
Sameness and Otherness – The Mechanics of Love and Devotion

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Abstract. The present paper focuses on foregrounding the subtle ways in which two traditional values – love and devotion – can be reactivated in contemporary writings in order to help engineering the reconstruction and restating of the concept of identity – be it individual, group, or national identity. The selection of texts is meant to illustrate the importance of different narratives, actions, and attitudes in the complex equation of defining one's sense of belonging in an internationalized world.

Key words: identity, belonging, love, devotion, sameness, otherness

Cultural Sameness

It is a fact that “most people think individualistically”(Hurd,1973: 5), being hardwired to maintaining their own self in a constant process of opposition and difference, inherently considering the presence of the Others as “the condition of life” (Morley, 2000: 265) within an increasingly tormented world in which individuals find it more and more difficult to face and solve their own identity status and issues, generated by the latter in terms of historical recognition, cultural practices and everyday routines. The impact of the dynamics of the variables related to inclusion versus exclusion, tolerance versus assimilation, acceptance versus accommodation is to be noticed in the ways in which individuals position their cultural selves in the larger context of social, political or spiritual transformations they go through

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via the mechanics of the contemporary society, so that their sense of belonging, their particular group identity to become visible, relevant, strong. Self-sentiments parallel cultural awareness in the intricate process of shaping, strengthening and asserting one's identity, personality and feeling of togetherness with one's own community and with the other members of a pluricultural society; it is a strong tendency that symbolizes the strife for the preservation of one's self as part of equal cultural values in a world where "no culture is superior to another" (West, 2005: 1) and where difference is positively acknowledged. Understanding one's culture and its defining features most often leads to reinforcing that special feeling people experience when realizing the importance of belonging to a specific group, community, nation which grant their beliefs and behaviours to be the very foundation for their present worldviews and perspectives. The sense of belonging, that strong connectedness to a cultural, spatial, professional community, can often be regarded as an expression of a certain love, a love that manifests as an "an attitude that creates a particular type of environment in which both the lovers and those dependent on them can grow and develop" (Noller, 1996: 9&), a kind of love that commonly supports the primary group in an individual's life, which is family, a construction that differs „widely from society to society, especially in the size and nature of the residential unit (...), and with regard to the distribution of authority" (Hurd, 1973: 80). Families so often echo the structure and the changes of a specific social context through the relationships established between their members and through the way feelings of love and devotion are expressed and shared, considering, as Isabel Dalhousie does, that there are so many ways of identifying them, for instance, within a couple's life: "There are so many different sorts of love. And being in love has a lot of meanings. Affection. Tenderness. Infatuation. Obsession It's as if love were a disease with a whole range of symptoms" (McCall Smith, 2011: 44).

One's cultural self becomes effective in the establishing the nature of family ties, commonly expressed by the selection of memories one chooses to opt for, as remembrance implies a recognition of a past experience and its mobilization to serve one's present-day actions (see Van Nieuwenhuysen et al., 2012: 159) while also acknowledging a persistent feeling of attachment of which, for instance, little Bertie becomes aware when recollecting a much earlier memory of his life when

Daddy and I went off to Glasgow together'(...). He recalled how he had been happy in the train with his father, with the ploughed fields unfolding so quickly past the windows and the rocking motion of the

train upon its rails, and the hiss of the wind. And they had talked about friends, and how important friends were, and he had not wanted the journey to end (McCall Smith, 2006: 96).

The Scottish scenery, as a constituent of the local identity narratives, be it personal or social, is a good example of how geographical spaces can turn into important sites of closely connecting individuals to the experiences they may go through when feeling involved in a special environment to which they prove to be "an integral part", an environment that represents "a component of connecting one's self into the fabric of surrounding people, places, and things" (Schumann, C., 2016), an environment that gives them the sense of belonging, a basic need that collectively tightens identities. The theorists foreground the idea that there is a human thirst for belonging, manifest in the capacity to decode large systems of meanings, and present in the intricate entity of the human psyche, a need that makes one's sense of having a meaningful life considerably depend on their sense of belonging" to a smaller or larger group, as proven by the condition of being fans of the same football team, as Kieron Smith was:

People all supported Rangers. Their pitch was away up the road and along. On Saturday ye heard big big roars coming, Ohhhhh, Ohhhhh, so a goal was scored. Two boys of my class were going to see them, Terry and Ian. I went too. Terry's big cousin was taking us(...). There was all men walking and ye walked beside them (...). There was no a way in like that for the Glasgow Rangers. It was big big walls, cops on horses. Big railings and high gates. (...). It was the biggest biggest crowd, all men there and boys too and then cops and some were on their horses (Kelman, 2008: 50).

