

PAIN AS TROPE: TRANSFORMATION OF FRIDA KAHLO'S IDENTITY FROM FEMININE TO A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The research explores the transference of Frida Kahlo from embodying traditional feminine roles to becoming a feminist icon within a phallogocentric society, as depicted in Slavenka Drakulić's novel *Frida's Bed*. Utilizing trauma studies, feminist theory, projection theory, and psychoanalytic theory, this analysis delves into how Kahlo's personal experiences of physical and emotional trauma shaped her feminist consciousness and artistic expression and projected her to a sensational symbolic breaking of the predetermined convictions of patriarchy. The novel's portrayal of Kahlo's chronic pain, resulting from a childhood accident and multiple surgeries serves as a focal point for examining how her suffering and resilience influenced her identity and work. Feminist theory provides a framework to understand Kahlo's challenge to patriarchal norms through her art and personal style, emphasizing her embrace of indigenous Mexican culture and her political activism. The psychoanalytic theory offers insights into Kahlo's inner life, exploring the unconscious motivations behind her self-portraits and the symbolic use of her own body as a canvas for expressing pain, desire, and defiance. This interdisciplinary approach illuminates the complexity of Kahlo's transformation, highlighting her role as a pioneering figure in the intersection of gender, culture, and politics. By situating *Frida's Bed* within these theoretical perspectives, the objective of the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Frida Kahlo's unrecognized legacy and the origin of Fridomania from a feminine to feminist icon that progressed under the Mexican society pre-occupied with cultural struggles and tensions that favored male dominance.

Keyword: Frida Kahlo, feminist, feminine, psychoanalytic theory.

INTRODUCTION

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón (6 July 1907 – 13 July 1954) is a Mexican artist, mostly renowned for exhibiting her deeply contentious self-portraits sharing her sensitive stages of desolation. Frida integrated an expedition of gender, race, culture, and identity in a comparative perspective of Mexican society directed through her vibrant canvas. Born on the outskirts of Coyoacán, Mexico City, she encounters a series of traumatic experiences that mark an expression of individualistic sense projected over her works of art. Her paintings, especially the self-portraits abound in a wide range of vibrant colours producing a reflection of surrealism blended with indigenous Mexican culture. Her work synchronized the elements of symbolic iconography and raw depiction of her pain and resilience. Frida's elegance of legacy extended and endured globally making her a pivotal figure of feminist strength and the intersection of art and unapologetic self-expression. More than 200 paintings have been accounted for acclaiming Frida's influence on Art and Culture. Her works reclaim her own body to showcase her pain and suffering.

Frida's Bed by Slavenka Drakulić presents an intimate portrayal intervened with Kahlo's physical pain, emotional turmoil, and the resilience that defines her. The narrative vividly captures Frida's constant battle with pain, stemming from childhood in the form of polio, later followed by the devastating bus accident that caused intense physical and mental agony endured by her. The book also encounters a tumultuous

relationship with Diego Rivera, as Drakulić explores their deep love and betrayals i.e., categorized as one of the emotional wounds paralleling the same torture of the physical one. *Frida's Bed* explicitly highlights Frida Kahlo's politics as a communist and also highlights her deep connection with Mexican heritage. The usage of Mexican clothing and embracing indigenous culture as a border context in art and life emphasizes her political statement. Drakulić provides a window into exploring Frida's psyche on facing her fears and desires as commencing action to find the duality of Kahlo's existence- The constant interplay between vulnerability and resilience. The narrative technique narrows imagination and reality, implying the surreal quality of her artwork. The portrayal of Frida's bed as a symbolic motif of aspiration empowers Kahlo as an inspirational figure. The novel introspects Frida's life as a testament to her indomitable spirit and perspectives.

