

## SUBJECTIVITY AND RESISTANCE THROUGH ‘CREATIVE PRAXIS’: AN ANALYSIS OF IN SEARCH OF APRIL RAIN TREE

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### ABSTRACT

Beatrice Culleton’s novel *In Search of April Raintree* demonstrates the search of a first nation Canadian woman for her identity. In the human quest for knowledge, the self and subjectivity has been as equally challenging as the world outside the self. April Raintree, in her life away from her parents and little sister experiences the suffocation and uncertainty that challenges her awareness of her own identity. In order to affirm her subjectivity she uses creative means from the knowing that the society is antagonistic towards her. This paper analyses the novel and proposes the notion that subjectivity may involve the subtext of creativity. This paper also proposes and defines the theoretical categorization of a particular individual interaction in the typical social scenario witnessed in the novel. This theoretical categorization is named ‘creative praxis’.

**KEYWORDS:** Subjectivity, Creativity, Creative Praxis, Identity

### INTRODUCTION

In the novelistic context of *In Search of April Raintree*, April searches her identity through the experience that her life unravels in front of her. This can be identified as an attempt to assert one's subjective identity. “The “search” in *In Search of April Raintree* is often equated with the quest for identity” (Dunbar). This search is an implication of the attempt undertaken by the individual subject in realising his or her own identity. April's search for identity and freedom becomes an individual endeavour since her parents and the society she belongs to give up their responsibility towards April and her sister. In the particular socio-politico-cultural context of Canadian first nation life, the silencing efforts of the society become a subtext of the quest for the subjective identity. As Kundera wrote, “it is precisely in losing the certainty of truth and the unanimous agreement of others that man becomes an individual” (159).

Every individual is influenced by his or her external habitat. In the life of April, her experiences with the people she met in the foster homes register their influence irreconcilably. The demarcation-of the external and the internal- is on the basis of the theoretical alignment popularly identified as Subjectivity. Subjectivity is the ‘internal’ and everything else exists ‘externally’. “Subjectivity is a critical concept (Hall 3),” which “invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (Hall 3-4). In other words, to read subjectivity is to direct the self consciousness of the individual for apprehending the identity conferred on him/her by the diverse strata of the socio-politico-cultural interactions of the individual, through the pre-conditioned notions and analytical methods, based on convenient grounds of scientific rationality or non-scientific irrationality, with the fullest conscious awareness of the individual participating in the interaction.

This concept essentially accepts the notion that the individual subjectivity is developed through myriad influences. Jorge Luis Borges puts it thus: “There is no whole self... I, as I write this, am only a certainty that seeks out the words that are most apt to compel your attention. That proposition and a few muscular sensations, and the sight of the limpid branches that the trees place outside my window, constitute my current I” (Borges 3). Borges, though, in his essay, “The Nothingness of Personality” negates the argument for subjectivity as a distinct entity, reconciles the controversy regarding the concept of human consciousness. He confirms that individuals “err, as well, who suppose that the negation of personality I am urging with such obstinate zealotry refutes the certainty of being the isolated, individualised and distinct thing that each of us feels in the depth of his soul. I do not deny this consciousness of being or the immediate security of ‘here I am’ that it breathes into us” (Borges 4).

In his work *Subjectivity*, Donald. E. Hall attempts a demarcation of the concept of subjectivity. Subjectivity is a responsibility that individuals laden themselves with. To put it in a different way, it is the weight of the awareness of one’s own limitations and possibilities within the territory of one’s immediate interaction. Thus subjectivity takes a pro-knowledge stand, which focuses on the existence of the awareness or knowledge of that, which is supposed to ‘create’ the individual subjectivity and its multi-dimensional interactions as well as limitations. From the pre-modern period, even before Renaissance, subjectivity and individuality was visible in literatures. Hall writes: “The finely drawn cast of characters in Chaucer’s late fourteenth century *Canterbury Tales* demonstrates the many idiosyncrasies and individual impulses underlying human behaviour and identity” (13).

