

# The Misinterpreted Female Artist: An Analysis of Frida Kahlo's Art

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## ABSTRACT

Latin American art has a special place in the history of art. Because of its various cultures and ethnicities, Latin America has developed a distinctive artistic style, and many of its artists in the second half of the 20th century made distinctive contributions to art world (Bethell, 1998). Local artists at this time preferred to draw inspiration from local history, ethnicity, and geography and to express their authentic selves in their works rather than copying the theories of Western European art schools. Frida Kahlo is a female painter who must be mentioned in the history of Latin American art. People are becoming increasingly interested in Latin American artworks due to globalization. When studying her works, many scholars examine the meaning behind them from a feminist perspective. This essay aims to analyze Frida Kahlo's artwork from the Charles Taylor's self-identity theory. Frida's initial intention may not be to focus on political influence and social significance as advocated by feminist artists, but she is more inclined to use her works to reflect her own personal experience. This essay argues that Frida is not only not a feminist but also likely a female artist who has made a compromise with patriarchal society based on her behavior.

## KEYWORDS

Artwork analysis; Feminism; Self-identity

## 1 Introduction

Identity, which now is commonly known as role identity, is the multiple roles that people inevitably define one another in society (Linton, 1936). This is a descriptive identification; for example, a woman can be both a wife and a nurse at the same time, and a man can be both a father and a firefighter. Due to the fact that some roles cannot be altered by an individual's subjective willpower, such an identity cannot set the subject apart from others. Charles Taylor proposed a new theoretical framework on self-identity, i. e., he considered self-identity as the subject's view of oneself within the framework provided by the outside world and their own perceptions (Taylor, 1989). It is a narrative identity, such as someone who perceives himself as a good-oriented person, or who perceives himself as a person who is antisocial. Narrative identity argues that a person is influenced by his or her surroundings, personal experiences, and maintains his or her own affirmation and perception of self-identity through narratives.

Regarding the development of the concept of self-identity, various scholars have diverse points of view. Descartes, a proponent of essentialism, stressed the significance and absoluteness of personal consciousness in his well-known adage, "I think, therefore I am." which means that man is the subject who determines all existence, and that self-identity is an idealistic vision of awareness (Descartes, 1637). On the other hand, Foucault, a representative of structuralism, considered the self as third-person self, the modern self is seen as a product of external structural discipline, and the individual can only passively accept a defined identity that is limited in nature (Foucault, 1972). However, Charles Taylor's theory of self-identity emphasizes that the identity of the self is constructed through the individual's narrative, and that the formation of self-identity is dependent on numerous factors related to the "roots of the self" but is also produced in conjunction with the objective social existence. That is, the self is constructed by both society and the individual (Taylor, 1989). Self-identity can be seen as the narrative that people use to explain and understand their lives, and the narrative contains the penetration of the narrative subject's consciousness.

Charles Taylor's theory is reflected in both literary studies and sociological studies. Katra A. Byram's *Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator: Reckoning with Past and Present in German Literature* uses Charles Taylor's theory of self-identity to analyze the use of narrative identity in nineteenth and twentieth-century German literature and to propose a new dynamic observer form, which enables the narrator's identity to be spoken of in terms of this new form when stories about others become a way of linking past and present experiences (Byram, 2015); Patrick B. Inman and James L. Peacock apply Charles Taylor's theory of self-identity to ethnic studies. In *Identity Matters: Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict*, they describe and analyze the patterns of behavior used by social groups around the world to maintain their identities, based on the insights of Charles Taylor's self-identity and other-identity theories (Peacock, 2007).

Self-identity, as perceived by Charles Taylor, is the inescapable framework for the individual to make judgments and think from the first persona of the subject. The formation of self-identity, while influenced by external factors such as

history and culture, the linguistic context in which one lives, and the environment in which one lives, is always guided by the subject's narrative. Each person's narrative is different. In the case of artists, they narrate their life experiences in the form of artworks, which acts as a window to their self-identity.

## 2 Painting Analysis

Latin American art plays a unique role in the world art scene, with its strong dynamism and its creative inspiration. Among them, Frida Kahlo has been influential in Latin America, and her works have inspired various people in different ways.

