

THE PROTEAN WOMAN AS THE PRODUCT OF CULTURE WAR: A STUDY OF TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S*

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Abstract:

*As the world changes in unprecedented pace and unanticipated ways, individuals find it challenging to sustain a single identity as they traverse the complex life situations. The identity of an individual is in constant state of flux. Many feminist psychologists eschew the identity of women as monolithic, rather they endorse the idea that women's identity emanates in relationship with others. An individual becomes pluralistic in a postmodern world. If playing a particular role leads to real changes in one's identity, then one should learn to play many roles, to adapt to any role that is in demand. The paper analyses the potential of an individual to carry many selves in the postmodern era of culture war. In the novella of study, it is the culture that requires a person to adopt the pluralistic self. The central character assumes superficial transformations for social acceptance. The need for a Protean self arises out of the wish for social acceptance. The rigid societal norms chains the individuals in such a way that they can pursue their desires so long as they look and behave according to the accepted social standards. Lulamea becomes Holly in Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to liberate herself from the rigid hierarchical constraints in the society that limits personal and social freedom to those who do not conform. Holly Golightly epitomizes the postmodern self-constructed identity that is in a state of flux.*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, culture war, protean self, identity diffusion, sexuality, plurality*

Postmodernism

As Walter Truett Anderson points out, "Postmodernity brings changing ideas, changing styles, changing behaviours...it brings above all, a change of mind." (123) Hence Postmodernism ushers in a deep and unsettling shift. Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics to Postmodernism* posits that, "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges". (3) Postmodernism subverts the accepted notions of existence and reality, celebrates fragmentation and plurality, and questions the superiority of order. Coherence and rationality are no longer important or possible. As M.H Abrams observes, "Postmodernism . . . show that all forms of cultural discourse are manifestations of the reigning ideology, or of the relations and constructions of power, in contemporary society". (177)

The Cultural Background

At a conference during Cannes film festival in 2004, the film producer Lawrence Bender made a biting response to the question about media censorship in the United States: "I feel like I'm going back to the fifties here. . .the conservatives are taking over the country." Bender's reference is to the 1950s America, a decade remembered for its conservatism. The 1950s culture was deeply influenced by the cold war ideology, and the unprecedented prosperity of America at that time plunged the consumers into enjoying the material comforts brought about by the international prestige. The middle class America was very complacent with the emerging prosperity manifested in the form of ". . . new houses, fine schools, neighborhood parks and safe communities" (Clinton 1) that no questions were raised as to how the nation rose to the global eminence. But the decade also reveals a number of parallel emergences that cannot be pigeonholed into the cold war ideology. The 1950s culture was a matrix of dualities, tensions and

contradictions. The diverse cultural expressions of the time negate any kind of generalization. J. Ronald Oakley described the 1950s as:

... a period of puzzling paradoxes ... an age of great optimism along with the gnawing fear of doomsday bombs, of great poverty in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, and of flowery rhetoric about equality along with the practice of rampant racism and sexism.(x)

Halliwell says in *American Culture of 1950s*:

the decade was vilified in the 1960s for its conservatism, particularly by those who saw themselves as its victims: the young, black, female and gay all found collective voices to denounce a decade that promised so much, but delivered little to those on the margins.(4)

As elucidated in books such as Douglas Field's collection *American Cold War Culture* (2005), Martin Halliwell explains that a closer inspection of the decade reveals another aspect of the cold war culture. "In popular memory the decade gave rise to Elvis, high school romances, Tupperware, the *Peanuts* comic strip, Hollywood blondes, 3-D cinema, and black baseball star Jackie Robinson helping the Brooklyn Dodgers to six World Series finals".(3) The American collective identity was constructed in line with the popular myth of the American dream, which emphasized social recognition and wealth. The central character of the novella for study, Holly Golightly, is an epitome of the American dream seeker, the one who traverses from rags to riches.

