

Exploring Artistic Expressions of Postcolonialism: A Case Study of Frida Kahlo

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Abstract:

Postcolonialism is a theory that explores the cultural impact of colonization, which did not die after countries and nations gained their independence one after another, but profoundly affected the colonized lands with political, economic, and cultural penetration. Artists who awakened to a new national consciousness and adhered to a post-colonial political stance produced many related works. Taking the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo as an example, this paper explores the expressions and meanings of postcolonial art in terms of both cultural subjectivity and trauma expression. Using a postcolonial theoretical framework and a work analysis approach, this study considers and interprets her postcolonial artistic expressions, and finally extracts two important features of Frida Kahlo's work: the first is the common use of indigenous Mexican cultures to interpret what she thinks and feels, and the second is the use of surrealism and magical realism to dramatize the postcolonial traumas of her and her compatriots. Frida Kahlo, for example, has a high degree of recognition of her Mexican identity and a deep emotional connection to Mexican culture. As a result, she is able to obtain a constant stream of inspiration from the local culture and use it to write about her own subject as well as the collective. To this day, the techniques she used are still worthwhile for marginalized cultures to learn from and apply.

Keywords: Frida Kahlo; postcolonial art; native Mexican culture; surrealism; magic realism.

1. Introduction

Frida Kahlo is a renowned Mexican female artist whose work encompasses rich themes of feminism,

class, and postcolonialism and presents stylistic schools of primitivism, surrealism, and magical realism. Kahlo has maintained a post-colonial political stance throughout her life and comes from a rela-

tively complex cultural background (born in Mexico to a German-Jewish father) Kahlo and her husband, Rivera, have participated in the Mexican Nationalist Movement and the Mexican Cultural Identity Movement. Mexican nationalists, during the independence movement, began to perceive the cultural qualities of their own people and insisted on writing about their native culture Kahlo has always identified herself with her Mexican identity, and this identification has permeated her work, allowing it to consistently possess a post-colonial manifestation of her ideas. This study looks at her postcolonial political stance, as well as surrealist and magical realist representations for research. This study is of great significance in exploring postcolonial cultural subjectivity and artistic creation in marginalized cultures and focuses on specific aspects of artistic expression and creative techniques. This study uses the method of documentary analysis to find and read relevant information and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can analyze the impact of Frida Kahlo's works on the postcolonial cultural environment, understand Edward Wadie Said's postcolonial theory, as well as the history and influence of surrealism and magical realism in Latin America, and understand how the two artistic expressions are deconstructed and used by Frida Kahlo. It will also provide information on how these two artistic expressions were deconstructed and utilized by Frida Kahlo, which will be beneficial to the research process. The ultimate goal of this study is to explore some of the manifestations of postcolonial art using the work of artist Frida Kahlo as an example. In order to achieve the research objective, this study compares the different cultural environments in which Frida Kahlo operates and provides an interpretation of her iconic works.

2. Using Local Culture to Interpret the Subjectivity

Edward Wadie Said, a member of the "Postcolonial Three Musketeers," raised the important question of "whether there is 'real' knowledge, in other words, whether there can be authentic, unbiased representations of the 'other' knowledge, knowledge of the 'other'". Said also argues in *Orientalism* that the Orient in *Orientalism* is not objectively lucid, but an Orient with prejudices [1]. Said's problem can be relocated to the relationship between the Western world and Frida Kahlo, and Kahlo and Mexican culture.

As a Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo is an "icon of the colonized culture", what Said called "the Other Oriental" [2]. The price of entering the first world of art and culture from the third world is to be constructed by the West as an exotic goddess, and the same image of Kahlo is por-

trayed differently in Western metaphors than in metaphors of indigenous cultures. Harj-Kaur-Khera's study gives two contrasting examples, namely the portrayal of Kahlo's image in Western societies and the reflection of the image in native Mexican societies "in line with Carlo's cultural background" [2]. In *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* by American author Hayden-Herrera, she is the "Mexican Ophelia," and as one of the most recognizable female characters in Shakespeare's plays, the lady Ophelia is fragile and highly melodramatic, and she perhaps represents the act of repeating trauma in Kahlo's work. Meanwhile, the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, in the introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, describes her as an Aztec and Toltec goddess - the earth mother goddess Tlaç olteoyl, a goddess who devours filth and is also the goddess of evil, depravity, and disease, combining purification and defilement, a goddess who also has the body of a carnivore like a vulture. This metaphor seems to represent the complexity of Kahlo's image as both a vulnerable and traumatized subject, while at the same time reusing primitive Mexican art forms, which allows her work to blossom into a raw and wild power, a paradoxical beauty that presents the subjectivity of the native culture, as well as the justification of her self-traumatization, in the paintings at the same time. The analogy of Tlaçolteotl, born from native culture, is clearly more apt and profound than the beautifully sentimental Ophelia.

