resonates with the similar emotions of the artist within the aesthete. Because of this multitudinous of emotions undergone by an artist in their life as well as in every movement of their brush, their tormented life is being transformed into ecstatic beauty. The contemporary painter Jerry Fresia conveys that "we make a mark on the canvas and when we look back, we see something that seemingly was not there a moment ago.", which he intends that the artists are being driven by their brush after analyzing the emotions they

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have been pondering through years or even decades. To put it simply, one stroke of the brush emits the infinite number of amalgamated expressions and emotions, which they were being, embraced overages.

## II. COLOURS AND CANVAS

The contemporary paintings have used bright and bold colors to be more expressive and to replicate the clouded instability of the emotions that are so restless in them. Each color entitles with various emotions and the mixture of these colors becomes a perfect medium for the better expression of their deep uncertainty and unrest. The colors like Indian Yellow, Prussian blue, Lead White, Tyrian purple, etc are consistently seen in various contemporary paintings and its capability in echoing complicated emotions can be witnesses as well. Frida Kahlo was influenced by Mexico-European culture as her paintings are the amalgamations of many aspects that are capable of reverberating emotions respective of various colors. All the colors play a deep role in expressing her concealed emotions of distress and agony. Most of her paintings are self-portrait as she believed that the only person who knew her better was herself alone, that she exclaims as "I paint myself because I am so often alone because I am the subject I know the best." She had poor health from her childhood as she wasn't able to play with other children. Her father always kept her replenished with the optimistic perspectives of life. He influenced her more in the mobility of life, both physically and emotionally. After getting admitted in the National Preparatory School in 1922, she got many opportunities to prove herself worthy enough to be a normal human being. Her participation in the athletic arena was the proof given to her as she wasn't less worthy. But after a few years, she met with a car accident that created complete havoc in her life. She broke her spines and her hips were disjointed, as she had to lie in the hospital for many months. Seeing the walls of the hospital every day made her remind about her worst health condition, which laid a great deal of psychological declination in her mind. To escape from the devastating present, she began to paint. She felt that the walls of the hospital posit as the limitation for her self-expression. From there she stepped into the world of art. Just like Pakistani artist, Muniba Mazari exclaimed, "I'm getting tired of this. I want to add more colors to my life."

Here Frida Kahlo wanted the same as well, as she was tired of contemplating those walls to be her final barrier. Her matrimonial life with the muralist Diego Rivera was harsh with her, especially when she happened to find his relationship with her sister Cristina. As revenge towards the infidelity, she blamed herself and she cut her long hair which was admired by Rivera. Another truth that devastated her completely was that she could no longer become a mother and this consistent contemplation of her inability in conceiving a child made her feel incomplete from within. All these incidents amplified her psychological declination but she couldn't stop herself to share her stories with the world and she continued painting. She added various colors that reflected her deep agony and complex emotions. Later she was acknowledged as a surrealist painter by the pioneer of surrealist art, Andre Breton. Eventually, she began to exhibit her paintings in many places including New York and there she got the chance to befriend many profound artists like Pablo Picasso. Diego encouraged Frida's talent and appreciated her unique style in painting but their matrimonial life provided them with infidelity and incest. This created deterioration in their relationship. Later her divorce with Diego manifested as disillusionment in losing her 'self' and this incident was followed by the deterioration of her health.

### III. FRIDA KAHLO AND HER WATERSHEDS

In 1932 Detroit Newspaper there came an article on Frida Kahlo's painting and the journalist titled the column as the "Wife of the Master Mural Painter Gleefully Dabble in Work of Art". This article later posed for many controversies for patronizing her art and self-esteem. This article questioned her independence and the requirement of a male touch in her self-expression. She lay in the hospital for many years but that doesn't conceal the real soul of an artist in her. She continued to paint and share her stories with people. Her works were seen as the upheaval in the new dimension of Feminism.

Her painting was an amalgamation of various elements like magical realism, surrealism, symbolism, etc. Out of her one forty-three paintings, fifty-five are self-portraits. All these paintings are enriched with innumerable colors emphasizing deep drenched emotions that reflect her self. Her portraits "Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird" (1940), "The Little Dear" (1946), "The Broken Column" (1944), etc., reflect her repressed self, full of agony and disillusionment. The thorn necklace, the arrow stricken deer, the shackled body, etc. posits the impediments that led to her lifelong distress and emotional declination.

