

**PAM HOUSTON'S "IN MY NEXT LIFE":  
TOWARDS A REDEFINITION OF THE SELF  
IN FEMALE-AUTHORED INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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According to the postmodernist de-centering process pointed out by Linda Hutcheon more than two decades ago, some marginalised voices have been rescued and fostered in contemporary Literature. This is the case of Pam Houston's "In My Next Life", the (auto)biographical story of two women –an Anglo-American and a Native American– who fall in love. My main concern consists in analysing the discourses this short story delves into, namely Indian autobiography and lesbianism. How does "In My Next Life" deal with marginal identity? How does it relate to Western (auto)biography, and link this genre with the heroine's Native American culture? And, why and how does it use Adrienne Rich's *lesbian continuum*? To put it briefly, Houston's short story constitutes an attempt to re-surface the marginal 'other', and reconcile it with tradition, to meet current political needs.

*Keywords:* Short fiction, Indian autobiography, autobiography by Indians, lesbian continuum, Pam Houston

"In My Next Life" (1994) tells the ephemeral but intense "love story" between a halfbreed woman, Abby, and a nameless young woman from New Jersey, who is also the narrator. The use of inverted commas to define both characters' bond is justified since, as the narrator points out, theirs is "a love story", though paradoxically they "were never lovers" (156). This apparent contradiction in terms is solved through the redefinition of love and identity in Adrienne Rich's *lesbian continuum* and North American native culture (that the story carries out). In line with the decentring poetics of (late-)postmodernism, the story re-negotiates the system of binary opposites which has always privileged the first half: "White/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, West/East, objectivity/subjectivity" (Hutcheon 1988: 62). "In My Next Life" is a tale on 'the other', particularly as concerns the way in which the narrator opens herself to Abby and her spiritual union with nature. It is a story of empathy towards and of vindication of Abby's silenced minority.

The narrator's self-exploration is aroused by Abby's love, more concretely after the pattern of Indian autobiographies. In Houston's text several layers of discrimination are crossed and re-defined. First of all, this is a short story, a traditionally minor genre. It turns, besides, around a lesbian love relationship. And finally, one of its heroines is a Native American. Despite the cultural confrontations between the heroines, "In My Next Life" constitutes a resolute attempt towards hybridity. In fact, it works as a bridge whereby lesbianism and Indian autobiography make Western and Indian cultures mutually understandable and fitting into one another.

Aitor Ibarrola explores three cases of autobiography by ethnic minorities in "Hybrid Identities: New Forms of Autobiography in Ethnic American Literature"

(1995): Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973), Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982), and Maxine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). He tries to analyse the complex phenomenon of autobiography when voiced by bi-cultural authors, those in the liminal territory between culture and acculturation, presence and exclusion. Maria Campbell is a native American who undergoes a "breathless pilgrimage ... in search of her identity" (Ibarrola 1995: 234). Richard Rodriguez's narrator embodies Hispanics' cultural alienation, so that "the more he becomes the English scholar he aspires to be, the farther he drifts away from his Hispanic roots" (237). For her part, Maxine Kingston solves her cultural dualism by defining herself as "a Chinese-American woman and as an artist" (238) in a highly experimental novel. Drawing on Marjorie Lightfoot, Ibarrola regards Kingston's story as "fictional [and with a] fragmented structure [that] artfully supports the myth/memory/experience fragmentation of content" (238).

As a revision of identity, and the boundaries between fictional and historiographic discourses, autobiography (and I would add memoir) constitutes a privileged territory for postmodernist poetics; hence, the increasing interest of critics and writers in the genre in the last decades, particularly when dealing with marginalised identities. Karl Weintraub (1982), Albert Stone (1982), Robert Sayre (1994), or Homi Bhaba (1994) initiated the revision of the genre from the viewpoint of Native American literature. More recently, Laura Marcus's *Auto/biographical Discourse: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (1998) and Jan Campbell's *Temporalities: Auto/biography in a Post Modern Age* (2001) have followed their lead; the former exploring epistemological concepts such as subject, history, and fiction in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century autobiographies, whereas the latter does the same with postmodernist texts. As Linda Anderson points out, the autobiography has also been a scenario for feminist debate, "precisely because it demonstrates that there are many ways of writing the subject" (2001: 87). From the 1970s onwards, lesbian autobiography has become a challenging genre, profoundly critical with the *status quo*. The genre has questioned itself, opening its scope to non-white lower-class lesbians (Soenser 2002: 66). Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Border-lands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) epitomize the process, introducing black and Indian lesbianism in the agenda. As Soenser points out, "in the 1990s, lesbian autobiography has been shaped both by poststructuralism and queer theory ... and by the sex wars of the 1980s, which saw the upsurge of specifically erotic, as opposed to political, definitions of lesbianism" (2002: 66). "In My Next Life" is the product of this changing climate of vindication of identity and desire.