Womanhood in Mexico had its complexities as it had the interplay of traditional roles but the period marked a significant social upheaval in the representation of women in the public and political backgrounds with the emergence of greater opportunities and participation changing the perception of Mexican society. Post-Revolution raised the fragrance of cultural nationalism, making a revival of indigenous traditions and cultures and broader exposure of Mexican history to the globe. Many women are involved in the roles of "soldaderas" or "Adelitas", providing physical assistance as nurses, cooks, and even combatants, breaking the stereotypical conventions.

Women established their presence in political activism for the advocacy and significance of women's rights and their convictions.

The artwork is a trace of personal experiences undergone in her life. Through the pathways intended, the research paper aims to transform Frida Kahlo from a projected feminine holder under the notions of a dominant patriarchal state to a feminist icon by analyzing the transference through her work of art and traumatic experience through the methods of integrating feminist theory, theory of projection, psychoanalytic theory and cultural studies.

Feminist Theory is a broad set of ideas and practices that aim to understand and address gender inequalities and promote women's rights and interests. The concepts of “Feminine” and “Feminist” help to distinguish and understand gender roles and identities. *The theory of Projection is the mental process by which people attribute to others what is in their minds. For example, individuals who stay in a self-critical state, consciously or unconsciously, may think that other people are critical of them.* The concept was introduced to psychology by an Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), taken the word projection from neurology, where it referred to the inherent capacity of neurons to transmit stimuli from one level of the nervous system to another (e.g., the retina “projects” to the occipital cortex, whether raw sensory input is rendered into visual images). It tends to see the self in another’s eye-; i.e., the process amplifies the emotion, feelings, and anxiety of an individual manifested in the other’s sight. Frida’s work and art were once subjected to feminine roles and later transformed into feminist qualities, with the help of these methodologies, it helps to track and navigate the deviation and degree of change.

At the age of six, Frida was affected by polio leaving her the ability to withstand pain and isolation in her formative years. Frida has the potential to be diverse as she is immersed in the field of different sports. She unlearns everything that she faced in the period of immobility, becoming a strong mixture of masculine femininity. She adopted a coat and boots with cropped hair for dressing for the family photo, exhibiting her bravery and courage in breaking the typical Mexican stereotypes and establishing her choice and will through body politics as a statement, which she frequently practiced in her works later. Frida hated the sense of empathy and pity towards her. In the theory of projection, the internal consciousness in one’s self may get projected to another subconscious. Frida’s father Don Guillermo Kahlo, a German-Mexican photographer also felt the same hatred towards empathy. Frida made a coping mechanism of making imaginary friend to develop interpersonal development at the time of solitude. At the age of 18, Kahlo engaged in a fatal bus accident while riding with her boyfriend Alejandro Gomez Arias (Alex) by crashing onto a nearby trolley in downtown Mexico. Her body was covered with a puddle of golden dust and blood. These colors remind her of death as she encounters art and suffering simultaneously for the first time. People called her *Ballerina* thinking she was a dancer. Frida sustained the accident with multiple fractures in her dislocated shoulder, right leg, ribs, collarbone, spine, pelvis, and foot injuries. This incident affected her optimism. She had undergone numerous surgeries and a long period of immobilization causing post-traumatic stress with the thought of leading life as a wasted as she disbelieves everything she believed and accrued over her childhood. The intent is to lose courage and bravery as a feminist ideal and attain the acceptance of feminine ideology in the impact of mental concussion and boredom.

The event turned out to be a junction of intensifying her artistic expression with the redefinition of her life and identity as she

started painting bedridden. Her observatory vision has acquired a high potency magnifying the world around her in detail. She slowly began inducing elements of the Renaissance (mainly, surrealism) with the expression of her projection over the art increasing her tier of notability. In 1928, the “portrait of Alejandro Gomez Ariaz;” showed a genuine token of first love towards Alex. However, their intricate relationship slowly faded as his parent didn’t allow him a life with Frida in a deteriorated stage. Alex was sent to Europe and, their love ended in martyrdom.

