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Quest for Identity in Kakar's Mira and The Mahatma

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to focus on Madeline's quest for identity. Madeline is the protagonist in Sudhir Kakar's novel „Mira and The Mahatma“. Cultural psychology as a part of the psychological science begins with sampling of an individual person and his/her participation in social institutions. Madeline a daughter of a British Admiral comes to India, as she has proved being Gandhi's greatest disciple. Before that, she was a great admirer of Beethoven. As she had been dissatisfied for years, she had decided to devote her life to the study of his life and music. Her plans went a sea change after reading Romain Rolland's book on Gandhi. She takes rigorous efforts to adjust herself with the life style of the Ashram. Bapu embraces her into the fold and as she becomes indispensable part of the Ashram and his life, renames her Mira after Mirabai, the legendary devotee of Krishna. Madeline comes to India and lives for thirty four years. She loves Gandhiji passionately. Then as Mira she tries to find her identity. But at last after the death of Gandhiji, she returns to Europe, again in quest for identity as Madeline. And she turns to her first love Beethoven's music.

Keywords: Cultural Psychology, Ashram, identity.

Introduction

Madeline Slade is the protagonist in Sudhir Kakar's novel „Mira and The Mahatma“. Sudhir Kakar is an Indian psychoanalyst, novelist and a scholar in the fields of cultural psychology. The present paper attempts to focus on Madeline Slade's quest for identity in Sudhir Kakar's novel Mira and The Mahatma in the perspective of cultural psychology. Cultural Psychology is an interdisciplinary field that includes psychology, anthropology and philosophy to study how cultural practices and institutions influence and reflect individual human mind. Cultural psychology as a part of the psychological science begins with sampling of an individual person and his/her participation in social institutions. The term, „Cultural psychology“ is defined by The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology as:

“An interdisciplinary movement which regards culture as central in any conception of human beings so that individual behavior and culture are seen as inseparable components of the same phenomenon with mind being a co-construction of the individual and the culture. It tends to focus on everyday life events conceptualized as mediated action in context and assumes that individuals are active agents in their own cognitive development but make choices in settings only partially chosen” (Matselmoto, 2009: 145-46).

The implied meaning of the term, „Cultural psychology“ emphasizes individual as a primate whose cognitive development is conceptualized through the inseparable components of individual's mind and culture

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in which he lives. Culture as central to the construction of individual's mind controls his behavior focusing actions mediated by everyday life events.

Kakar, Indian Psychoanalyst and contributor of this newly established genre has added his view point as:

"Cultural psychology is the study of that part of an individual's representational world which is shaped by his/her membership of a particular group and which can be brought into sharper focus by comparing it with the representational worlds of individuals belonging to other cultures" (Kakar, 2008: X preface).

An individual's identity as a member of certain group or community is shaped by its culture vice-a-versa s/he represents his/her community on the one hand and on the other his/her identity is brought into focus comparing with other communities and their cultures to which s/he relates with. Obviously, impetus is given to the culture that mostly brings one's identity into focus relating other cultures s/he belongs because culture and psychology are inter-related and even more emphatically inter-dependent terms.

Through the novel *Mira and the Mahatma*, Sudhir Kakar examines the relationship between Gandhiji and Madeline. Moreover, the novel explains in detail Mahatma Gandhi's Ashram and the life thereof. It is 1925, and India's struggle for independence is in confused state. Gandhiji had withdrawn from active politics and was immersed in the creation of a community that is wholly dedicated to the highest standards of self-discipline, tolerance and austerity. Into this world comes Madeline Slade, the daughter of a British Admiral. She was part of the British ruling establishment. This Madeline Slade is the seeker, seeker of her identity, in the novel.

