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**Reclaiming Identity and Self-Definition in the Multicultural Society of the
United States: A Study of Isabel Allende's *The Sum of Our Days*.**

Abstract

Isabel Allende's *The sum of our days* is a memoir, narrating the story of her family and her extended family, their experiences as immigrants and citizens of the present day multicultural society of the United States. Allende highlights the hardships of living in the complexities of transculturation and develops a hybrid identity. The present paper aims to explore by a variety of cultural and sociological theories, various features of multicultural society, stressing on the cultural and linguistic predicaments faced by Allende and her ethnically, culturally and religiously divergent extended family and the self-identity created by Allende by adopting an interdependent notions of self.

Key Words: Multiculturalism, Transculturation, Exile, Self and Hybrid Identity.

Caleb Rosado in his article, "Toward a Definition of Multiculturalism" gives an elaborative definition of the concept of Multiculturalism. According to him, "Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviours that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society"(2). Further, Stuart Hall views multiculturalism can be attributed to the various "strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up" (209). The present multicultural society of the United States comprise of

African –Americans, Native Americans, Asians and Hispanics. Christopher Lasch in his book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* views that the term multiculturalism originated in the United States in 1960s, when the multicultural movement dissolved concepts such as identity politics and cultural narcissism.

While, the concept of identity and identity formation is different in every society and culture, but, Alan Roland (a cross- cultural psychologist) recognize three notions of identity namely: an individualized identity, a familial identity, and a spiritual identity present in everyone. Different cultures stress on either one or a combination of two of these notions. In the United States, where being independent and self-sustaining is stressed, the individualized identity forms an important component. In contrast, cultures like Latin American, Asian and African, where interdependence is stressed, the important component is familial identity. Spiritual identity or what can be said as realization of higher meanings in life while also experiencing connectedness with others.

There are different ways in which identity can be constructed depending on an individual's view of self. Markus and Kitayama in their essay, "Culture and the self: Implications for Cognition, Emotions and Motivation" specify two types of self -constructs: independent and interdependent. The independent view of self involves, "a conception of the self as autonomous and independent person" (226). Contrarily, "the interdependent view, "the significant features of self according to this construal are to be found in interdependence and thus, more public component of the self" (Markus and Kitayama 227). Further, the independent view of self is an example of the western culture. However, cultures like Japanese, African cultures, Latin American and South European exemplify interdependence. Describing the important features of an interdependent construal of self and identity Markus and Kitayama comment that, "Within such a construal, the self becomes most meaningful and complete when it is cast in the appropriate social relationship, be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of *others* in the relationship. People are motivated to find a way to fit in with relevant others, to fulfil and create obligation, and in general to become part of various interpersonal relationships" (227). In the memoir, Allende adopts various roles, the role of a wife, a daughter, a mother, a step mother, a mother-in-law, a grandmother, a friend and a sister. We find that Allende is always motivated to oblige to fit in her various interpersonal relationships that she adopts.

Moreover, in *The Sum of Our Days*, Allende's constructs an inclusive self- definition, where the status shifts to "we" from "I". This shift can be traced in the very first page of the memoir, when Allende tells about a storm that took the night before, she writes, "We were shaken by a storm" (TSOD 1). Thus, using "we" for self reference clearly brings out the socially extended self concept that Allende portrays in the novel. According to Brewer and Gardiner, "An extended self means that the boundaries of the self are redrawn, and the content of the self-concept is focused on those characteristics that make one a "good" representative of the group or of the relationship" (84). This is evident as Allende plays the role of a matriarch for the entire tribe, and struggles for their well beings. Even her step father describes her role as an archetypal mother in the family he tells Allende and she narrates, "he said, I would always be the matriarch, a position that others undoubtedly resent. He was right: my role in the tribe is disproportionate" (TSOD 171).