When analyzing Frida's paintings, some scholars have interpreted feminist perspectives. *The Broken Column* (1944), Frida's masterpiece, is a self-portrait in which the viewer can visually sense the artist's physical suffering from her tearful face, nail-studded skin, and fractured upper torso. The steel column in the middle of the painting, according to Liza Bakewell, symbolizes both the penetration of pain and the penetration of contemporary patriarchal society. As a result, Bakewell contends that Frida defies conventional aesthetic rules and embodies the image of women, which is with a defiant spirit, from a feminist perspective. Frida rejects conventional notions of gender and femininity by portraying a woman in a loose men's suit with short hair in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). This is a departure from the femininity she usually showed herself as. The feminist slogan "The Personal is Political", according to Laura Mulvey, is what motivates Frida's political activism. She claims that by masculinizing the appearance of the women in this painting, Frida escapes from her inner suffering and shows her focus on female self-awareness. This masculinization serves as a metaphor for the rejection of the traditional image of femininity (Mulvey, 1989). Mulvey appears to believe Frida's works that are viewed as masculine actually represent feminism's attempts to eliminate the distinction between men and women and establish a new gender hierarchy.

This essay, however, contends that Frida Kahlo may not be a feminist artist and that her paintings do not exhibit feminist connotations; rather, it is possible that she is merely expressing what she perceives to be her authentic self.

### 2.1 An Artist Who Embodies Her Personal Experience through Her Arts

According to Charles Taylor's theory, we perceive our emotions through articulation. This essay claims that artists can utilize painting as a tool for emotional expression to convey their personal experience, in addition to providing direct personal stories through diaries and biographies.

That's exactly what Frida does in her paintings, using suffering as the basis for several metaphors. Once she said: "I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration" (Herrera, 1983). Due to spinal issues, Frida was forced to stop teaching in the middle of the 1940s. She then spent her days at home. This is when she produced her well-known work *The Broken Column* (1944), which, despite the physical trauma, bravely depicts how she battled the awful reality of pain and sorrow. She heartbreakingly chopped her long hair short and painted *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) in the 1940s after learning that her husband had cheated on her, on the painting she wrote: "Look, if I loved you, it was because of your hair. Now that you are short haired, I don't love you anymore." It demonstrates how, after realizing she has been betrayed, Frida transfers her suppressed feelings onto the female in the picture, who is also experiencing a horrible circumstance. Through her artworks, Frida exposes her psychological and physical scars, allowing the audience to experience these traumas firsthand. We can infer from the self-narrative and actual events mentioned above that Frida originally intended for her works to serve as a means of autobiography, serving as a record of her own experiences.

Unusual features like bloodied human organs and exposed wounds become strong visual symbols in Frida's art. This led some people to think that Frida was a surrealist painter when she was just using her imagination at a period when modern art was in vogue. For this, Frida replied: "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." (Herrera, 1983). The fact that Frida does not identify with any particular school of painting serves as more evidence that her art more accurately reflects her life's meaning than any other.

### 2.2 A Woman Who Subordinated to the Patriarchy

This essay argues that, despite the fact that many academics view Frida as a feminist artist, she was likely a woman who was prepared to choose compromise in a patriarchal society. Judging from Frida's performance, she had a high admiration for her husband Diego. In the early stages of their relationship, she dressed up in Diego's favorite Tehuana costumes just to please him; she began to paint his favorite things to gain his approval; and after the marriage, she stopped painting and played the role of "young wife of a celebrity" for several months. (Herrera, 1983). The artist's performance makes it clear that Frida views Diego as inferior to her. Her performance shows that she views Diego, a man,

as the center. From the family's perspective, it is submissive and discursive; from the woman's perspective, she is voluntarily in a subordinate and vulnerable position to the male. These behaviors don't fit the feminist idea of "gender equality".

In 1935, Diego developed an affair with Frida's sister. Even so, Frida still wanted to be with Diego. During their separation, she used an almost pleading tone to gain Diego's affirmation: "From the beginning, I have loved you with all my heart, more than I loved myself. You may not love me in the same way, but you still love me anyway, don't you?" (Herrera, 1983). In the same year, Frida read in the news about a husband who had stabbed his wife twelve times and had smugly justified it by saying, "But I just gave her a few small nips!" The compassionate Frida recreated the image from the news and painted *A Few Small Nips* (1935). Despite the painting's fun title, the sight it shows is horrifying: a naked woman with several stab wounds laying on a bed, her blood all over, even on the frame, as the murderer stands by silently and still holds a sharp knife in his hand. In line with the reality that Diego always justifies his infidelity without being guilty, Frida depicts the murderer as Diego, who stands casually in the painting with a casual expression. Meanwhile, Frida has long been like the woman in the painting, covered in sores and covered in blood, reflecting Diego's cruelty and ruthlessness in the relationship as well as the pain and suffering that Frida experiences.