Belén Martín analyses the two main varieties or subgenres of autobiography by North American halfbreed/Indian women (1995). Drawing on Arnold Kuprat, she points out that "Indian autobiographies are compositely produced by an Indian and a white, such as Mary Crow Dog's *Lakota Women* (1991) and autobiographies by Indians [are] individually written [by an Indian woman], like Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973)" (1995: 79). "In My Next Life" belongs to the first subgenre –the Indian autobiography–, being the product of the collaboration between an Indian woman and her white friend.

Kuprat's taxonomy may be useful at first sight. In fact, despite the Indian *component* and setting of the story, it is the Western culture of the narrator that eventually prevails. The whites assume the role of narrators in Indian autobiographies and that of publishers and editors in autobiographies by Indians. As a matter of fact, autobiography was originally a Western (literary) genre which was only lately introduced into Indian culture. To put it shortly, these (sub)genres are the product of the unequal confrontation between the white invader and Indian culture: "Constituted as a genre of writing by the principle of original, bicultural, composite composition, Indian

autobiographies are not a traditional form among Native peoples but the consequence of contact with the white invader-settlers, and the product of a limited collaboration with them" (Martín 1995: 79).

The mixture of an originally Western genre with Indian content is highly problematic. (Auto)biography is a priori based on the liberal humanist concept of subject (Belsey 1985: 8), inexistent in the Indian culture, *except within and subordinated to the community*. In this light, "Kuprat regards this communal sense of self as one of the most distinctive features of Indian societies, in opposition to the 'egocentric individualism of the Euro-American ideologies'" (in Martín 1995: 80).

The bi-culturalism of Indian autobiographies is the arena where halfbreed women must reconcile their original (communal) Indian culture, which *may* discriminate them for their gender, with their invaders' (individualistic) culture, which discriminates them both because of their gender and race. In this cross-cultural context of multiple discrimination and exclusion, women suffer a three-staged process of acculturation –submission and integration, internalized violence, and self-definition (Martín 1995: 82-83)–, as Gretchen Bataille shows in Bobbie Lee's *Bobby Lee: Indian Rebel*. In a first phase, Indian women must accept Western values to be properly integrated within a 'superior' culture. On the second stage, their integration is 'reaffirmed' through violence. Once they become conscious of their cultural degradation, they decide to re-define themselves by returning to their Indian roots.

These three steps in Indian women's acculturation process fit "In My Next Life". Abby is integrated in Western culture by compulsory mimesis and submission. Like any white girl, she went to school (160), and to university afterwards: "She had advanced degrees in botany, biology and art history" (160). Moreover, she was, and still is, a victim of patriarchal violence: as a child, she was frequently raped by her stepfather (163). As an adult, her boyfriend Roy is a potential abuser since he is into drugs and alcohol: "We [Abby and the narrator] were both involved with unavailable men, one by drugs, one by alcohol, both by nature" (158). The last stage, self-definition, coincides with the moment when the story is being written down. Once Abby has been submitted to and integrated in(to) white patriarchy, and has been violently abused by it, she decides to "come out" as an Indian woman (though brought up in a white *culture*). Abby's story follows a stereotyped pattern. Like Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, after being involved in drugs and prostitution, she discovers her Indian roots as both a way out and a way back. Although it is parallel to the Western *Bildungsroman*, Abby's self-definition relies paradoxically on the dissolution (or rather reformulation and reintegration) of the self. In other words, the self is subordinated to a communal self. These women's return to their cultural roots constitutes a whole rebirth out of regained rituals, legends, proverbs, songs, and memory (Martín 1995: 85). Thus, Abby performs her reappraisal of her ancestors' heritage, or at least this is how it is recalled by the narrator:

She sang the song to each of the four horizons, and danced the same steps to each with the gray bird's feathers in her hair. The words elude me now, half-English, half-navajo. It was about light, I remember, and red dirt, and joy. When she finished dancing and turned back toward the Eastern horizon the full moon rose right into her hands. (166)

Abby's re-appropriation of Indian rites permits a re-definition of her self as indissoluble from nature. Although mediated by Western education and language, it is her ancestors' nature-bound culture that eventually shapes Abby's identity. She practises shamanic healing (159), and her discourse is scattered with references to Indian magic such as the

“power animal”, “which serves as the patient’s interpreter [and] guardian” (159). Even on the verge of death, she looks through the window (170) as if trying to escape the prison-cell of her surrogate culture.

