

Consider the interplay of identities-national, racial, gender or otherwise- in the works of at least one artist and one film director studied this semester.

The identities I have chosen to consider are gender and national identity. I feel these are two of the major issues of Latin Americans, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when feminist movements began and movements occurred such as indigenismo (A Latin American movement urging for a dominant social and political role for Indians in countries where they make up the majority). To consider the topic of identities I must first understand the context of the period of time that the artists were working and what sort of feminist or national occurrences were going on at that time. Then having considered this I will have to consider why and where these identities are evident in the work of the artists I will be looking at.

Since the 1970's, new, modern forms of feminism have begun to take shape in Latin America. This feminism has been influenced by events and tendencies as diverse as the debates over the Cuban Family Code (mid-1970's); the experience of Latin American women in exile in Mexico, the United States, and Europe (1970's and 80's); the international feminist movement; the Nicaraguan revolution and guerrilla movements in Central America; and the rise of strong women's movements in response to scarcity and repression throughout Latin America. (www.american.edu/efindlay/HIST340/hist340.html). Given extensive poverty and the strength of class and racial oppression in the region, Latin American feminists were, from the very start, forced to confront the many conditions and factors that divided them from the rest of the world. Thus being a topic that has had great interest and the reason why I have chosen Frida Kahlo as the artist and Luisa Bemberg whom wrote *Camila* as the film director that I plan to base my essay on.

The other aspect of my essay, national identity, is also a major theme for these two artists. For both, the background of their works has somewhat to do with the consequences of political or cultural conflicts and systems that made a lot of people question and/ or take full pride of their national identity. In Kahlo's case being born in 1907, (although she claims to be born in 1910, perhaps an excuse fabricated as she was behind with her education) she was brought up in the midst of the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) and during the promotion of Mexicanidad. Furthermore In 1920 parliamentary elections elected General Obregon as president who created a socialist government. Oregon's government intended to amend the existing social structure of Mexico by concentrating on issues that concerned workers and peasants; people who had previously been ignored by government policies and oppressed by landowners. Inherent in this social change was the promotion of cultural nationalism or Mexicanidad. By promoting cultural nationalism, the indigenous art of Mexico and its people, the government sought to restore Mexico's own identity. (members.lycos.co.uk/exposuremagazine/kahlo.html) This came from a desire to be free of the baggage of European culture that had been forced upon the people with the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Frida influenced by these factors and also seeking to restore Mexico's identity herself used indigenous Mexican imagery to demonstrate her feelings towards these political situations.

Bemberg's film however is more a pointed criticism of Argentine culture, and national identity during the Federalist dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829 - 1852). The conflicts between the opposing Unitarians and Federalists provide the background for the film. Bemberg conveys such things as the terror, violence and

ensorship that Rosas threatened and controlled his people with. She also illustrates how the strong-willed Camila challenges her father and the rule of the Argentine dictator by eloping with a handsome young priest, Ladislao. Born in 1922, Bemberg came of age when Argentina was not so different from the repressed society Camila was experiencing. From 1976 there was a military dictatorship in Argentina, similar to that of Rosas. This was a period, of intense violations of human rights also being the period within which there were near to 12000 murders. Obviously a key aspect of Bemberg's life this was a key element of the story she wanted the audience to perceive.

Nevertheless the politics and national identity is not the key identity of Bemberg's film. The key to what Bemberg was trying to achieve in her films was a woman's perspective. Bemberg is particularly critical of the situation in her homeland. "I believe Argentine men suffer from great insecurity. Argentina is one of the most machista countries in the world. Just watch television. Almost everything is defined by male protagonists" (www.msu.edu/~colmeiro/untold.html). Thus into the largely male-dominated world of moviemaking, an Argentine woman dares to enter, planning to go about things in completely her own way. "I am going to tell it with the point of view of a woman, with female protagonists, a bit like a promise to my own gender." she claims (*Based on a true story...* ,page 86)

The feminist dimensions given to the film are those such as the way in which Camila, the protagonist is portrayed as the instigator of the romance, rather than her being Ladislao's pliable victim, which Bemberg believes would be the male interpretation. Camila is an assertive, free-spirited rebellious woman who knows what she wants.

Bemberg describes her actions as “a passionate woman’s intellectual and sexual seduction of a man she found morally desirable” (*Based on a true story ...*, page 86).

Bemberg also portrays the feminist perspective of the struggle between patriarchy and passion. In every way the woman is subordinate to the man and the patriarchal power. In the film we are shown how the patriarchal system is mirrored in the state, the church and the family. There are many examples in the film where the patriarchal system is evident. One is how the red ribbon is used to symbolize loyalty to Rosas. These were not worn out of choice but out of fear that they would be terrorised by the state if they were not worn- the way in which Rosas maintained his control of the people. When Ladislao is not wearing one, although he makes no fuss, it is described as an emergency by the others.

Other examples of the patriarchal system include when the book keeper tries to sell books against the censor, he is decapitated and his severed head is put on the railings outside the church. Censorship was a very important part of Rosa’s regime and anyone who went against the censor would pay the price, Rosas makes sure of this by letting the town know what will happen to them if anyl else tries the same thing. Rosas uses censorship as a means of oppressing the people, to not let them develop their own ideas because if this happens then they will rebel. In the sermon that Ladislao gives after they learn of the news of the book keeper, he talks against the state saying that what they did was unchristian-like. Later when Camila’s family sit for dinner and her father and her husband-to-be are criticising what Ladislao has said, Camila tries to support the views of the priest but she is not allowed to give her

opinion, this reflects the patriarchal system of the state, where the father is like the dictator, not allowing his people to have freedom of speech.

