

## REFLECTIONS OF CULTURAL CONCEPTION OF SELF IN ZADIE SMITH'S THE AUTOGRAPH MAN

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### ABSTRACT

Antropologists think that culture deeply affects people and shapes selves. It is a known fact that cultural themes have a great influence on the conceptions of self, emotion, child development, mental disorders and frames of individuals' cognitive development. For J. Greg Miller, cultural content should be analyzed as an essential influence on the patterning of psychological structures and processes. So, there is a close relationship between the self and cultural discourses. Michel Foucault points out that cultural forms shape subjectivity in a socially constructed manner. Individuals having diverse inheritances due to culture are in the center of identity problems when a person's ethnicity is categorized.

In *The Autograph Man*, Alex-Li Tandem, buys and sells autographs for a living. Collecting the signatures of famous people is his favourite occupation. As the son of a Chinese father and Jewish mother he has a mixed blood and a complex inheritance. He lives alone because his father is dead and his mother has moved to the country. He does not mind his girlfriend of ten years, Esther, any more. He is always drunken and does not refrain from smoking pot with his childhood friend Adam in his own life's complexity. In the novel difference between Jewish and goyish things is emphasized, and naturally it creates a perceptual field for the concepts of subjectivity and self. Thus, Zadie Smith tries to describe Alex-Li's place in pop culture both as an autograph man clinging to a life full of irony and also a character having complex inheritance and she gives an opportunity to the researchers to study the *Autograph Man* in terms of the importance of cultural content in the formation of one's social identity with references to cultural themes in a Foucauldian approach.

**Key Words:** cultural content, subjectivity, self, identity, Alex-Li, Foucault, care of self.

## REFLECTIONS OF CULTURAL CONCEPTION OF SELF IN ZADIE SMITH'S THE AUTOGRAPH MAN

Contemporary scholars are investigating the nature of the self in radically new ways. Investigation of the self has, of course, been a major philosophical and religious concern through both the East and the West. They have often placed a major emphasis on analyzing the nature of the self. with a few significant exceptions, they have dismissed or devalued the role of culture in their specific formulation of the self (Allen, 1997, p. IX, X.). The self is a part of system of inscription, exchange,

perspective and value-attribution. It is a product of and is shaped by the dominant symbolic that and leaks the energies of accumulation, loss and practice through affectivity, dispositions and characteristics. The self, as Megill de Foucault (as cited in Skeggs, 2004) so brilliantly demonstrated, a category that does not pre-exist the discourses that constitute it (p.19).

There is a clear relationship between culture and self. "Culture, conceptualized as a repository of meanings, symbols, provides a variety of conceptions that people use as symbolic resources to construct their own self-conceptions: To the extent that self is not completely definable ostensibly, individual and collective efforts to make sense of selfhood must rely on symbols, which are necessarily supplied by culture" (Sedikes and Brewer, 2001, p. 277). That is a contextually varied and dynamic connection between culture and self and it needs a theoretical framework showing the cultural dynamics of self-conceptions in a way to explain how culture and self shape each other in time and space (Sedikes and Brewer, 2001, p.277). Foucault analyzes self's relation to itself and he gives importance to self technologies that is effective in man's formation of his own identity.

Everybody is advised about his or her identity and tries to follow the way about how he or she should be. The following orders like 'just be yourself, keep it real, be true to yourself, have self-esteem or follow your own path' are the discourses in order to shape one's own self. Indeed, people know to mask or to conform themselves and they sometimes behave in a way the others expect them and neglect themselves (Taylor, 2010, p. 127).

Anthropologists think that culture deeply affects people and shapes selves. People of versatile cultures remarkably carry the different signs of the self of the others. Man's individual experience is influenced by these signs and people's cognition, motivation and emotion change for the reason that cultures have clear conceptions of individuality. Through the self individuals discover their inner reality and gain their interdependence from others (Cooper and Pervin, 1998, p. 464). "Some understanding and some representation of the private inner aspects of the self may well be universal, but many other aspects of the self may be quite specific to particular cultures. People are capable of believing in an astonishing variety of things about themselves" (Cooper and Pervin, p.466).