The title itself suggests Madeline's quest for identity. Brought up in the freedom of an upper class English home of the era, Madeline had been dissatisfied and unhappy for years and tells us that everything had been dark and futile. She was not happy. The author uses the words „fugue like state# for her situation. They are words of ignorance in search of understanding. Madeline, in her diary, calls the state „a moment of grace#. Timeless moments like these were familiar to her from childhood. When Bertha, her old nanny expressed her apprehensions about Madeline's going to India she replied, "it will be the first time in my life when I shall not be alone." She was different from her sister Rhona who loved dances and balls. To Madeline, dancing was unrelieved torture. A great admirer of Beethoven she had thought of devoting her life to the study of his life and music. However her plans underwent a sea change after she read Romain Rolland's book on Gandhiji. (Mahatha Gandhi 1924) She had been so moved that she wanted to leave immediately for India. But she thought about it seriously and decided to prepare herself through a year of rigorous training. Madeline started reading about India, studying some of its sacred literature and learning Urdu. She was also learning to spin and weave, since spinning was an obligatory daily activity in the ashram. The actual act of spinning was hard work and it stretched her patience. She learned sitting cross legged on the floor and also asked to remove

the bed from her room as she wanted to get used to sleeping on the bare floor because that what the inmates did at the ashram. Madeline went about this task with her usual single minded determination. She became a teetotaler and a vegetarian. Practicing to sleep on floor was difficult for her. In the beginning, it was less a matter of stiffness in her neck and back when she woke up in the morning. After eight months she wrote to Mahatma Gandhi, "By September, I expect to be mentally and physically ready for ashram life. Some months ago, I had an experience which I can only tell you in person when we meet. It revealed to me that my life was to be joined to yours, that all I want is to come to India and live with you" (16). Madeline's first impressions of Gandhiji are to be found in the two letters to Romain Rolland. She writes, "I could have never imagined how divine he is. I had been prepared for a Prophet and I have found an Angel" (35). In another letter she writes, "He is the only one I feel I can talk to, to whom I can pour out my heart, who I can welcome into the depth of my soul" (37-38). This illustrates her romantic as well as spiritual quest for identity.

A tall, strapping woman, handsome rather than pretty, Madeline took eagerly to the ascetic part of the ashram life. She was attracted to the thoughts and simple life of Gandhi in ashram. Gradually, she felt strong need of his physical proximity. Knowing the feelings of Madeline, Gandhi would repeatedly send her away to live and work in other ashrams in distant part of the country. She would have nervous breakdowns as a consequence of these separations.

Madeline was appropriately renamed as Mira by Gandhi. Mira whose infatuation with Krishna was not much greater than Madeline's own yearning for Mahatma. This feeling of Madeline was however a battlefield of forces stronger than those inclined to reason. The presumption that their relationship was not quite one sided and that Mira too evoked complex counter-transference reaction in Gandhi is amply supported by his letters to her. Once in 1927, when Mira had rushed to Gandhi's side on hearing that he was under severe strain, and had promptly been sent back, Gandhi wrote to her.

"I could not restrain myself from sending you a love message on reaching here. I felt very sad after letting you go. I have been very severe with you, but I could not do otherwise. I had to perform an operation and I steadied myself for it....." (161). The letter was followed the next day with a post card: "This is merely to tell you I can't dismiss you from my mind. Every surgeon has a soothing ointment after a severe operation. This is my ointment...." (161). In another letter, Gandhiji wrote "But I was on a bed of hot ashes all the while I was accepting your service." To this Mira added the commentary, "The struggle was terrible. I too was on a bed of hot ashes because I could feel that Bapu was. This was one of the occasion when, somehow or other, I managed to tear myself away".

In 1936, when Gandhi was recovering from his breakdown and had decided to leave Sabarmati to go and live by himself in a remote village, Mira thought she finally had a chance to fulfill her deepest longing, to live with Bapu in the countryside. Gandhi, however was adamant. He

would stay in the village. Mira lived in only if she herself shifted to a neighboring one. This nearly broke her heart, but somehow she carried on, and when Gandhiji finally decided to come and live in Seagaon, she buried her sorrow in the joy preparing for him his cottage and cowshed. She built a little cottage for herself a mile away on the ridge of Varoda village, and within a week of Bapu's coming to live in Seagaon she departed for the hut on the hill where she lived alone with her little horse as her companion. Even this relative nearness was not to last long as political events inexorably pulled Gandhi away on his travels.