The uniqueness of one's personal identity is most often shaped and forged by the features that mark a person as a member of a community to which they belong, whose acceptance, attention and support they gain within the larger context of one's social identity. As "identity consists in being recognized as" (Behrenson, 2017: 118), attachment and commitment to an ethnic structure by collectively defining oneself, is common in a pluricultural environment, where ethnic belonging needs acknowledgement within a context of conflating social, historical, traditional, everyday experiences, in order to grant a solid and positive participation of that specific community to the general evolution of the complex demographic segment of a particular geographical place. This is how Ansara Ali's protagonist, Petr the Pole, acts in his position as a taxi driver in Chicago, namely, working for the best representation of

the group, respectively, the nation he loved:

From day one in the taxi business, Petr the Pole had shown in no uncertain terms what color of blood flowed through his veins. As his taxiing days increased in number, so did the slogans, signs, stickers, and symbols decorating the taxi. (...), increasing in number (...) and in size (...). Bites and pieces of Polish poetry everywhere (Ali, 1995: 46; 209).

Projecting One's Sense of Belonging

"Narratives of identities are constructed in social environments (...) as an identity category socially available; it is dependent on larger socio-political developments" (Behrenson, 2017: 106) and it mostly consists of tracking features through time and putting them together as traditions, habits, peculiar everyday practices which all become relevant in the greater complexity of human activities of our globalized society, where the difficulty of defining one's self and the community one is part of, increases with every relocation, as that, for example, experienced by Dalila Mwathi: at her arrival at the London Heathrow airport. While queuing at the immigration office, she gets disoriented when realizing the difference displayed by the people there, while sharing the commonality of their own humanness:

People were confusingly different from what she imagined. The hairstyles, different. The tatoos, different. Her eyes skip from one to new image to another, trying to absorb all the differences of every new thing. She wants to look at everything, tu turn around in her seat and examine every person, every surface, every item of clothing (...). Dalila glances down at the slimy texture on her fingers. It's blood and she realizes she has been picking the scab on her wrist (...). This she knows. Blood is no different (...). Blood is always the same (Donald, 2017: 7)."

The inevitable presence of the Other, of the fundamentally different one, labelled as being a member of an in- or out-group, is decided by theorists to be nowadays a necessary condition for any national/ist project as Otherness generates the very discourse that could posit any individual in a visible position (see Morley, 2000: 17), as easily observed by a transitory character, Uncle Digby, in Gurnah's book, *The Last Gift* (2011), a story of disrupted identities and broken promises; he explains to (H)Anna how important socialization and internationalization of ethnic practices can be in the contemporary world:

To keep communities together, host and stranger need to know each other, but we cannot know each other if we don't know ourselves. We who care for the welfare of immigrants work as hard as we know how to get the message across to encourage people to know. Those words *I am British* feel like a cold tragic blast to me sometimes (Gurnah, 2011: 118-9).

The representation of one's feeling of belonging to a certain national group becomes imperative mostly with migrants, those who have left their homes for various reasons and moved to a new place; they express their fondness for the motherland in an honest way, the authenticity of their sincerity being "determined by way of emotional connection" (Lambert et al., 2013), testifying a positive patriotism, such as Kelman's first-person narrator observes as a Scottish immigrant in the USA;

My 'hame' [Glasgow] (...). My faimly was my faimly and that land was my birthplace. This was undeniable. Being away for so long it just went out of my mind. How long had it been since I considered the word 'hame' in regard to myself? Other exiles think about hame much of the time, they get together and talk about the guid auld days and all that stuff. I could chat about the dear auld motherland as well it was aye with an uncommon sense of relief at no being there (...). Irish folk I meet, they dont bother reminiscing, they want to sit there in company of one another but they dont talk, they just like to be there and every now and then they turn around and nod their head and maybe later on they sing a song (Kelman, 2004: 16-7).

