

## THE EVOLUTION OF FRIDA KAHLO AS A POP CULTURAL ICON

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### **Abstract:**

*This study "The Evolution of Frida Kahlo as a Pop Icon", attempts to locate Frida Kahlo, the artist who enjoyed influence and power within the framework of the Mestizaje culture and to trace situations and emotions that attract the masses of Fridolatry in order to discover her many facets as a woman, artist, historical figure and inspiration. Her self-portraits as a starting point for wider ideas add humanity to her abstract ideas to reach us on an emotional level. Through the process of glocalization, she becomes Mexico's greatest artistic export, as a myriad of products is now available to buy with her instantly recognisable floral motifs, mono-brow and bright colours. She remains as an enigmatic figure who inspires young women, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community and is remembered as a survivor with a fighting spirit. Even though one discovers the commodification of both the painter and her paintings, the evolution of Fridolatry into Fridamania is a global phenomenon that transgresses disciplinary boundaries.*

**Key Words:** *Autobiography, Fantasy, Reality, Mexico.*

Frida Kahlo or Magdalena Frida Carmen Kahlo (1907-1954), the Mexican artist, political activist, a feminist and a global phenomenon fascinates and inspires people from all walks of life. Famous for her striking self-portraits and traditional vesture, her paintings occupied concepts of tragedy, sadness, femininity, and masculinity. Among many things, she was a bi-sexual lover, a broken would-have-been mother, an artist, a Communist, and a stunning vision of Mexico. Her iconic status throughout the world is unique and significant in its cross-cultural implications. Frida Kahlo, the artist gave us the most original and dramatic imagery of the 20th century, by painting herself bleeding, weeping, cracked open, transmuted her pain into art with remarkable frankness tempered by humour and fantasy. Kahlo's self-portraits are generally treated as her autobiography, with the artist as author who wrote her life story with paint and brushes. The ideology of Kahlo's art helps oneself observe paradigmatic gendered boundaries alternately inscribed, resisted, and transgressed in interpretations of the paintings.

A self-portrait is a reflection of the artist's mental happenings. In other words, self-portraits like autobiographies reflect and showcase the author's unconsciousness. Frida Kahlo's life and work are inseparable as her paintings are her autobiography. Kahlo, who lived a short but extraordinary life, experiments with Renaissance traditions of portraiture which capture the distinctiveness and the essence of personality of the individual in addition to physical resemblance which is thought-provoking. Her portraits which are material, mobile and semiotic objects are produced in a specific cultural and social time-space location. Her work, which seems to impinge on both Surrealist and Magical Realist worlds, brings together the purportedly disparate realms of fantasy and reality, mythology and rationality, and native Mexican votive art and European high art.

Frida Kahlo has evolved to be one of the most recognisable artists and an admired idol of study in a multitude of disciplines which includes art history, cultural studies, and women's or gender or sexuality studies. After life in the United States which she mockingly calls as Gringolandia, she heavily critiqued what she saw as the oppressive nature of American capitalism and imperialism that favoured the wealthy and kept down the working class. Just before her death, she attended a protest against U.S. intervention in Guatemala. Her paintings also reflected messages in favour of Marxism and Stalinism, which she hoped would inspire a similar state of nationalism and unity in her beloved home country. Even her last public appearance - her funeral - was marked by the Communist Party hammer and sickle flag that adorned her coffin.

An introspection of Frida's paintings, enlivens Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, where by deconstruction of a body of text is not just one, but can have several different meanings, and this theory can be applied to artwork irrespective of the artist because artwork itself can have more than one interpretation. Kahlo's work also proves contradictory for each viewer when it is analysed with the notion of Roland Barthes' "*Death of the Author*" in which the viewers own beliefs can change the author's original intentions. Here, the layering of meaning can only be derived from the viewer's point of view, as they will see the work and interpret it according to their own context, beliefs experiences or personal attributes. The viewer needs to be able to set apart the artist from the work to release the interpretation from any preconceived notion. Barthes believes that this is dependent on the spectator's experience of Kahlo's work, being a renowned artist, many people will be familiar with her history and will derive an interpretation from that in itself. However, many who are not familiar with the work will read it in an entirely different light.

Through her art, Kahlo attains control of herself when she portrays her emotions for psychological relief. This in Freudian terms, would be classified as a form of hysteria. Hysteria in current psychological terms is described as two categories, one being somatoform whereby mental problems such as stress can cause brain to feel physical pain. The second is dissociative which occurs when a person's psyche cannot handle a particularly traumatic event. However, in Freudian terms this hysteria created by the subconscious part of the mind, which was protecting the ego from the id. This is relevant when looking at Kahlo's work, as the subconscious creates this form of unreality which is evident in the paintings.