The decade also witnessed the standardization of gender roles, which has been mocked by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* as, "... the long commute to work in the city for the 'organization man' and a day perfecting the home for house wives 'smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor'".(16) As Halliwell puts it:

... there was some unrest in the mid-1950s as can be gauged by uneasy representations of gender roles in film and fiction: in Jack Arnold's film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) domesticity becomes an oppressive prison for the shrinking white-collar protagonist Scott Carey, while in Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) the organization man, Tom Rath, feels uncomfortably caught between the demands of work and the home; he cannot ever fully settle down to suburban life, with memories of active combat and a wartime affair dragging him back into the past. (40)

The films of the times tried to reassert the masculine identity by displaying manliness through the figures like William Holden and Rock Hudson. Nonetheless all these representations of masculinity were not what it purported to be when the reality dawned. All the artists who were the epitome of masculinity proved out to have homosexual inclinations.

The status of the American women then was even worse. As observed by Halliwell, "... the fact that the phrase 'public woman' in the 1950s was more likely to be associated with prostitution than intellect is one marker that the home became the naturalized habitat for many women". (41) Alfred Kinsey's *Report on Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) effected a huge outcry as it confronted the purity and sanctity associated with femininity. Kinsey observed that sexual relationships outside were more prevalent than what was perceived. Till the ground breaking publication of Kinsey, sex was understood to be a private, domestic affair, which exclusively happened in the domain of marital relationships.

Accordingly, the era witnessed two contrasted images of women- the devoted stylish domestic housewife and the glamorous diva, the paragon of ostentatious sexuality. This paradoxical situation was exemplified in films like *Niagra* (1953), in which the hyper-sexualized character of Munroe is contrasted to the modest, sensible and the morally complying character of Jean Peters. Consequently, the insistence on the morally pure womanhood socially disenfranchised the uncontained women like unwed mothers, abortionists and lesbians. (Halliwell 42). The findings of Kinsley that infers increased illegal abortions, pre-marital and extramarital sex, and experience of eroticism between the women that resulted in orgasm

raised questions about the morality of American culture. The evolving behaviour of women thus parried the national morality that positioned women as the guardians of a conservative, moral, domestic ideology.

Certainly the decade witnessed apprehensions about female sexuality. There was a stark contrast between the women's prescribed social and sexual roles and their actual desires and behaviours. This finding of Kinsley shook the conservative morality of the time. Holly Golightly is the true representative of this shift in morality. Capote's novel subtly addresses these moral concerns of the decade through its depiction of the dynamic single life of an American geisha who is a staunch proponent of progressive sexuality.

Breakfast at Tiffany's

The narrator in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* tells a retrospective story of an enigmatic, sensuous, morally problematic figure named Holly Golightly who is a representative of the "narcissistic youth culture that rejects middle-class values through late-night parties, drinking, and sexual freedom" (Fahy 175). The card on her mailbox which reads "Holly Golightly, Travelling" exemplifies her unrestrained identity that values social and personal freedom. Golightly is the incarnation of the seeker of the 'American dream' who is enchanted by the material comforts of the newly aroused middle class bourgeois culture of the postwar era. Holly earns money as a geisha girl, an escort for wealthy men. She also amasses wealth as the messenger for the mobster Sally Tomato. Sally manages his narcotic business through the seemingly innocuous messages he transfers through Holly. When the identity of the geisha girl is revealed, one is flabbergasted to know the transformation she has acquired to access the high-end life of New York. In order to reconstruct her identity, she abandoned her husband and his children, skillfully masked her southern accent, changed her name from Lulamae to Holly, and lost weight considerably.

Eventually Holly gets romantically involved with Jose Ybarra Jaegar, a South American diplomat who aspires to become the president of Brazil, which Holly describes as her first "non-rat romance" (82). The news of the death of Fred, Holly's brother, devastates her and transforms her into a recluse. Her prospects as the wife of the future president is shattered following her arrest due to the involvement with Sally Tomato. The sudden turn of events forces her to leave the country, leaving behind her cat in Spanish Harlem-never to be seen by the narrator again. Holly recognizes the complexity of human sexuality and embraces the notion that an individual should be natural and not normal.