Through Abby, the narrator learns how Indian culture does not make a difference between reality and fiction, at least the way Western culture does: “The Indians don’t believe in imagination, she told me. They don’t even have a word for it. Once you understand that fully this all becomes much easier” (160). This ontological blurring of boundaries triggers off the clash between the narrator and the heroine. Abby’s reliance on ancestral tradition and magic differs from the artificial imagination the narrator finds in “cartoons, ... Disneyland and special effects” (170). For Indians, the process is easier. They do not know reality, but merge with it instead, through rituals that, for the narrator, constitute merely an aesthetic pleasure (166). Their viewpoints definitely break apart when Abby falls ill. Her majesty when in communion with nature contrasts with her insignificance when trapped by “the medical machines she was hooked to” (166). Thus, despite her love for Abby, the narrator cannot help mistrust her spirituality: “I even want to believe in her magic, but she’s ignoring hundreds of years of medical research” (168).

“In My Next Life” is not only a territory of cultural confrontation, but especially one of reconciliation. When the narrator can no longer believe in Abby’s faith in magic healing, she asks her gay friend Thomas: “How can I make leap?” (169). He gives the clue to their whole story:

“You love Abby”, he said.

“Yeah”, I said. The bright leaves against the dark evergreens in the moonlight were like a hallucination.

“And she loves you”, he said.

“Yeah”, I said.

“That’s”, he said, “how you make the leap”. (169)

Love is thus the bridge the story proposes when cultural boundaries are too strict to be broken. It solves the narrator’s well-meaning attempts to understand a culture which, for her, is often close to the hippy movement she lived in the sixties (165). Their love also moderates the narrator’s irony on Abby’s uncertain Indian origins (159) and the failure of her shamanic “power animal” to heal. Adrienne Rich’s theory on lesbian love is particularly helpful to understand the characters’ bond (1993). According to Rich, “lesbianism” is innate to all women, but hindered by patriarchy. Essentialist and constructivist debates apart, the love story of Houston’s heroines is rather difficult. Frequently forced to have heterosexual relations with violent men, they eventually make up a bond which escapes easy classification. Theirs is a love affair without sex (156) which is replaced by feelings such as mothering and nurturance. The mainstream priority of the visual gives way to tactile pleasure, as when the narrator remembers Abby “holding and touching and hugging” (156), or when they “touched at the shoulders, the knees, and the hips” (164). Mothering and nurturing each other, Houston’s heroines vindicate a female sisterhood which transcends physical relations and recalls Rich’s *lesbian continuum*:

If we consider the possibility that all women –from the infant suckling at her mother’s breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother’s milk smell in her own, to two women, like Virginia Wolf’s Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory, to the

woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women— exist on a *lesbian continuum*, whether we identify ourselves as lesbians or not. (Rich 1993: 240)

Rich's words inspire not only the heroines' love story, but also Abby's utopia of a lesbian community: "There are so many things more interesting to do than fall in love. ... If Rob and I split up, I want to live in a house full of women, old women and young women, teenagers and babies. Doesn't falling in love sound boring compared to that?" (162). The *lesbian continuum* ultimately constitutes Abby's bridge between Western – via feminism– and Indian cultures. Both the tradition she claims from her ancestors and the all-female one she devises *replace individual identities by an undifferentiated whole where Abby's self dissolves*. In its turn, the vindictory discourse of the story solves the controversy between the *a priori* normativism of autobiography, adapting the genre to the needs of (so-far) marginalised identities and communities.

The paper started with a reference to the current decentring process, which has allowed historically silenced voices to come out and speak. Doubly marginalised due to her gender and race, Abby becomes the speaker of an alternative (hi)story. Through her, "In My Next Life" revises "otherness" and celebrates hybridity. Instead of "fixed individual subjects", the story endorses "a flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, and so on" (Hutcheon 1988: 59). Likewise, it adopts a politically-inflected stance by blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, nostalgia of silenced traditions/voices and hope in a utopian *lesbian continuum*. On rehabilitating the marginalised and deconstructing master narratives "In My Next Life" does not reject the canon and its discourses. On the contrary, these new voices contest but also enrich exhausted genres –like autobiography– to meet new political needs.

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