It is obvious from the picture that Frida is being ruthlessly destroyed, yet she appears to make no more effort other than to endure this anguish and loneliness alone, to put her thoughts onto the canvas, to express them heavily and silently. Therefore, Frida's act most likely depicts her accommodation to both life and patriarchal society. She sees Diego as an essential component of her life, and she depends on Diego to validate and fulfill some of her wants in order to feel worthy. The situation for Frida is passive if she was not reliant on Diego. The artist needs Diego in several aspects throughout her life, whether it is for monetary support or emotional support.

Without delving into Frida's life and the foundations of her works, is it easy to misinterpret Frida's distinctive visual feminist tendency in her artwork as feminism rather than self-expression. However, this essay argues that Frida did not manifest a clear feminist tendency: First, Frida's numerous handwritten letters and official biographies show that she never identified herself as a feminist; Second, it is evident from Frida's behavior that she was in an inferior position to men: Frida was aware of Diego's background and abilities, and she showed great admiration for him before they got engaged. Following her marriage, when she learned of Diego's betrayal, Frida did not emphasize her female identity and ideas like a real feminist and fight to better her circumstances. She doesn't become fully detached from her spouse; instead, she willingly submits to him. Although Frida's work looks feminine, she only uses her own experiences as the inspiration for her works, using art as a means of expressing her feelings and experiences. In other words, Frida is only an artist who reflects her true self.

### 3 Conclusion

As was previously indicated, this paper takes a distinct stance from that of many researchers who believe Frida Kahlo was a feminist. Frida's pioneering, strongly feminine, and South American aesthetics are evident in her paintings, but this does not imply that her works contain feminist characteristics. The core of Charles Taylor's theory of self-identity, our concern for existential issues or the meaning of life from the perspective of the self, is confirmed by this analysis of Frida Kahlo's works in light of her life experiences and personal narratives. Frida's art is found to be a means of reflecting on her experiences. Through the depiction of blood and sorrow in her artwork, Frida more accurately depicts herself as a suffering woman who has been torn apart by life than as a feminist with a rebellious spirit seeking gender equality.

In contrast, many women over the world have the same issue of being constrained by the patriarchal society, and making concessions will not alter how women are perceived or their position in society. Women need to do feminist acts that have societal influence if they want to break this impasse. Like Frida Kahlo, Mónica Mayer is a Mexican female artist. She has been active in feminist activism: founding the first feminist art group in Mexico and participating in feminist organizations around the world. Her art installation *El Tendadero* (1978), bravely exposing the sexual harassment and verbal violence which are commonly happened to women in public. Pola Weiss is another feminist artist from Mexico who, as a supporter of Mexican video art, makes the feminist video piece *Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad* (1978) to raise the public awareness of the marginalization of indigenous women in Mexico City and the problems in their communities. While the two artists previously mentioned actively fought for feminist ideals in order to change the status quo of women, Frida only expressed her own pain and helplessness about women's experiences through her paintings and made no significant efforts to change her own situation of being victimized by men.

The act of judging and evaluating the valuable components of oneself and one's surroundings through identification, is actually falls under the category of classification. In fact, the problem of assigning artists to a particular genre occurs frequently not just in the field of art history research but also in everyday life, where people are used to defining and labeling others with a variety of extremely subjective "labels." Isn't Charles Taylor's theory of self-identity, in which people use self-narratives to express how they see themselves, the act of removing the "labels" that others have placed on them

while simultaneously putting new "labels" on themselves? It's crucial to avoid limiting ourselves to these pre-existing "labels" if we wish to have limitless options and recognize and know our genuine selves. Likewise, we should be conscious and discerning when understanding things, and thoroughly research each one to avoid stereotyping or categorizing them. It is important for "labels" to be flexible and diverse.

Frida Kahlo was "labelled" as a feminist by many scholars in the history. But now, unintentionally, Frida Kahlo is again being "labelled" to be an independent artist, not being a feminist, according to this paper. This makes me wonder if, in addition to "labeling", experts have actually paid attention to and thought about the substance of something when interpreting or analyzing it in the context of art history research, and whether they can find a better and more in-depth way for analysis.

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