The Songs of Mira was her favorite book. She says about it that her nickname has linked the gap of centuries and cultures to enter her heart and make a corner of her own. She found a reverberation and melody in her words that till now was the province of Beethoven's music. She translates one of the songs of Mira in following way,

"My eyes have fashioned An altar of pearl tears, And here is my sacrifice:
The body and mind Of Mira,
The servant who clings to your feet Through life after life,
A virginal harvest for you to reap" (145)

At the age of 21 she was impressed by Beethoven's music. She also came to know about the pianist, Frederic Lamond who was well known for his interpretations of Beethoven's sonatas in Beethoven's music. Madeline perceived unmistakably the "heralds of grace" she has fleetingly encountered during her walks through the woods and the downs when she was a child. One day, she believed, such grace would once again storm into her soul, submerging it and altering the contours of its landscape, when she heard Lamond which was but an intimation of the musical treasures contained in Beethoven. The music reverberated in her head, prolonged now, growing suddenly, stretching without a pause. And then it was as if her soul was convulsively released from its long incarnation in flesh. Many years later, she would discover the same purity and strength in Gandhiji, in moments when Bapu was most himself. In one of her letters to Romain Rolland she writes, "Even more than Beethoven, our European Mahatma, Bapu remains for me the strongest mediator between the life of senses and Eternal Life." When Gandhiji asked Mira about her life in another ashram and for sacrifice, she poured her heart out. She told that her god has to be personal, alive, a palpable presence. He has to permeate her heart, mind and body. He must fill every inch of space in and around her, like Mirabai's Krishna. If she had that then there was no sacrifice she could not make. Bapu was very much perturbed and agitated but soon controlled himself and said, "For Mirabai, Krisna was all-pervasive, but not in the flesh and not in the body..." (147).

Mira slept badly that night. Next morning, she broke down when she went to his room to say goodbye as he was going away. Perhaps it was the love in the look he gave her when he motioned her to sit next to him on the floor, which made Mira lose all control. Crying helplessly, she holds his hand in hers. For a fleeting moment she sensed a separate life in his hand. She felt it came alive in within hers, even as he quickly pulled it away. The next morning she did not attend the prayer. She received a letter

from Bapu which asked her not to get disturbed. She wrote back to Bapu, “Yes, I kissed your feet, over and over again. Yes, I bathed them in my hot tears. Yes, I pressed my face against your legs even as I hugged them tightly to my breasts. I can still feel the muscle in your calf go taut”(171). She blamed herself for not rubbing ghee on his skin to make it soft and supple as she used to do once. She tells him that she does not want to worship an idol but the living God who incorporates the Eternal and paying homage to the Eternal, to the Divine, is not idolatry. Further she calls him as her beloved physician who is wrong in the diagnoses of her disease as her disease was her separation from him. The only treatment for her disease is his presence. Her doctor is the cause of her disease, as he is also its cure and its sole physician. All these things illustrate Mira#s quest for identity.

In 1948, at the time of Gandhi#s death, Mira was living in her own ashram near Rishikesh in the foothills of the Himalayas, devoting herself to care of cattle in the nearby villages. Starting one ashram after another, deeper and deeper into the Himalaya, she was to live in India till 1958. She decided to return to Europe, almost thirty years after she had first left home in search of Gandhi. In the forests above Baden near Vienna now she made her home in an isolated farmhouse with a dog and an old Indian servant from Rishikesh. Mira had chosen to live in Baden because of its connection to Beethoven. He had been her first passion as a girl and a young woman and now she had returned to him. At that time she refused to talk about Gandhi, claiming that he did not interest her any longer. What animated her exclusively and what she enthusiastically talked about was Beethoven whom she saw as the highest manifestation of the human spirit. He had been her first love before she read Romain Rolland#s book on Gandhi that was to change her life. Working on a biography of Beethoven and with his music as her dearest companion she had come back to the composer after a thirty five year detour with Gandhi.

To conclude, I would like to state that „Mira and The Mahatma# exposes Madeline Slade#s quest for identity throughout her life. At the same time, this quest proves that cultural psychology is a field which assumes the idea that culture and mind are inseparable and psychological theories grounded in one culture are likely to be limited in applicability when applied to different culture. Though Madeline in her whole life tries to seek her identity in India, with Mahatma Gandhi, at last she returned from India and Mahatma Gandhi to Vienna and to Beethoven. Madeline came to India and to Gandhiji in quest for identity. She lived in India for thirty four years. She loved Gandhiji passionately and became Mira. Then as a Mira she tried to find her identity which may be called a romantic quest but at last she returned to Europe again in quest for identity as Madeline. In such a way her journey is from Madeline to Mira and from Mira to Madeline.

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