Social attachments functions differently at different levels of configurations. Brewer and Caporael (1995) in their model of group structure, establish four important configurations namely, "*dyads* (two-person relationships), *teams* (small face-to-face social and working groups), *bands* (small, interacting communities), and *tribes* (macro-bands characterized by shared identity and communication but without continual face-to-face interaction)—have been "repeatedly assembled" throughout human evolutionary history" (Brewer and Gardiner 84). Allende tells a story of her extended family that she calls her small tribe in the novel. The tribe includes her husband, her stepchildren, her son, her daughter-in-law, her grandchildren, her friends, and her group of five women whom she calls as, "the circle of the Sisters of Perpetual Disorder" (36). With some she shares her multicultural identity, with others like her mother and Abuela who live in Chile, she communicates almost every day by writing letters.

Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama in their book, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, study the various facets of multicultural people and the various reasons as why people develop multicultural identities. One such category according to them are global nomads, who, "grow up in many different cultural contexts because their parents move around a lot (e.g., missionaries, international business employees, and military families)... these children have unique challenges and unique opportunities...experience cultural rules that may be constraining (e.g., in cultures where children have less freedom), and endure periods of family separation" (202). Isabel Allende's life story can easily filter into that of a global nomad.

She was born in Lima, Peru and abandoned by the age of three by her biological father, she returned to Chile to live in her maternal grandparents' house. Her stepfather was a Chilean diplomat; as a result, her childhood was spent travelling. She attended school in Bolivia and Lebanon and returned to Chile 1958. She worked as a journalist, translated Spanish novels into English, and in television shows. In 1970, Salvador Allende, her uncle was elected as the first democratic president of Chile. Unfortunately, Salvador Allende was assassinated in 1973 in the Military Coup led by Augusto Pinochet. Isabel Allende's name featured on the black list and she started receiving death threats; as she got involved in helping the victims of the coup, by providing safe passages and aid. As she no longer felt safe in Chile, she went to Venezuela with her family and stayed there till 1987 in what she terms as "self-imposed exile" (Paula 273) and confess about in her memoir *Paula*. While, the period of exile witnessed the birth of her literary career as wrote her first novel, *The House of the Spirits* in 1982, it also resulted in her divorce in 1987. In the same year she met William C. Gordon, and married him in 1988 and moved to California, where she stayed first as a permanent resident till her citizenship in the year 2003. In 1991, her daughter Paula fell into coma. Unable to control the situation that she faced, she started writing a letter to her daughter that turned into the memoir, *Paula*. Allende starts *The Sum of Our Days*, from where she finished *Paula*. She narrates her life experiences both as an immigrant and a citizen of the United States, where she lives with her extended family in her memoir to her dead daughter, who plays the role of an invisible and muted audience.

In the present paper, we study how Allende adopts an interdependent notion of self and identity and encapsulates an extended self; which focuses on all the essential attributes of collectivism as opposed to the individualistic culture of California, where she currently resides as an official citizen. The paper will also examine how she adopts a multicultural identity and the various advantages and limitations of this cultural hybridity, by studying its impact on the other characters in the memoir.

Martin and Nakayama comment that, "All multicultural people may feel as if they live in cultural margins, struggling with two sets of cultural realities: not completely part of the dominant culture but not an outsider, either. This is evident in the memoir as Allende constructs an interdependent notion of identity focussing on the collectivist culture of Chile, while she lives in California.

Triandis et al in the essay, "Individualism and Collectivism: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Self-Ingroup Relationships" comment that, "An essential attribute of collectivist cultures is that individuals may be induced to subordinate their personal goals to the goals of some

collective, which is usually a stable ingroup (e.g., family, band, tribe), and much of the behaviour of individuals may concern goals that are consistent with the goals of this ingroup” (324). Like Allende, most of the members of Allende’s tribe come from societies with collectivist cultures. In her memoir, Allende cites various example of such subordination by all the members of her tribe. The most evident one, where all members come to the new born Sabrina’s rescue, whose, single mother is a drug addict and cannot look after her. Everyone is ready to adopt her, even when they do not have the proper means and time to do so.