Frida opts for painting as a withdrawal remedy from depression and as a career opportunity. She approaches Diego Rivera for validation. Both of them shared a mutual interest in communist activism and were against the dehumanizing behavior of capitalist powers. The shared collective feeling layers into Frida’s later works and their relationship. Later, they worked with famous activists like Leon Trotsky and actively brought pressure and tension during the period of political instability in Mexico. Rivera gets interested in Frida and her talent. In 1929, Frida got married at the age of 22 with 43-year-old Rivera. Her mother Matilde describes the marriage as a “marriage between an elephant and a dove” reinforcing the disapproval towards marriage. Her life with Rivera indulges a life of minimalism as she opts to borrow a dress from a housemaid substituting the white gown for a wedding, reinstating the abandonment of materialistic life. The life propagated over her to satisfy Rivera’s interest and perception as a drive of unconscious perseverance by the feminine traits to gratify the totalitarian system of patriarchy.

Kahlo’s reproductive health was severely affected as a result of the previous bus accident. These injuries contributed to her inability to carry a pregnancy and led to many miscarriages. These events diverged onto the origination of paintings *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) and *My Birth* (1932), Establishing new meanings for feminine expectations different from the existing societal norms and notions. She subverted the traditional gender expectation associated with motherhood and womanhood by depicting pain and channeling it into her art form. Her reproductive struggles honestly resonate and define the themes of body autonomy and the fight against societal pressures exceeding women.

Kahlo’s marriage with Diego Rivera was a marital turmoil with infidelity and emotional turbulence. Frida and Kahlo were considered an equal and open relationship, but her artistic brilliance was foreshadowed by the fame of Rivera, where people of Mexico sought her as his vigorous wife only. Frida intends to change her appearance by adapting from modernity suits to Mexican Te Huna heritage in her dressing for the interest of Rivera, showing the unconscious drives of the feminine perspective, creating a duality in character to please the patriarchal dom. Rivera’s numerous extramarital affairs as he continued the persona of polygamy after marriage including Kahlo’s sister, Cristina. This relationship led her to different relationships irrespective of male and female providing her a space to explore her sexual identity, and empowering who she is, being propelled for the first time. Frida’s life and art exhibited the markings of pursuing personal autonomy and sexual freedom propagating the application of anarchy-feminism displacing the manifestation of pre-existing coercive societal structures. The abandonment of gentle, passive, and reliant traits and acceptance of verging cross-broader cultural representation from different disparities (nationality, race, sexuality) reflected Frida’s thought as a global perception. In 1939, Frida got divorced from Diego Rivera, discarding her Mexican style of dressing and accepting

modern European aesthetics with cropped hair. This was the regeneration of the courageous feminist idol portraying the reinstating traits such as self-entirety and expression.

The subject attained a state of tranquillity. Further, Kahlo's health was deteriorating later in the years due to the gangrene caused due to the amputation of her right leg, enduring more surgeries, pain, and immobility cornering her output on the same outpost of her artistic enlightenment (*Her bed*). She was confined with declining mental health causing severe pain, depression, and alcoholism. This moved her to accept the reliance of death, Due to pulmonary embolism. Some speculation was the overdose usage of painkillers. The pain endured her to the last moment.

CONCLUSION

Frida Kahlo resonated as the most significant artist of the 20th century as a posthumous recognition resonating as a global icon of Mexican culture: dominating her presence in preoccupied patriarchal surreal artwork, reflecting the tapestry of the cultural heritage extended over Mexico. She introduced the concept of *mestizaje* in her work embodying a meltdown in the Western view of beauty attire. Kahlo's works remained relatively unknown till the 1970s. However, by the early 1990s, she had become a recognized figure in art history and an important symbolic figure for marginalized communities, Chicanos, the feminist movement, and the LGBTQ+ community. Her artwork is internationally renowned for representing Mexican national and Indigenous traditions and was moved on with the post-revolutionary *Mexicayoti* and *Mexicanidad* movement. Feminists particularly admire her for her honest and bold depiction of the female experience and body.

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