According to Carl Jung "The experience of the self is always a defeat of the ego(546)". Living closely with pain, loss, disappointment and death, Frida's life and art embody Jung's theory as her vivid portraits. The voice of her psyche assists one to discover how our unwanted agonies can be our greatest teachers. For Frida, life and death existed simultaneously. She understood the archetype of death as her guide and plunged into her internal world of life through her art. This descent allowed her to ultimately value her life, her culture, and her inner-directed creative expression. Frida's images penetrate into this paradox of existence, the dance of life and death. Invited into her world, she seduces us to confront similar issues in our own lives. Frida has become a mesmerizing archetypal image of the wounded and triumphant feminine, whose teacher is her indigenous culture and death. For Kahlo, this creative process was undoubtedly gendered. French feminist Helene Cixous' asserts in "*The Laugh of the Medusa*" that:

You can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes-any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible. (334)

Kahlo as an emblem of early feminism and female freedom like Cixous, connects female sexuality with the creative faculty. It is this creative faculty that is so essential for Kahlo's artistic production that was intimately tied to Kahlo's place and time. She is identified with Mexico throughout the world with her connection to the avant-garde, European movement of Surrealism. The artwork of Frida Kahlo depicts a stunning visual autobiography of color charged images, and spiritual and emotional contexts.

Her painted diary *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* by Frida displays colourful drawings in-between the textual lines, whereas her paintings often include inscriptions on the canvas. Kahlo reveals a distinctive capacity to express herself through verbalized images and visualized languages, where the interweaving of images and written text introduces an autobiographical voice rarely witnessed with such intensity. According to Smith and Watson, Kahlo's "daring self-making as self-chronicling" can be read as "an avant-garde gesture performed publicly that expands the modes of self-representation at a shifting matrix of visuality and textuality (3)". Her personalistic narrative is rooted not in the Italian Renaissance, the Beaux-Arts traditions of historical painting, or the school of Russian socialist-realism but in the European traditions of portraiture and in the Mexican tradition of religious folk art.

Kahlo began using the Mexican folkloric attire and the colourful Tehuana dress she's now known for, which is the traditional ensemble for the matriarchal Zapotec society and represents a culture of female leadership and independence. The dress can also be seen as a political statement which is Kahlo's sartorial endorsement of post-revolutionary ideology and as a guiding theme in her artworks which depicted her adoption of the native traditions of *retablo* and *ex-voto* paintings, the types of folk art that flourished in rustic Mexico after Independence. Her conscious and creative manipulation of indigenous material culture is one aspect that helps her retain her status as the most famous Latin American artist, who consciously or unconsciously used religious imagery as a leitmotif in her paintings, a fame that now places her in a commercial and Avant-garde league with the likes Van Gogh, Monet, and Picasso.

Frida's artworks represent a mixture of cultural and artistic traditions. As she sought her own roots, she also vocalized concern for her country as it struggled for an individualistic cultural identity. As she grew up after the Mexican Revolution, much of this identity was rooted in a profound reverence for the pre-Columbian Aztec civilization. As she rejected colonialism, Frida developed a strong sense of *Mexicanidad*, a term used to describe the admiration for indigenous Mexican culture and fascination with her *mestizaje* or mixed-ancestry heritage, which lent itself to locate Aztec symbols, such as monkeys, skulls, and flowers, in her paintings. This movement claimed to resist the mindset of cultural inferiority created by colonialism, and placed special significance on indigenous cultures. Frida allows her spectators to review culture as in the words of Raymond Williams, "the first denotes a whole way of life, the second refers to the arts and learning (3)".

The huge focus on the white woman's movement, tended to marginalize third world women (black and latina) as the 'other.' 'Othering' is the way members of one social group distance themselves from, or assert themselves over, another by construing the latter as being fundamentally different (the 'Other'), a term that is associated with discourses of colonialism. Edward Said, in his influential book *Orientalism*, wrote:

The development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity... whether Orient or Occident, France or Britain... involves establishing opposites and *otherness* whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from *us*. (332)

Frida Kahlo has become an international icon for the feminist movement as she wielded her source of power and personal identity through *Mexicanidad*. Though Kahlo did often play into the patriarchal society and convention, she actively defied the *machismo* culture within Mexico. She refused to trim her moustache, alter her unibrow or shave her armpits, keeping all the elements of masculinity visible in her appearance. Frida chopped off all her hair, which represents her power and sexuality in her relationships. Long, flowing hair is often associated with the very feminine, while short hair is looked upon as a more masculine representation. Distancing herself from the very feminine through her self-portraits, she

demonstrates that she is complete in order to rescue herself from her internal and external trauma. A total iconoclast, Frida's visceral painting style of fleshy fruits, torn arteries, tortured birthings, and imago-packed surrealist dreamscapes, terrify and mesmerize people. Her burning eyes in both self-portraiture and photographs make her hard to forget. Her pain seems to emanate from many wounds which are psychic, physical, and romantic.