The self- portrait "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940) was painted right after her divorce with Diego Rivera. In the portrait Frida is sitting on a chair, cross-dressed in a men's suit with cropped hair. On a bottomless look, it is sure that she has cropped her hair with scissors in her right hand and her hair strangled on the chair and floor. The odd factor is she let her earring remain along with the suit. Many interpretation followed after the production of a painting. The painting was analyzed as the product of revenge towards Rivera, on his divorce request as he admired her long hair and the Tehuana dress. But she has shredded both in her self-portrait. As she was influenced by Mexico-European culture, she used the Mexican colonial theme color scheme like bright shades of red, yellow, green, orange, blue, etc. In the respective painting, she has used variant shades of these colors. Frida is sitting on a yellow chair in a black suit, where the color yellow represents fear, madness, and mystery. Here her fear and exasperation can be the unreachable love and compassion from Rivera or the tormented life she dealt with within her lifetime. The color of the suit is black as well as she has cut her hair(shredded femininity)and it is littered on the floor, which gives the impression as she no longer cares about it. The color black gives a dangerous and penetrating intensity of Frida's agony and bitter pain, life has given her. From the background of the

painting, an aesthete can witness that, Frida had been overwhelming with multitudinous of emotion while painting every stroke, as the mixture of colors has been more intensive for impression in an aesthete. Another factor that plays the core idea of impression is the musical note written on the top of the painting in Spanish which translates as, "Look, if I love you, it was because of your hair, but now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore." Some other critics view the painting as her agony and disillusionment of breaking up with Rivera. But here the voice of Diego Rivera has been uttered through Frida' who is cross-dressed as Rivera himself. Here she intensifies the notion of the absence of love between them. and her cross-dressing as Rivera protrudes the fact of herself being living under the shadow of the patriarchal society throughout her life. But we can also witness the overshadowing "double consciousness" in the self-portrait. The term *doubleconsciousness* was introduced and popularized by an American sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois which was primarily introduced in his book *TheSoulofBlackFolk* in 1903. It is a social and psychological division that prevailed in the American society that focused on black alienation and oppression nationwide. This American-African oppression was

followed by pessimistic perception like the destruction of self-identity and self-esteem. Du Bois also explains the awakening of twoness in the oppressed. Prevailed racial equality norms and their dilemma of facing racial discrimination. But by setting aside the racial discrimination as put forward by Du Bois, the self – knowledge of the existence of ‘ twoness’ pervades in the mind of people. The notion of twoness can be considered as arbitrary, as the notion changes concerning the problems they encounter.

In this paper by setting aside the concept of racial discrimination, the idea of twoness can be witnessed in Frida Kahlo's painting “Self Portrait with Cropped Hair” (1940). This notion can be further explained through the prejudices put forward by Du Bois, self-critical and self-inhibition. Frida was followed by problems after problems from her childhood onwards. She married Diego Rivera without her parents’ concern. Her passion for art and the encouragement given by Rivera drew her towards him. But the problems still followed her in many forms like physical impediments and most importantly the emotional exasperation and dilemma associated with Diego Rivera. She was lonely among his infidelities and this loneliness promoted her relationship with other male artists and even female representatives as well.

In her paintings, the portrayal of disillusionment, dilemma, her vexation in Diego’s absence when she needed him the most, especially her consciousness of never becoming a mother, etc. is vividly visible and impactful for the aesthete. It’s pretty obvious from her self-portrait as the production of self-portrait was to utter her emotions and stories to the people. In her self-portrait “Self Portrait with Cropped Hair”, she cut her hair as a symbol of sacrifice, he blamed herself for the all lost in her life, especially when she divorced with the person who encouraged her the most, moving on with her passion in art and feel of her role as an outcast in Rivera’s life. Here we can see the appearance of the prejudices mentioned by Du Bois, i.e. her inclination to find faults in her actions, the consistency in contemplating herself as a failure in life. This sprouted the seed of mental agility and the self-interrogation in her owns self which later diverted to the self-introspection in the existence of ‘twoness’. Here the two consciousness made her incomplete from within, the fear of losing Diego Rivera and the independent existence of her art without the touch of patriarchal society. The article came in the Detroit newspaper played a key role in activating her feminine consciousness.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Frida finds a satiating shelter during her aspiration to paint. Apart from all the impediments she faced, the chances of emotional purgation were at its highest rate while she was brooding in her aesthetic world. She painted her portrait “Self Portrait with Cropped Hair” after her divorce with Diego Rivera. In the painting, the cross-dressing can be interpreted as her choice in abandoning her femininity, but she let her earring remain with her symbolizing her desire to be independent. The portrait is filled with intense emotions, self -knowledge, and self-enduring on the materialistic world around her. She doesn’t want to lose Diego at the same time, she was not ready to compromise her artistic creation to be overshadowed by the patriarchal society. She stood for the independent existence of her creation and passion.

Frida Kahlo is a well-cultivated person who cultured herself through experiences and hardships. Her deformities only transformed her as a human being, as an artist, and as an aesthete as well. The self-portrait was also critically appreciated as a rebellion towards Rivera (cross-dressing), at the same time it was also analyzed as

for the impregnable femininity resided in her. Her works were a hailstorm against the patriarchal overshadowing in feminine independence during her age and the penetrating gaze in the portrait might be towards the chaotic society. Through her creative production, she was successful enough to break the stereotypic contemplation prevailed and give rise to the art of grandiose which was derived out of mental turbulences and uncertainties.

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