It is a known fact that cultural themes have a great influence both on individuals' patterns of cognition and on the conceptions of self, emotion, child development, mental disorders (Holland, 2003, p. 22). J. Greg Miller (as cited in Holland, 2003) perceives cultural content to be an essential influence on the patterning of psychological structures and processes (p.22). So, it can be said that there is a close relationship between the self and cultural discourses. As a thinker Foucault (as cited in Vickery and Costello) points out that cultural forms are social in origin and they exist in subjectivity in a socially constructed manner (p.147). Due to this point, individuals who carry diverse inheritances have identity problems socially and psychologically.

In Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*, Alex-Li Tandem, the son of a Chinese father and Jewish mother, is the autograph man of the title. His subjectivity strikes a sliding pose because he has been under the influence of a Jewish mother and Chinese father. Theoretically, it is a known fact that man's relation with himself is the relation with his own self. As man is the ethical subject of his actions he

tries to determine how this relationship should be by the help of self. It is a reality that one's family, his or her surrounding and characteristics have important effects in his/her relationship with his/her own self. Foucault (as cited in Best and Kellner, 1998) explains his self pragmatics in an ethical perspective and tries to mould his own life like a work of art and analyzes subjectivity in this concept (p.85). His focus is on questions of subjectivity and the shaping and regulation of identities on a regulational self, where intersubjectivity becomes central – a self that acknowledges and is constituted by difference and the other. Foucault's critic opens up possibilities for us to sort out how we might see, understand and, in turn, negotiate our subjectivity and the power relations in our world (Besley and Peter, 2007, p.20).

In the novel, Alex-Li has a better relationship with his father, Li-Jin rather than with his mother, Sarah. His mother is so far from sense of motherhood that she can't be included in the reciprocal relationship between her husband and her son. She is Jewish and Smith brings out Jewishness in her novel. It is noticed that the Jews have a contemptuous attitude towards others. For instance, Alex-Li is also Jewish and is ashamed of his father's some Chinese gestures like greeting (Smith, 2002, p.21). Correspondingly, Li-Jin begins not to enjoy unending Jewish rituals which have not been so important for him before (Smith, 2002, p.7). However, Alex-Li describes himself to be an autograph man. Joseph Klein, his childhood friend had a hobby for autographs when they were teenagers (Smith, 2002, p.25). Joseph shows Alex-Li his files full of autographs belonging to famous persons. One of his most important files is the file related with Jewishness. Montjoy, where Alex-Li lives, is popular with its Jewish population. All these things form the relationship of Alex-Li with himself.

Alex-Li sees himself to be an autograph man and his occupation has three parts including collecting, trading and verification (Smith, 2002, p.54). Alex-Li is the man whom people pay to flick through a selection of aging paper. So, he gives his opinion as to "what is real and what is forged" (Smith, 2002, p.59) in their collection. "It is a skill knowing the difference between the notorious Sydney Greenstreet secretarial and the curves and loops of the real thing. It is a skill distinguishing the robotic scratch of a Kennedy Autopen from the real presidential signature. Knowing when to lie about these matters, and how much, is an art" (Smith, 2002, p.59).

This situation composes an important part of Alex-Li's subjectivity. Foucault doesn't see subjectivity as an existing thing. He proposes that it was invented by dominant systems of social organization of the world and puts the human population into fixed categories. For him, subjectivity separates the good from the bad, the honest from the criminal in dualities. People in each category are managed and regulated differently in a system of rationalized thought. So, subjectivity is the way people are led to think about themselves and have the opportunity to present themselves in the correct way (Mansfield, 2000, p.10). With reference to this perspective, Alex learns the subtleties of his occupation during his life and becomes the best among his colleagues in time and constitutes his own subjectivity. For achieving this he never neglects caring himself. So he achieves his subjectivity by caring himself step by step during his life span.