Further, Triandis et al comment that, “In collectivist cultures the relationship of the individual to the ingroup tends to be stable, and even when the ingroup makes highly costly demands the individual stays with it” (324). Similarly, Allende relations with her daughter in law Celia remains stable even when Celia declares that she is a lesbian and moves on to stay with her girlfriend, as a result of which, Allende’s son’s family is broken. Allende writes, “Nico and Celia’s divorce did not bring an end to things, because we were still mired in a swamp of constantly changing relationships, but we cut no ties” (TSOD 134).

Further, “In collectivist cultures the most important relationships are vertical (e.g., parent-child), whereas in individualist cultures the most important relationships are horizontal (e.g., spouse-spouse, friend- friend)” (Triandis et al 325). This is evident even in Allende’s case; her children are her most prized possessions. Allende intervenes in her son’s life, sometimes providing guidance and sometimes by finding suitable match for him. She also confesses that she only married Willie because, “If I wanted to be reunited with you [Paula] and Nico I would have to be a citizen, so I had no choice but to swallow my pride and suggest the idea of marriage to Willie” (TSOD 17). On another occasion, she even warns her husband when she says, “Don’t make me choose between my children and you! I warned on that occasion” (TSOD 17).

Further, Martin and Nakayama in their book describe six ethnocentric stages given by Milton Bennett (1993) focussing on “how individuals can develop an “ethnorelative” perspective based on their attitudes toward cultural difference” (203).The first stage involves, “the denial or ignoring of difference” (203). As Allende was not aware of the cultural codes of the United States, therefore, both in denial and ignorance, she started applying Chilean cultural codes. This is seen when she makes efforts that every members of her extended family, stayed together as a clan. In fact, she made arrangements for this. She tells, “We lived as a tribe, Chilean style; we were almost always together” (TSOD 77). She even gives explanations of her need for a tribe. She writes, “I think that my need to create and hold

together a family, more accurately, a small tribe, had been a part of me since my marriage when I was twenty years old, had grown stronger on leaving Chile— when my first husband and children reached Venezuela we had no friends or relatives... and was consolidated when I found myself an immigrant in the United states” (TSOD 172).

In the second stage, “people recognize difference but attach negative meaning to it” (Martin and Nakayama 203). Allende realization of these inherent differences comes through various instances in the memoir. The most evident being when she comments, “This country is a continent divided into parcels; it is impossible to measure the magnitude or variety of reactions because each state and each social, ethnic, or religious group is a nation within a nation, all beneath the broad umbrella of the United States, “the land of the free and the home of the brave” (TSOD 243). After having lost her daughter, Allende was in mourning, for her life became a standstill, while that year was also the year, where she had to undergo various struggles in her life. She describes them as, “That year of mourning, of too much work, of financial difficulties and problems with my stepchildren, was undermining the foundation of my relationship with Willie, there was too much chaos in our lives. I wasn’t adapting to the United States. I felt that my heart was growing cold, that it wasn’t worth the effort to keep on rowing against the current; the energy needed to keep us afloat was disproportionate” (TSOD 55).

In yet another instance, Willie suggests that Allende’s parents can come and stay in California, to which she replies, “but there isn’t enough money to buy in the the United States the comfort and company they enjoy in Chile. I am consoled by our separation when I think of my mother with her mustached painting instructor, her lady friends...happy in her home filled with relatives and friends. Here old people are left to themselves” (TSOD 131). Further, her preferences for living like tribe bring out the negativity she feels for the lifestyle in California, as she comments, “A tribe has its inconveniences, but also many advantages. I prefer it to a thousand times to the American dream of absolute individual freedom, which, though it may help in getting ahead in the world, bring with it alienation and loneliness” (TSOD 173)