Kahlo succeeds in representing her view of life on a grand scale of interconnectedness of all things. She is sexually liberalized and is not afraid to self-represent outside of her gender but often still adheres to very traditional Mexican norms of hegemony and patriarchal dominance. Her embrace of Mexico's indigenous roots and her dedication to social and political reform in Mexico, combined with her colorful clothing, colorful sex life, and bright paintings, have made her a favorite daughter of Mexico. The festival of Dia de los Muertos is rooted in Mexico's pre-Hispanic ancient past, as the Aztecs welcomed the return of their spirits to the land of the living once a year. The image of Frida Kahlo is an integral part of items sold in stores to be a part of the *ofrendas* as she now enjoys something of a cult status now among those of Mexican heritage.

Hayden Herrera's wildly successful 1983 biography of Kahlo, which led to a 2002 Hollywood movie starring Salma Hayek, frames the origin point of Fridaphilia. The book is a warmly and colorfully told narrative that traces the character and artistic evolution of Kahlo, who had a mischievous glint in her eye and was known and loved as much for her devilishness and pranks, as for her *alegría* and her innate love of life, which vanished the face of pain and suffering. In Herrera's book, the finesse of Frida's art is woven seamlessly into this picture, suggesting a symbiosis between her paintings and the events of her life, very much like the eventual film *Frida*, where live-action scenes often morph into the images of her paintings and vice versa to symbolize and explicate the distortion of reality. To Herrera her indomitable will had begun to triumph over despair and apathy. "My painting carries within it the message of pain. Painting completed by life. I lost three children... Paintings substituted for all of this. I believe that work is the best thing (148)".

Fridolatry, Fridamania or even Kahloism, has emerged to be a non-stop, cross cultural phenomenon since Kahlo's rediscovery as an artist. The cult of Frida Kahlo, and the widespread commercial use of her image, has taken an existence of its own. It is a timeless example of glocalization, the process of taking a product with local colour and distributing it outside its home territory, changing and even overlaying that product with values and tastes that reflect where it is being marketed. The glocalization of Kahlo, helps to identify the transcultural, psychoanalytic and feminist elements in her self-portraits which fuels the

Mestizaje's identity both as a painter and an icon of pop culture. Kahlo and her work not only belong to and mirror Mexico but she also belongs to a colossal, contemporary culture whose core concerns and values are emulated by Kahlo.

When women were expected to stay in line and support their husbands, she made waves for establishing a career and holding her own radical political convictions. A bracelet decorated with Kahlo's visage, worn by former British prime minister Theresa May during her catastrophic Conservative party speech, apparently to communicate that May, like Kahlo, is a woman of the people. In 2020, we can learn a thing or two about the way she led her life and it goes way beyond how to rock natural brows. Kahlo's performative identity was also originally explored in a number of pictures taken by some of the most famous twentieth-century photographers namely Edward Weston, Nickolas Muray, Imogen Cunningham, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Her face has run rampant through the retail world, licensed to clothing brands. This mass reproduction of her face might be comparable to Che Guevara posters and T-shirts in the 1980s. While artists have reproduced her striking style innumerable times, featuring linen skirts, thick eyebrows, and hair bedecked in flowers, she influences forever, eminent fashion designers like Riccardo Tisci for



Givenchy, Dolce & Gabbana, and Carolina Herrera and Jean Paul Gaultier.

Since her death in 1954, Kahlo has become a global feminist icon of resilience against adversity and patriarchal oppression and her open sexuality fashioned her as a cult figure in the queer community. Through her dress and her politics, Kahlo aligned herself with Central America's marginalized indigenous populations. Her rise to prominence in the popular imagination through the '80s and '90s and on has coincided with the ascendance of identity politics, the factors which appropriates her with the colours of a political idol for every wounded minority. After sixty years, Kahlo continues to be lionized for her impeccable selfie game, her iconic fashion sense, and her outspoken personality as she publicizes female experiences like miscarriage, pregnancy, menstruation, breastfeeding, infertility, sexual organs. The bi, disabled, moustachioed, monobrowed, cross-dressing woman of colour inspires people who treasure photographs of her and visited La Casa Azul or The Blue House, Kahlo's home in Mexico City. Through a blend of retrospective appreciation, conscious commodification, and political activism, Kahlo has developed into a poster girl for feminism, alternative identities or sexualities, and ethnic pride within the last thirty-odd years. It is Kahlo's artistic oeuvre that holds her power as a feminist through the indistinguishability of art from life. Frida continues to live in hearts through the reservoir of memorabilia and historical reconstruction and her place as a pivotal figure in modern art remains contested.

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