Alex gives importance to collecting autographs more than everything during his life. For instance, Esther, his girlfriend of a ten years, is always neglected by him. She is a negro and he cheats her for a white girl a few times. Alex-Li drinks too much, and smokes too much pot with his childhood

friend Adam Jacobs. He is not a person who puts himself at ease. He compares himself with Catholics culturally and he finds himself more stressful than them; and so he causes an accident while he is with Esther in his car and Esther has to undergo an operation. In her operation, Alex-Li prefers to go to auction house. Auctions are more valuable than all other things in Alex-Li's life. This is the natural result of modern life for him. He compares today's culture with 1750's culture and he imagines to be a person in those times and notices the value of the change (Smith, 2002, p.58). Alex-Li to be a person who rewards the changing during the time. As Foucault embraces changing the identity forms it can be set forth that Alex-Li displays the key concepts of the subject's caring self with his attitudes towards people, things and incidents in his life..

According to Foucault there are four major types of technologies which are used by people in order to develop their knowledge about themselves. These technologies hardly ever function separately. He explains these technologies as in the following way:

a-Technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform or manipulate things; b- Technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; c- technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination; an objectivizing of the subject; d-technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality ( Foucault, 1988, p.18).

Foucault suggests that self technologies help people modify themselves (Foucault, 1988, p.20). For Alex-Li, caring himself is a real need: "He was still slightly thrilled by the idea of receiving post addressed to him and not to his mother" (Foucault, 1988, p.64). According to Foucault, man is the ethical subject of his own actions and this relationship determines how he will establish himself. Self's attitude toward ethical behavior, one's being aware of modes of ethical responsibilities imposed on him and the means for transforming ourselves in order to become normal subjects are the characteristics of this situation so that it requires caring yourself. Foucault calls caring yourself or improving self *asceticism* or *practice of self* (Foucault, 2000, p.205-207).

Foucault analyzes the importance of asceticism in the context of ethical formation and its aspects of what he calls *the relationship to oneself* in the History of Sexuality in the following categories: "a- the ethical substance (that is, the part of oneself that concerns moral conduct, the material with which ethics works; ) b- the mode of subjection (that is, the mode that encourages or people on to relate to their moral obligations such as revelation or divine law;) c- Asceticism or self-forming, 4-the telos or goal (that is, the end towards which the ethics moves, the end result of formation)" (Vincent, 2002, p. 545-546). Alex-Li does not refrain from altruism on his work in the process of self transformation. There are different comparisons in collecting autographs for him. "Autograph collecting, as Alex-Li is not the first to observe, shares much with woman-chasing and God-fearing" (Smith, 2002, p.65). For him a famous actress should not sign everything she or he can

her hands on because she can be ordinary. In this concept, Alex-Li is in love with the 1940's movie actress Kitty Alexander and adores her. Kity's autograph has been one of the most-sought in the "Most autograph men have given up the hope of ever getting one. Not Alex-Li. Every week since he fourteen, Alex-Li has sent a letter to Kity, to an address in Manhattan, her fan-club address. Never has he received a response. Not once. Only a drawer full of form letters, signed by the fan-club president. And therefore, it takes Alex-Li a long moment, therefore, to remember why, how, by what means, a blank postcard with Kity's autograph clearly written upon it has come to be pinned, like Luther's declaration, to the back of his own front door. Carefully, he unpins it and holds it up to the It is exquisite. It is real. Or he is not Alex-Li Tandem" (Smith, 2002, p. 66).

In this situation, Alex-Li is sure it is a real autograph and hasn't been imitated by himself however he is accused of being a forger. In fact, he behaves honestly in moral terms in order to transform a qualified autograph man. It is clear his action refers to the fact that he has practised Foucault's self practice as an ethical subject since he was fifteen years old. In Plato's *Alcibiades* Foucault firstly points to the relationship between 'care for the self' and education and then he is impressed by the relationship between 'one's care for himself' and 'knowing himself'. In this concept, 'caring yourself' as a theme not only includes caring for the body but also caring for the soul because the soul composes the self (Foucault, 1999, p.47). Thus, it is seen that Alex has educated his soul by trying to behave honestly in every step of his career and it is understood that he knows himself ethically despite his friends' false prejudices about him in Foucauldian terms.