The third stage takes place “when people minimize the effects of difference” (Martin and Nakayama 203). This is seen as Allende’s relationship with her husband Willie passes through various stages marked by cultural differences, language barriers, and differences in views, and of various adjustments each one had to undertake. Allende describes these as, “when we met we had little in common; we came from different backgrounds and we had to

invent a language —Spanglish—in order to understand each other. Past, culture, and customs separated us, as well as the inevitable problems of children in a family artificially glued together [Willie’s family], but by elbowing our way forward, we succeeded in opening the space that is indispensable for love” (TSOD 113). Both Willie and Allende’s view of their love can be seen as the outcome of their past circumstances. While, Willie feels that they have the ‘spiritual connection” (TSOD 16) Allende confesses that the only reason she married Willie was “for the matter of the visas” (TSOD 18). She says further that, “I had to act fast, because I was leaping from city to city on a crazed tour” (TSOD 16). This comes as Allende and Willie’s relationship is seen maturing in the novel. In the middle of the memoir Allende states that, “The two of us are bound together by our ideas, a similar way of looking at the world, camaraderie, loyalty, humor. We look after each other. We have the same schedule, we sometimes use the same toothbrush, and we like the same movies” (TSOD 95).

In the fourth stage, “people accept the notion of cultural difference” (Martin and Nakayama 203). Allende narrates an incident when her son and daughter-in-law Lori, who was born and brought up in the United States came up to her and told about her interference in their life was too much. Allende writes that, “The trauma nearly gave me a heart attack...My son was throwing me out of his life!” TSOD 170). Allende like always asked her parents assistance. She writes, “At first they didn’t understand very well what the problem was, since in Chilean families relations tend to be what I had imposed on Nico and Lori, but then they remembered that customs are different in the United States” (TSOD 171).

And, in the fifth stage people, “may change their own behavior to adapt to others” (Martin and Nakayama 203). Similarly, in the end of the memoir Allende is seen adapting to her circumstances, as she comments, “For the time I was a little girl, I had looked after myself... But now, I told Willie, all I wanted was to lay my head on his shoulder and beg him to take care of me, as it seems men do with women when they love them”(TSOD 300). Finally, the sixth and final stage is, “similar to Peter Adler’s (1974) notion of a “multicultural person.” where, this individual’s identity is not defined by a sense of belonging; rather, it is a new psychocultural form of consciousness” (203).

Thus, according to Markus and Nikayama, Allende’s relation with the United States is of a cultural hybridity, and such a relation, “may desire economic assimilation (via employment), linguistic integration (bilingualism), and social separation (marrying someone from the same group and socializing only with members of their own group), producing not the “melting pot” society where everyone was supposed to try to become the same, but rather a “salad”

society, where each group retains a distinctive flavor but blends together to make up one great society” (318), which can also be termed in the words of Ortiz as “transculturaltion” (qtd in Rosado 7).

Martin and Nakayama focus on Janet Bennett’s description of two kinds of multicultural individuals namely: “encapsulated marginals, who become trapped by their own marginality, and constructive marginals, who thrive in their marginality” (204). They add further that, “constructive marginal people thrive in their marginal existence... they recognize the tremendous challenges. They see themselves (rather than others) as choice makers. They recognize the significance of being “in between,” and they are able to make commitments within the relativistic framework. Even so, this identity is constantly being negotiated and explored” (204). Allende can then be termed as a constructive marginal, as she turns her situation onto the pages of her memoir in which she writes, “I learned to speak in public without panicking, to go through airports without getting lost, to survive on what a carry-on would hold, to whistle down a taxi, and to smile at people greeting me, even though my stomach hurt and my shoes were too tight. I don’t remember all the places I went, ... On planes, I wrote my mother by hand to tell her my adventures, but when I read the letters a decade later, it’s as if all that had happened to another person” (TSOD 110). Thus, in her memoir, she faced several challenges, and learned to adjust in all of them, while sustaining the notion that identity is fluid and dynamic.

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