Holly discards the cultural significances accumulated to the notion of sexuality and transcends the oppressive presence of it. Her liberal outlook on sexuality is expressed in, "a person ought to be able to marry men or women or- listen, if you came to me and said you wanted to hitch up with Man o' War, I'd respect your feeling. No I'm serious. Love should be allowed" (83). Golightly defies the supposed moral values of the decade and repudiates the standardized notion of gender roles and sexuality. One of the central aspects of the novella is the ambiguity revolving around the sexual orientation of the different characters that apparently lead a conventional existence. As Mastilo notes, "the exploration of sexual identity is presented as a fluid process that avoids labelling" (3). The intriguing Golightly herself raises question about her sexual inclination when she remarks, "... people couldn't help but think I must be a bit of a dyke myself. And of course I am. Everyone is a bit. So what? That never discouraged a man yet, in fact it seems to goad them on" (25). A succinct analysis of the character of Holly Golightly is expressed by Lulee Aberra as:

... an unconventional, eccentric young woman who subverts the matrix of power that regulates female sexuality and whose identity is performative, fluid and in a constant state of flux, lending her easily to a post-modern interpretation... (4)

Despite her goal of acquiring the social status aspired to in the post war materialist culture, by becoming the wife of a wealthy man, Golightly defies many notions associated with traditional femininity. Her relationship with the major characters of the novella reveals her progressive view on sexuality. Holly subverts the ideology of the time which predominantly endorsed femininity in terms of mothers, house

wives or virgins, by indulging in licentious activities and leading a high-class, fashionable, opulent, promiscuous life. She partied all night with umpteen men who lacked any commonality. The narrator observes that all of the party men in her apartment seemed disappointed:

Except for a lack of youth, the guests had no common theme, they seemed strangers among strangers; indeed, each face, on entering, had struggled to conceal dismay at seeing others there. It was as if the hostess had distributed her invitations while zigzagging through various bars... (35)

This illustrates her openness about sexuality that was largely uncommon in American Culture. Holly celebrates the fluidity of sexuality and is a hard core non-conformist. For Holly, there are no fixed values when it comes to relationships. Holly is very much a product of the American Culture of the 1950s.

In a postmodern context, the identity is constantly in a state of flux. As Pointed out in *The Saturated Self*, "Identities are highly complex, tension filled, contradictory, and inconsistent entities. . ." (Gregen 147). According to the postmodern psychologists, a replacement of identity is inevitable in a decade of cultural conflict. The various self-concepts are replaced by a sense of identity based on "a reality of immersed independence, in which it is relationship that constitutes the self" (Gregen 147). Holly epitomizes this replaceable identity that is subject to constant change. Golightly is flighty, unstable and unsettled throughout the novella. The narrator meets Golightly as the geisha girl, the socialite who is a companion to various wealthy and important men. The narrator's encounter with Doc Golightly, Holly's husband, throws light on the earlier life of Holly Golightly as Lulamae Barnes. The glimpse of Holly as Lulamae re-asserts her inherently untamable nature. It is her essential nature to run away from everything that "cages" her. Her untamable nature is not compatible with Doc Golightly's obsession of nurturing and nursing the wild things. Holly says, "That was Doc's mistake. He was always lugging home wild things. . . But you can't give your heart to a wild thing: the more you do, the stronger they get. Until they are strong enough to run into the woods. Or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky". (74) When Holly finds that her nature is not in accordance with her status as Doc Golightly's wife, she flees to freedom. Her mailbox card inscription, "Holly Golightly Travelling" suggests her insistence on freedom and her resistance to belong to somewhere or somebody. "I don't want to own anything until I know I've found the place where me and things belong together. I'm not quite sure where that is just yet. But I know what it's like". (39). Naming is also problematical throughout the novella. Naming symbolizes defining and fixity for Holly Golightly. It explains her refusal to name the cat, her naming of narrator as Fred, and her insistence on a pseudonym for herself. ". . . poor slob without a name. It's a little inconvenient, his not having a name. But I haven't any right to give him one: he'll have to wait until he belongs to somebody . . . we don't belong to each other: he's an independent, and so am I. (39)