April Raintree, in her life away from her parents and little sister experiences the suffocation and uncertainty that challenges her awareness of her own identity. Later in her life, when her sister Cheryl also accompanies her, she finds herself in the verge of a clash. The conflict she experiences is between the world view she is accustomed with and the view that her little sister Cheryl carries, which she took from her previous foster home. This shows how an individual is influenced by his or her socio- cultural and political environment. The matter of significance is that when these two girls identify their predicament and attempt an escape, the society treats them as absconders. In other words, it is through the interference of their subjective agency the girls identify their predicament. There are ample examples in history, which shows how such expression of subjectivity or individualism is criticised as a social evil.

During the pre-modern period, it was the Platonist concept of collective existence that occupied the major thought lines, even in literature. According to that “world view,” confirms Hall, “we only act ethically when we act in fulfilment of our preordained purpose, in concert with our duty to our society and its subunits” (8). Within this perception individualism appears to be a negative endeavour, and a threat to the peaceful existence of the society, and essentially leads to tragedy. Hall traces some elements of this type of individualism, which meets its necessary repercussion in tragedy. He cites examples from Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone* (c.441. B.C). The exercise of self will, and its problematic anti-conformist stand, is visible in the Book of Genesis, where “Adam and eve are expelled from Eden because of their quest for knowledge, for their self will in defiance of divine law, faith. The subtext of the unchangeable order, fixes the individuals within the 'preordained place and a divine plan” (10). Until Renaissance, “the solutions validated in most religious and literary writings remain similar” (9).

Subjectivity can be identified as the inevitable agency in the process of territorializing knowledge in the individual consciousness. Subjectivity and identity are terms, which are often juxtaposed, but to attempt a demarcation is essential. “One’s identity can be thought of as that particular set of trails, beliefs and allegiances that in short-or long-term

ways gives one a consistent personality and a mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity" (Hall 3).

In other words, the identity that is attributed externally is an eclectic bundle of labels, which is plainly the subjection of the individual to the norms of confinement, power, and objectivity. This intellection underrates the "qualia", that is, the subjective quality of conscious experience of the individual subjects. Qualia is a concept almost analogous to Dennis Lee's "Cadence." Holding on to the above definition, the identity that has been attributed on the subject as a result of the subjective awareness of its own existence can be treated as internal and therefore imaginative and holds no objective weight, and would be a metaphysical identity. This identity can be considered as 'creative' as it includes an attempt from the subject to fix its subjectivity. And for that matter, any attempt to assert one's own subjectivity can be considered 'creative'.

The notion of 'creativity' proposed here foregrounds the aspect of 'creativity' in a wider perspective, which stands outside the notions confining creativity under the norms of the artistic practice alone. 'Creativity' is often a synonym for possibilities. To be 'creative' is to open one up to the myriad opportunities offered by the moment of 'creative' thought. "Creativity is the ability to produce something new through imaginative skill, whether new solutions to a problem, a new method or device or a new artistic object or form" ("Creativity". Encyclopaedia Britannica) It involves divergent thinking. The notion of divergent thinking unravels the possibility of the thoughts directed widely or randomly towards a number of varied solutions. 'Creativity', thus, can be perceived as a significant measure taken in the endeavours of problem solving as well as an active agent in socio-politico-cultural interactions as a parallel activity.

The space of 'creativity' is established in the awareness of one's own subjectivity. Though incomplete and paradoxical this notion be considering the many influences, conscious and unconscious, going into the construction of the so-called individual identity, the concept of uniqueness of the subjectivity can hardly be undermined. This uniqueness corresponds to the existence of qualia, or the distinct ways of one's feeling the world. The question is does April identify her subjectivity? All her attempts with her sister to escape the foster home were failures. In fact, these attempts can be asserted as the expression of her subjectivity and this need not depend upon the successful completion of such an act.

Each individual interprets the textuality of the environment of existence in distinct ways. This phenomenon occurs as an aftermath of the intrusion of the subjective agency. This precisely is the reason for the difference in dimensions in the perception between Cheryl and April. The expression of an individual's subjectivity through creative action need not stem from the awareness of the factors that manipulated the genetics of her subjective consciousness. Thus the awareness of an individual of her subjectivity extends well beyond the comprehension of the multiple themes that went into her psyche as motivating factors. If the individual's outward expression of subjectivity that he or she practices through creative acts originates from awareness of the factors that affected the formative stages of her subjective consciousness, it could be identified as 'creative praxis'.