As a Mexican artist, Kahlo draws much of her inspiration from Mexico's indigenous art, and Aztec art, and her paintings are rich in natural elements that represent Latin America. Frida's work also used many Aztec characters to represent the typical Mexican woman", her self-portrait is very different from the image of women depicted in the traditional Western painting, the woman is no longer soft, gentle, red lips and white teeth of the ultimate beauty, even if wearing traditional Mexican women's clothing or European dress, Kahlo depicted himself is also rough and wild: The unibrow, the stubble, and the earthy dark brown skin are all contrary to the traditional image of women, and are even very "masculine" in binary gender theory [3]. And her repetitions in self-portraits emphasize these qualities even more profoundly (*Self-Portrait with Braided Hair*, *Self-Portrait with a Necklace of Thorns and Hummingbirds*, *Me and My Parrot*), etc.). Another thing these self-portraits have in common is the use of natural species characteristic of Mexico as secondary elements in the images, such as green roses, spider monkeys, hummingbirds, and parrots. *Self-Portrait with Necklace of Thorns and Hummingbirds* is one of her most iconic paintings. In Mexican culture, the monkey symbolizes lust, while the hummingbird symbolizes the end of a

marriage, and the greenery in the background symbolizes resilience. This painting uses natural elements that have special significance in her native culture to imply Kahlo's deepest suffering: the more she loved her husband, Rivera, the more she was susceptible to more brutal harm [4]. The painting still contains images derived from biblical allusions, namely the necklace of thorns around Kahlo's neck, derived from the crown of thorns from which Jesus suffered. However, due to the presence of local cultural symbols that dominate the picture, the crown of thorns is internalized at this point as part of Kahlo's suffering and no longer has a strong Western religious symbolic imagery. In works such as *Me and My Nurse*, *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*, and *The Wounded Table*, Kahlo chooses to use her own cultural background to express the painful experience of personal experience. In these three paintings, Kahlo depicts pre-Columbian funerary masks, Nayarit figures, and skulls representing the Day of the Dead, elements that allow her to emphasize her Mexican cultural identity while affirming her own existence through the creation and reproduction of pain.

Kahlo's creative journey can illustrate that when fans of local culture create interpretations of their cultural subjects, they have the opportunity to reshape the discourse from the Western mouth, to a certain extent affecting the prejudices of bystanders and Western researchers, and as a powerful resistance to colonial culture. Some twenty years after Kahlo's death, she and her work have gained an unprecedented social resonance, becoming a "cultural icon", an identity that is not only welcomed by the international community but also profoundly affects her compatriots from her native land. It has also profoundly affected her compatriots from her native land. In the 1960s, Kahlo played a pivotal role in the Chicano civil rights movement started by Mexican-Americans. The key concept in Chicano art is "self-definition," and Chicano artists believe that "making art means creating oneself" and challenging the dominant culture, as well as being inspired by tapping into local culture [5]. This coincided with Kahlo's artistic philosophy of using native culture to create art, and her anti-colonialist political stance allowed her to be recognized by Chicano artists. Ester Hernandez, a famous Chicano artist, created the work *Frida and Me* to show that Kahlo was their role model for using art to resist and rebel against colonial culture [5]. The necessity of adhering to the Indigenous cultural interpretation of the subject can be seen in the fact that Kahlo's use of Indigenous cultures to create works of art has influenced the Mexican national collectives to a certain extent, allowing them to affirm their collective identities and that she has gained subjectivity in this way.

3. Surrealism and Magical Realism in Works - Postcolonial Trauma Expression

Mexican customs, as well as Latin American culture, are often considered surrealist and magical realist, and are widely reflected in literature. Surrealism originated in the beginning as a Western art style, born out of the crisis of faith in Europe in the 20th century, when literature and art turned to the absurd, the subconscious, and transcendent expressions of reality. After interacting with the surrealist genre and using surrealism to create their work, the American creators were inspired by magic realism. They believe that the land of Latin America is originally full of dystopia, full of psychedelic color species and theological elements, and because of the long-term colonial invasion, so that this land presents a modern city and primitive culture coexist in the scene, so magic realism in the Latin American land, is not a direct nature of the transcendence of reality, but rather, the processing and portrayal of the reality of the scene [6]. The surrealism and magical realism of Kahlo's work are also influenced by this milieu. Kahlo's work is mostly autobiographical in form, and her compositions tend to reflect her own unique experiences, depicting personal trauma and self-soothing. Her complex cultural background, her political stance, and her experiences living in Mexico and the United States are also part of what makes her who she is. Her post-colonial position is reflected in her unique forms of artistic expression, of which surrealism and magical realism are a part.