In the novel, Jewishness is presented as a marked subject. Alex-Li's best friends are Jewish. Rubinfine is a rabbi and Adam is really a pious Jew. Alex-Li describes himself to be a Jew but he isn't pious as his friends are. He also has little fetishes peculiar to people who are not Jewish as a result of cultural interaction. Rubinfine and his rabbi friends talk about Kabala, which is the secret light in the Old Testament. However, Alex-Li just cares autographs and autograph houses. Moreover, Alex-Li has been writing a book on people who are not Jewish. As a manifestation of cultural interaction Alex-Li's complex inheritance prevents him from devoting himself to the things related with Jewishness although it is continually emphasized as a religious identity in the novel. Alex-Li is also identified to be a trader rather than a collector and it seems that he has an occupational identity, too. When Haham Green questions his occupation Alex-Li answers in the following words: "I'm a trader. It is not a really personal thing. I prefer to think of it as a business" (Smith, 2002, p.7). In this part, it is seen that Alex has tried to form his own life according to his own values as a subject. Foucault suggests that subjects can transform their own lives in the direction of the values which are important for them (Foucault, 2000, p. 219).

On the other hand, Rabbi Darwick questions Alex's Jewishness. When he learns that Alex's father is Chinese Darwick utters him in a secretly threateninig manner: "If you are not for us, you're against us!" (Smith, 2002, p. 76). Discriminating discourse powerfully appears in these two paralel situations. For Foucault (as cited in Stroizer, 2002) "there is no position outside discourse or power-knowledge" (p.57). In this concept, Alex's will to be an autograph man presents this identity a gift to him. For Alex-Li, Joseph has given up being an autograph man because of his father's

despite his sufficient qualities of being an autohtaph man. Alex-Li learns this business from Joseph he starts the trade at the age of fifteen and it becomes his business at the age of twenty.

Related with this situation Foucault emphasizes that his main purpose is to understand how human subject has entered into realities. He also explains that the subject holds a place in reality without any compulsion but it is included in this reality through the practices of self which is called *asceticism*. He explains the practice of self as the study of man on himself with a preoccupation to reach a definite mode of being, adding that it is not a moral suffering (Foucault, 2000, p. 222-223). Related with this concept, Alex-Li is so pleased with his job to be a Jewish autograph man who is not pious and is ready to experience miracles as a peaceful Chinese. It is a burden for him to join in the Judaic rituals. So, he opposes to the Jewish funeral traditions that will be practised for his father's burial ceremony and he finds all these things nonsense because his father is Chinese and not Jew. He takes this power from his subjectivity constructed during his whole life. Meanwhile, his sense of self develops consciously. Because "Self is that conscious thinking thing –whatever substance made up of (whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) –which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends" (Atkins, 2005, p.29). Foucault, who gives up searching modern period in 1980's, begins to search Greek, Roman and Christian moral values of pre-modern period and its sustainability, reveals how subjectivity is produced in power, knowledge and truth connected to discourse and practice in archeology and genealogy and he also aims at making a criticism of modernity's constitution of subjectivity in multi-dimensional perspectives (Best and Kelner, 1998, p. 83).

As a theorist of death of man, Foucault both reviews Enlightenment due to its contribution to present and he also focuses on the problem of subject which he refuses as he codes it to be a humanist formation. Even though he is interested in the history of subject's formation of knowledge relationship which means 'self's relation with itself' is emphasized in his posterior works. After Foucault gives up studying on domination technologies by which subjects are dominated and objectified through discourses and practices, he brings out self technologies created by individuals while they are composing their identities through the methods of ethic and self-construction. In this change, Foucault emphasizes subjectivity as his main concern (Best and Kelner, 1998, p.83).

In the period of practising his own self's choices Alex never gives up the will to find and meet Kity. Alex-Li's Kity Alexander file are full of letters written to Kity to tell her about herself. Unfortunately, it occurs that the letters are kept by Max Krause, Kity's menager. Alex-Li participates an autograph collecting fair in New York, where collections are exhibited and famous people sign photos. He goes there at all cost although his girl-frind Esther is about to undergo a serious cardiac operation. Alex tries to create his future by leaving everything that he has had up to that time. For instance, Alex-Li's relation with Esther doesn't have a priority when it is compared with autograph collecting and trade. If Kity's autographs are to be the case he forgets everything in his life. Nevertheless, Esther is the only real person in his life. He himself compares "real people (Esther, only her, always) with fantasy people (Kity, Anita, Boot, porn girls, shop girls, girl girls)" (Smith, 2002, p.