The mode of practice of 'creativity' the individual characters undertake can be identified with the term praxis, as an attempt to ground creativity within a conceptualised framework, to ensure its presence as an aspect of theoretical relevance. Praxis is a term used by the ancient Greeks to refer to an activity engaged in by free individuals, also means the practise of a subject or art arising from the theory, which has been established in correspondence with it. It can be interpreted as a way of thinking about theory (Prescott-sted 1).

'Creative' praxis can be identified as a reaction against social vices, and for personal as well as social causes. This enhances the significance of the theme in the present socio-politico-cultural scene, where individuals are forced to be stupid, through silencing and the "non-thought of received ideas" (Kundera 163). According to Kundera, "we could imagine the world without the class struggle or without psychoanalysis, but without the irresistible flood of received ideas that programmed into computers, propagated by the mass-media threaten soon to become a force that will crush all original and individual thought and thus will smother the very essence..." (Kundera 163) of everything unique and individual.

"The self", as an entity, retains a strong influence of one's sense of belonging, identity and self-esteem, which were in turn affected by the socio-cultural and political influences. Different occasions during the social interaction in the life of the individual, connects itself to all those experiences and environmental influences. This distinctiveness in the individual identities can answer to the questions concerning their behaviour and thinking pattern of April and Cheryl, to a greater extent. Each attempt by each one of the individual characters is remarkable as the explicit exercise of the 'creative praxis'. Howard Goldstein puts it thus:

Some people are field-dependent in the way they think while others are field-independent. The former tend to rely on the clues and guides within their social environment for directions about how and what to think about something. The field-independent thinker, in contrast, tends to reason and think without a great deal of reference to the opinions of others or the constraints in his or her environment (Hunt 1982: 286). Cognitive styles may also be 'convergent' or 'divergent'. Convergent thinkers (sometimes called "concrete" or "unimaginative") strive to reduce their impressions and explanations of the world to closed and limited categories.... Divergent thinkers, on the other hand, are able to entertain and imagine any and all possibilities and define reality in any number of forms as they think about and organize their impressions. The divergent imagination (sometimes called "creative", other times "neurotic") is by its very nature unconventional; it can create all sorts of analogs[sic] and metaphors which may lead to a personal reality that is exceptionally rich and diverse (Goldstein 40-41).

Divergent thinking can be interpreted as an act of dissidence, anti-conformist practice, and an effective strategy to assert one's subjective identity. In this context it is Cheryl who successfully registers her protest against racism and the social discriminations. Emma Goldman in her article *The Individual, Society and the State*, writes: "The very essence of individuality is expression; the sense of dignity and independence is the soil where it thrives. Individuality is not the impersonal and mechanic thing that the state treats as an 'individual'".

Every culture, every society, and every nation are constructed for the betterment and progress of its individual members. But when these mechanisms put on oppressive nature and fetters the individual subjects and confines their subjectivity, the scope of creative assertion of subjectivity or 'creative praxis' heightens. Racism and social conformism in its socio-cultural and political aspects, when forces their oppressive structures on the subjects, many of the individual rights, such as the freedom of self expression, are hindered.

In fact, in presenting April, the protagonist of the story as an individual who is unsuccessful in making her voice heard and one with lack of respect towards her own culture, Beatrice Culleton attempts a narrative that is more close to reality. As Goldstein points out, "...The only measure of "effective" thinking that seems valid (no matter how bizarre, erratic, or different it may appear to others) is the extent to which it furthers one's sincere and authentic pursuit of meaning-given that this meaning results in actions that are personally rewarding and at the same time ethically concerns with social consequence" (Goldstein 41).

In the human quest for knowledge, the self and subjectivity has been as equally challenging as the world outside the self. Attempts to analyse the concept of subjectivity can be perceived occupying a space parallel to the growth and development of different streams of knowledge. 'Creative praxis' can be utilised as a socio-cultural and political strategy. But, it requires further analysis and study, as the paper has only focused on the concept within the limited space of the novel. The concept of 'creative praxis' can be used as a tool for the betterment of individual lives and thus the betterment of the whole of humanity as a future weapon in the clash of cultures.

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