Another sequence that also illustrates the patriarchy society, in reference to home life but also parallel to society as a whole is when whilst sitting at the piano and having a discussion with her father about marriage, Camila's father says she must get married or go to a convent. Both are measures of control and as the mother points out the woman will always be subservient to father or husband, just like in a dictatorship. The patriarchal mind-sense is that women need to be controlled and not to have any independence. Bemberg is trying to point out that this is a parallel to the dictatorship regime. In just the same way, a country needs to be controlled, it should not be allowed to make any decisions for itself, as would Rosas impose.

With Bemberg as a dedicated feminist, Frida Kahlo contrasts to her concerning the feminist identity in their works. Kahlo is more renowned for her national identity and her traumatic life being reflected through her work. However, especially since the 1970s, artists who were women have been rediscovered. Like Kahlo, many female artists' careers had been obscured by those of their male partners, whose work received more interest and financial reward; Kahlo was married for 25 years to the muralist Diego Rivera. (www.greenleft.org.au/back/1994/161/161p26.htm). There was always an element of rivalry between diego and Kahlo but he was always seemed to have upper hand, since Kahlo was perceived worthy of consideration largely because of her position as Rivera's wife.

The illustration of Kahlo as a strong woman, as expressed significantly in her self-portraits, is probably the greatest reason for her current interest. The gripping power of paintings such as *Self-portrait* and *Self-portrait with Monkeys* strikes a chord with almost any viewer, especially feminists. Kahlo's rise in popularity has coincided with this rise of the women's movement.(www.greenleft.org.au/back/1994/161/161p26.htm)

That she provides an example of strength for women today is not surprising, as Kahlo had been an ambitious woman from an early age. She was one of only 35 women in a high school of 2000 students, and before a horrific accident in 1925; she expressed the intention to become a physician. Her strong will helped her survive the injuries she received, and kept her going through years of physical pain. In her paintings she not only portrays her physical suffering from the injuries she attained but also the betrayal and tumultuous relationship in her marriage with Diego.

The individuality she maintained in her work was often expressed in the way she dressed. Self-portraits show her stunningly attired at all times, in clothes as varied as indigenous bridal dress (as in *Self-portrait as Tehuana*) to men's suits in the style of Rudolf Valentino (as in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*). Clothes were extremely important to Kahlo. Kahlo not only used dress to make a nationalist political point, she also used it to make a statement about her own independence from feminine norms.

Thus as a feminist heroine, ahead of her time and unaware of doing so, Kahlo gave rise to feminism. A more well-known identity of Kahlo's however is her nationalism. Excusing the period she was brought up in, one of the key reasons this topic would relate to her is because of the different nationalities of her mother and father. Her

father was a Jewish Hungarian-German and her mother a Spanish-Indian from Mexico. To add to this as previously mentioned, she had grown up in the period of the Mexican revolution. The force of the Mexicanidad had a great cultural effect on Kahlo and although she travelled widely with Rivera, she was securely rooted to her native Mexico and its revolutionary art.

Kahlo used indigenous Mexican imagery to demonstrate her feelings towards political situations, such as the USA's attempts to intervene in Latin American countries. For example, her painting *The Two Frida's* (1939) is generally read as a painting that illustrates the emotions that she felt after her divorce from Rivera. However within the painting there is also evidence of imagery that depicts the dichotomy between the European and the Mexican. Kahlo depicts herself in Tehuana dress and in European dress, with both hearts exposed and outside of the bodies. The two images are linked through held hands and an artery that joins the two hearts. The European Frida has an artery that has been cut with a pair of scissors that she holds and the blood pours onto her dress whilst the Mexican Frida holds a picture of Rivera as a young boy. It is apparent that the indigenous Frida is stronger as she seems to be helping the European Frida as this side of her is drained and has a smaller weaker heart. Perhaps Kahlo is trying to make a point that although the Europeans feel stronger, they are increasingly becoming weak and are surviving off the support of the indigenous people.

She also reflected on the current events in Mexico. For example, in *Self Portrait on the border between Mexico and the United States* (1932) her opinion of the relationship between Mexico and the USA is evident. She again depicts herself in Tehuana dress, with, to her right, the USA, dominated by grey images of industry. Next to smoke-belching chimneys are skyscrapers, and by her feet, robotic structures. Contrasting with this image is the thriving vegetation and the Pre-Colombian

sculptures that symbolise her nation. The message is clear: the USA equals commerce and the degradation it brings, ultimately display the threat it held to her country. Frida believed that industry was part of Capitalism, and even though Diego Rivera believed in the necessity of technological progress, Frida believed machines to be bad luck and the cause of pain.

In both artists we see the interplay of identities, both national and gender. In Bemberg's film, we see that for her gender is more a key concern than nationalism. She intended to show people an Argentinian perception of the patriarchal system rights in nineteenth-century Argentina through a love story rather than a political story in this way she engages the audience through their emotions but is also able to convey the idea of the political regime by not focussing on it as a key topic and keeping it in the background of the story.

Frida Kahlo on the other hand was not an intense feminist. Although she shows herself to be a strong-willed independent woman through her paintings, her main topic area is of nationalism. Portraying her view on the political situations around her she makes it clear that she not only is a strong independent woman but is also very independent in her views towards her national identity.

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