Picturing one's feeling of belonging to a national group emphasises the cohesion of its members as well as their love and devotion, their patriotism, their sense of attachment especially in cases when individuals live as immigrants far from their homes and families, and when they strive to preserve the memories of their former lives in a form of ethnic display as Piotr the Pole, Piotr Poland-ski, Peter Poland does when he decided to turn his taxi into a symbolic venue for any of his clients:

Petr's taxi was beginning to look like a stand. The front of this 'tank' bore the license of plate POLONIA (...). The problem was at the back. There, Petr had a different license plate. This one read POLSKA (...); everything else surrounding the taxi was also a mystery, and the deepest secrets were still inside (...), the decoration galore with the inside of a taxi looking fancier than a museum (Ali, 1995: 43).

Asserting his feelings for his motherland as it is, brings for the nostalgia that characterizes any immigrant separated from their own culture, from their homeland which in his case becomes something personal, strictly connected with his private life:

Petr the Pole's first day on the job, as a taxi driver, was stamped with his fervor. Before he put his key in the ignition and started the first shift of his career on the road, he had already put two signs on his dashboard to introduce himself to his customers and the world. 'POLAND FOREVER', read the first sign. And his was an announcement of his patriotism. 'KISS ME, I'M POLISH', read the second sign. This was more a case of ambition than patriotism(45).

Love for one's country, patriotism, is seen as covering a large number of meanings, eventually reaching "a basic consensus about the homeland, providing a reassurance function" (Le Huérou, 2015: 28), and constantly proving to be "something deeply rooted in the personal and intimate, something connected with mother, home, and childhood, with all kinds of references to the private sphere" (29), something that generates strong positive feelings, the conscious decision of commitment and devotion to the past and present of one's motherland. Lucky the Indian, Petr's co-worker, cannot stop admiring the latter's allegiance to his culture demonstrated by the way in which his cab gradually turned into a proper sanctuary to house remembrances of his own history:

The whole history of Poland and the whole mystery of Poland was before me [Lucky the Indian], researched, reviewed, experienced, assembled, and compacted in one taxi. A thousand years of Poland (...). The roof of Petr's taxi was (...) a bulletin board. Better still, it was like an art gallery (...). Every picture of every Polish hero and heroine could be found there. Unfortunately, all names and captions were written in Polish. There was one saving grace. In the center of them all was the Virgin Mary, Poland's Black Madonna (...). The inside walls of the taxi were no less colourful or decorated. Every space was pasted with something Polish. Even the windows were almost completely covered with pictures and stickers (...). Petr's dashboard was like a holy place. It looked like an altar dedicated to the Black Madonna and to 'her' Poland (Ali, 1995: 206).

The presence of the Other, featuring the condition of exile, certainly leads to a process of crystallization of one's personal identity as well as to the revaluation of one's degree of commitment and attachment to a

small or an extended group (family respectively, ethnic community or nation), to one's homeland, turned into a "repository of historic memories and associations, a place where our sages, saints, heroes lived, worked, prayed, fought" (Smith, 1991:9), as demonstrated by Petr the Pole and his taxi:

Pictures, posters, and plaques occupied every available square inch of the wall of glory. There were also handmade cards with poems, sayings, titles, and anything that flashed from the imagination of Petr the Pole (...). Sinkiewicz was on one of Petr's cards, second on a list of other names (...), he had won the Nobel Prize (...). Petr put a title on on his card – 'Polish Nobel Laureates': Marie Curie (Maria Skłodowska) 1902 Physics, 1911 Chemistry, Henryk Sienkiewicz 1905 *Quo Vadis*, Władysław Reymont 1924 *The Peasants*, Isaac Bashevis Singer 1978 Literature, Czesław Miłosz 1980 Literature, Lech Wałęsa 1983 Peace. (Ali, 1995: 208).

The contemporary world is facing a constant reconfiguration of cultural identities within the expanding process of migrant transnationalism, so that assessing one's belonging to a certain community within this multicultural environment foregrounds individuals' sense of attachment, of devotion and love, of cohesion, for that particular community, a necessary condition to prove an active participation to the general picture of world views and voices.

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