161). Despite this reality, Alex insists on communicating with Kity. Briefly, he prefers doing in order to actualize himself using self technologies in Foucauldian terms.

In Alex's adventure to meet Kity, a famous whore called Honey Smith has a key role. In the auction in New York Alex-Li meets Honey. Honey helps her to find Kity because she understands that he is a real fan of Kity Alexander. At last, they find Kity's house in which she lives with Max Krause. Kity is so excited to meet Alex-Li because she has had a chance to read Alex-Li's letters which were sent to Max when he was outside. Kity is so excited and adores Alex-Li. She likes his letters because they are about a living woman. Max hasn't shown the letters to Kity up to that time because he is envious of another person who knows her more than him. Alex-Li is so proud that he is together with both Kity and Honey, two famous women. He has achieved his purpose as the autograph man. He is with Kity Alexander and the other autograph men have never met her autographs. Alex-Li does not lose his hope to meet Kity one day, and thus he cares himself and his self. For Alexander Nhemas (2002), Foucault reached a new perspective about the possibilities that man has. He calls this situation 'care of self' (p. 316). Therefore, Alex is aware of the difference and he tries to shape and regulate his identity based on a relational self. In Foucauldian perspective of self, it is constituted by difference and the other (Foucault, 1988, p.20).

In Alex' life, becoming free is very important and something valuable. Accordingly, he tries to rescue Kity from the house where she stays with Max. For Alex-Li, It is like a prison in which Kity has to live and he persuades Kity to leave Max and come with him. This is because Max has tyrannized over Kity keeping her off everybody. Alex-Li opposes Max's selfishness and his greed to dominate Kity. Alex-Li's behavior is very ethical and valuable in Foucauldian terms as Foucault gives importance to technologies of self serving man's wish to improve himself and to become a unique person both physically and spiritually rather than power relations (Best and Kellner, 1998, p.83).

At this point, it is clear that Alex-Li is right because Max hasn't behaved honestly and he has never explained the real value of Kity's autograph to her not to lose his power and control on Kity. For a long time she has to think that her own autographs aren't valuable so she accepts Alex-Li's offer. Alex-Li sells Kity's old letters like an agency and they earn a lot of money, together. By this way they both become free. It is an action that is planned by Alex-Li and strikes everybody. Foucault indicates that his study on self is a freedom practice rather than a process of becoming free. For Foucault, it forms the core of ethic and it means to actify freedom by being thought, purposely (Foucault, 2000, p.227). However, it will begin a new kind of solitude for Alex-Li because he has reached his purpose to be a rich autograph man now. Hereafter, he has a place on the winning side not in the losing side any more in this new period of life.

## CONCLUSION

As a result, Alex-Li has been successful to be an autograph man and improved himself in occupation and gained a distinguished position culturally in life despite his sense of situation has changed. This is directly related with power and knowledge relationship in Foucauldian terms. For Foucault, if there is no knowledge man can't care for himself and manage his own life (Foucault,

p.227). His culturally mixed inheritance makes him more respectful to other people and adds his sense of self and sense of subjectivity a new perspective which makes him successful in his occupation. His intellectual and spiritual sense of change is originated from his care of self. In fact, subjects have transformed themselves and their lives through technologies of self including both physical and improvements in the point that they are able to reach their goal in Foucauldian perspective. Foucault says that everybody can have different subjectivity forms while they are forming themselves psychologically, socially and culturally (Luna, 2009, p.141).

As Foucault refuses essentialist emancipation models accepting them as a spiritual core waiting for alienation and being suppressed, Alex-Li's freedom can be defined as a kind of ethical practice on his self progress in the direction of care of self. Alex-Li prefers to be himself to be an autograph man and forms his subjectivity so as to transform both himself and Kity by the help of his own beliefs and values. Thus, they both have new identifications. Thereby, Zadie Smith revives Foucault's will (as cited in Hulür, 2009) that life should be constructed like a work of art by the representation of Alex-Li as a subject in her novel (p.459). Thus, Alex-Li cares his sense of self, improves himself culturally and he contributes to the continually recreation of life in this ethical process as the representative of sense of fluid in the Foucauldian terms in the Autograph Man.

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