One of the controversies surrounding Kahlo's work has been the surrealism of her work, which French philosopher André Breton considered to be purely surreal, but Kahlo herself denied that she subjectively used surrealism, considering it to be "my most honest expression of myself" and not following surrealist ideas. Kahlo herself denies that she subjectively used Surrealism, arguing that it was "my most honest expression of myself" and that she did not follow the Surrealist concept of creation. However, her artistic language does have similarities with surrealism, and their creative moods of seeking new expressions in the midst of confusion and distress are also similar [7]. After living in the U.S. for three years, Kahlo wishes to return to Mexico, however her husband Rivera is in the U.S. continuing his own business. In her 1933 painting *My Clothes Are Hanging There*, Kahlo describes this ambivalence and bitterness, the way she arranges the American scene is utterly surreal, disregarding and transcending all spatial and geographic order, like the whole yet fragmented pieces of her memory. Landmarks and modern city complexes overwhelm the image, with

only her traditional ethnic dress hanging alone between the toilet and the trophy, which seems to suggest that she is overwhelmed by being in a modern, industrialized society, like a disturbing nightmare. Unlike her previous self-portraits, in the skyscraper her image does not appear on it, her entire body disappears, leaving only her national symbol, a symbol that represents her native culture. Her arrangement also emphasizes the specificity of Mexican national culture in her conception of the only Mexican cultural memory that supports her life here, and that everything about her is shaped by her homeland.

One of the ways that magic realism offers in postcolonial-related creations is an attack on mainstream culture, allowing marginalized cultures to be on par with, or to confront, or even transcend, mainstream culture [3]. Take, for example, *Self-Portrait on the Mexican-U.S. Border*, a unique self-portrait created in 1932. In the painting, Kahlo, who always wears traditional Mexican women's clothing, is wearing a Western-style women's dress, a necklace and lace gloves, with her full-length portrait as the dividing line, making a dichotomy between Mexican and American landscapes in terms of composition and content. In the left half, Kahlo depicts elements related to the Aztec civilization, with the sun and the moon hanging above the Mesoamerican pyramids, echoing their names—Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon—perhaps in connection with some kind of ancient sacrificial ritual [8, 9]. With artifacts such as a Day of the Dead skull and a pre-Columbian fertility icon in the center of the image, and a variety of the same plants featured in her other self-portraits in the lower left-hand corner, Kahlo continues to emphasize her Mexican native identity. In the right half of the image, the United States consists of dense skyscrapers and industrial production areas, with the American flag emerging from the smoke, the eerie arrangement of mechanical monster-like pipes, and the exhaust fans connected to the rhizomes of the plants, which seem to represent some kind of exploitation and intrusion that has become some kind of reality in contemporary times [9]. Paul J Nicholson offers a more modern reading of the painting in the 21st century, where the increase in emissions by high-income countries in low-income countries has created an environmental burden on rapidly industrializing countries in Asia and Latin America, at a time when the dichotomy between the boundaries of modernization and primitivism in Kahlo's work is becoming increasingly blurred over time [9]. Undoubtedly, Kahlo uses personal experience as his medium and materializes his self-existence as a full-body self-portrait in a pink dress, dividing the background image equally between the United States and Mexico, and contrasting industrial and primitive civilizations. These painting techniques lead to the conclusion that Kahlo is a represen-

tation of a dual marginalized identity, she is both Mexican and a woman, which represents the double oppression she suffers [10]. In her paintings, however, the hegemonic persecution, and the great divide of modernization differences disappear from the mainstream world and the third world, and they survive as equals in Kahlo's individual experience. Kahlo succeeds in expressing, through surrealist as well as magical realist techniques, her personal, as well as collective, trauma in the hegemonic culture, which is further dissolved upon expression.

4. Conclusion

In the creation of postcolonial art, by insisting on local ethnicity and constantly emphasizing the use of local culture in creation, creators can effectively resist the subjective interpretation of mainstream culture and gain their subjectivity. It also inspires creators, like Frida Kahlo, to be inspired and express their ideas by shaping their own culture. The excavation and migration of surrealist expression and the birth of magical realism, on the other hand, reflect the creators' process of observing and reflecting on their local cultures, a process that ultimately led them to transcend foreign expression and create cultural expressions with national characteristics, expressions that are also capable of more effectively and accurately describing their collective national traumas. Frida Kahlo's work has enriched postcolonial artistic expression and continues to influence communities deeply affected by colonization, and her work deserves to be further interpreted, explored and researched.

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