Nonetheless Holly ardently tries to resolve the problem of being a domestic housewife when she is in a relation with Jose. While the instability aroused from the identity as Golightly's wife is unresolved, the new identity as a future President's wife is ardently looked forward to. As the fiancée of Jose, Holly becomes a typical housewife who is content learning to furnish her house, speak Portuguese and cook meals for Jose and the narrator. Holly seems to be happy though she admits that Jose is not her ideal man. She is more than happy to leave behind her glamorous chic life as she feels immense satisfaction in loving and caring for Jose. Holly confesses to the narrator, ". . . I do love Jose I'd stop smoking if he asked me to. He's friendly, he can laugh me out of the mean Reds, only I don't have them much anymore . . . I take his suit to the cleaner, or stuff some mushrooms, and I feel fine, just great". (83) Holly finds it obligatory to "settle down" despite her wish to transcend the societal limitations.

This sharp deviation in the character of Holly Golightly from the nonchalant, fickle-minded woman to the apparently stable, conventional figure is highly representative of a postmodern subject position that is constantly shifting with a "replaced identity". As Anderson observes, "The postmodern person is a multi-community person, and his or her life as a social being is based on adjusting to shifting

contexts and being true to divergent and occasionally conflicting commitments.”(124)Holly Golightly is a true representative of this makeshift identity where the transformation is often appalling to the readers. Her transition from a married woman who “didn't have to lift a finger, 'cept to eat a piece of pie. 'cept to comb her hair and send away for all magazines”(69) to a socialite with “ragbag coloured boy's hair”(12) and “chic thinness”(12), and finally to carelessly dressed, content with domesticity kind of home maker. The character of Holly is continually made and re-made in collaboration with others. At the end of the novella, the postcard that narrator receives from Holly, informs that she has returned to her older promiscuous life using men for their money, unable and unwilling to find a stable home. Throughout the novella, Holly make choices about the role that she must take up or adapt to, and how much and when.

Holly can be compared to the figure from the Greek mythology, Proteus, who was able to change his shape to whatever he wished, from wild boar to lion to dragon to fire to flood. Proteus found it impossible to be in a single form, unless seized and chained. In this context, Holly is a modern Protean who defies a static, stable identity. This Protean style is characterized by different kinds of identity, some shallow, some profound meeting the demands of the situation. These Protean transformations could be abandoned anytime in favour of something new. This pattern is what Erik Erikson calls, “identity diffusion” or “identity confusion”. This Protean style is an indispensable aspect of Holly's character, the functional patterns necessary for her existence. In fact, the Protean people cannot belong to a place, and they cannot have a home, which is very much true in the case of Holly Golightly. Though Holly claims that she loves to belong to a place like she Triffany's, she makes no genuine attempts to root herself to that place.

The Protean person has a particular kind of relationship with the ideologies propagated during his time. Robert Jay Lifton observes that:

Protean man has a particular relationship to the holding of ideas, which I think has great significance for the politics, religion, and general intellectual life of the future. Just as elements of the self can be experimented with and readily altered, so can idea systems and ideologies be embraced, modified, let go of and reembraced. . . (127-128)

Though Holly transcended the rigid sexual boundaries, she was forced to succumb to the prevailing ideology that demanded of a domestic house wife. The transformation that Holly undergoes is appalling when she yields to the approved societal behaviour expected of a woman of the decade. She acquiesces to the prevalent notion of “settling down” though she was a kind of person who always tried to escape the conventional existence. The ideological manifestation seems to be oscillating as far as Holly is concerned. Holly alters her idea systems when she embraces the dominant ideology by deciding to be a typical housewife of the era, while disregards the same when she transgresses the moral authority.

Holly is caught in a tug of war wherein she is drawn by both “the impulse toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward progressivism”. (Hunter 92) According to James Davison Hunter, an orthodoxy approach is characterized by “. . . the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. . . it tells us what is good, what is true, how we should live, and who we are.”(93) Such an authority is the propagator of personal and collective value, goodness and identity. However, for progressivism, the defining factors of morality include subjectivism, rationalism and the *zeitgeist*. Hunter says, “What all progressivist world views share in common is the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life”. (92) In the novella, we see Golightly waging war against the conventional notions and morality. Besides, she tries to inculcate her progressive attitude, particularly her attitude of liberal sexuality, to her fellow beings. On the contrary, in the latter part of the novella, Holly Golightly transforms herself into a domestic housewife, to fit into the society. The narrator elucidates this transformation as “un-Holly-like enthusiasm”. “A keen sudden un-Holly-like enthusiasm for homemaking resulted in several un-Holly-like purchases. . .” (80) And narrator observes that Golightly was happy at the new prospects of life.

Inferentially, Holly Golightly is part of a postmodern cultural conflict wherein the people or

organizations oscillate in their allegiances to conservatism and progressivism. As Hunter observes, "At the heart of the new cultural realignment are the pragmatic alliances being formed across faith traditions." (95) In a decade of culture war, the people tend to take conservative stand on some issues and liberal positions on others. The sexually progressive attitude that Golightly displays in the first half of the novella is in stark contrast to the conservative role that she takes upon at the prospect of her marriage to Jose. When Holly allows Jose to move into her apartment, she "cages" herself, something she claimed she wouldn't ever do to herself or to others. The narrator says that "she hibernated like a winter animal who did not know spring had come and gone. Her hair darkened leaving into memories her signature multi-coloured hair." (80) The narrator observes that, despite her consistent efforts, she doesn't really fit into her new attire of domestic wife. Unlike her role as a geisha, the glamorous socialite, the new role of dutiful wife fits badly on her. But she seems to be content and happy about the turn of events. Golightly is the classic example of Erikson's description of identity diffusion, which lacks a firm sense of the self. Holly Golightly is a person who moulds herself into the "made identity" rather than fitting herself into the "found identity" fixed by the social role or tradition. Golightly deviated from the "found morality" of the culture she belonged to, and revelled in the "made morality" of her choice.

Conclusion

As Fahy says, "For Capote, Holly symbolized the growing number of young women seeking social and sexual autonomy". Holly pursues after wealthy men to gain financial security, which is an essential ingredient to lead an autonomous single life. But the cultural and historical significances and privileges attributed to marriage, and the conception of marriage as the sole private place of sexual behaviour, forces the impulsive, flighty Holly to succumb to the ideology of domesticity in America.

Holly is invariably a Proteus who thrives by replaceable identity or "identity diffusion" as Erikson puts it. However, the Protean self of Holly Golightly is seized and chained when she struggle to adapt to the role as the dutiful, domestic housewife. But Holly fails desperately in her Protean guises and she is compelled to leave the country. She confesses to the narrator that, "Even if a jury gave me the Purple Heart, this neighbourhood holds no future..." (103)

The cold war era with its rigid cultural significances deny a lasting place for people who reject or resist the ideology. Holly's progressive sexual attitude tampered with the traditional restricted gender roles of wives and mothers who acquiesces domesticity to ward off extended bachelorhood, homosexuality and sex outside marriage. Holly Golightly is a modern Proteus who transforms inevitably according to the prevailing circumstances. She decides what and how she should be at any particular point of time. Fahy rightly deduces that, "Her last name (Golightly) further implies the ease with which she moves from one identity (one place) to another. As suggested by her unfurnished apartment and the word "travelling" on her Tiffany cards, she defines herself by movement, particularly the ability to pack up and go at a moment's notice". (190)

For Holly, freedom encapsulates her choices to alter the identity whenever she desires for. This fluid identity manifests in many ways as: she seeks domestic stability but constantly eludes from it, she yearns to find a place like Tiffany's but never really tries to find one. Holly's Protean self suggests that transformation is imperative as far as a postmodern culture war scenario is concerned. Holly's notion of sexuality as a natural and indispensable part of human identity voices the need for a pluralistic culture that cultivates an attitude of inclusiveness and acceptance. As Aberra argues Holly is a "floating signifier" (6) and "she is capable of representing anything" (Aberra 6).

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