

Case Study

Gender, Creativity and Insanity: From an Anthropologist's Notebook

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| ABSTRACT |

This essay has emerged through my research engagements with life history as a research method in anthropology. It is based on the life events of a woman artist. The past few decades have brought an explosion of cultural criticisms and also explorations of women's creative expressions across cultures. Some of the queries addressed are, how do external forces shape the creativity of female artists. Also, how do creative women respond to such forces? Creative women, then, have a unique relationship to their cultural contexts, as well as to the creative genre to which they respond. This essay also delves into myths related to insanity and women. It discusses creativity, as a mode of engagement with rigid social structures.

Keywords

Life history; Women; Creativity; Body psyche; Insanity; Myths; Anthropology.

| BACKGROUND |

My first meeting with Laetitia took place in the summer of 2007. The occasion was an exhibition of water-colour and oil paintings by contemporary lesser-known painters. The artistes had displayed their art works in an open space. It was a mesmerizing carpet of art pieces that created a mosaic of colours around the luscious grassy boulevard strip next to the river Seine in central Paris. Laetitia had put on display eight pieces of paintings in oil. I noticed each painting had an exclusive name. Also, some of them were accompanied by Haiku (Japanese) genre of short poems in the French language. Most of her paintings had etchings, dabs and strokes in various shades of red and black. Her paintings stood apart from the rest in that exhibition because of short poems and a consistent presence of red and black colours. Her paintings were modestly priced. I bought two of her paintings. I wanted to know about her creative goals and her understanding of creativity. It meant an extended interaction. She handed me an olive green hand painted, laurel leaf shaped paper. It contained an asylum and private rehabilitation centre's address. It was located in the eastern outskirts of Paris. She lived there.

I bid adieu to her. Further meetings with her needed planning and forethought. It was not going to be a spontaneous meeting and conversation with her. It meant employing the bio-

graphical method approach to understand her life choices.

| LIFE HISTORY |

Biographical research is an exciting and fast moving field which seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives. What is extremely important is that how to provide interpretations of the accounts people give to their past, present and future. Sociologists too provide certain frames to work with biographical method as a research tool. A family of terms combines in different permutations to shape the biographical method such as life, self, experience, case, autobiography, story, narrative, narrator, fiction, history, personal history, oral history, case history, case study, writing presence, difference, life history, life story, self-story, and personal experience story.¹

Apparently, biographical research is part of the broader practice of qualitative research method. 'Qualitative researches tend to espouse an approach in which theory and empirical investigation are interwoven.'² Qualitative research has a number of features stemming from its philosophical and theoretical approach to the social world. It is imperative to remain close to the experiences and views of the researched. In the process including strands of narratives about Laetitia from people who have stood by her side over the years. It seemed necessary to weave together these threads

as well. So, in the present context the term life story seems more adequately suited. A life story can also contain certain elements in the narrative voiced by other people. Since, a life story, 'is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the narrator wants others to know of it. Usually, as a result of an open ended and guided conversations by the researcher. In the prevalent narrative practices a life story is a narration of one's entire experience of life as a whole highlighting the most important aspects of the self-representation of an individual life. Also, it may contain other people's voices added to build a narrative in a coherent structure. The voices which are added on mostly come from people who have also been a part of an individual's life story. It is not a new phenomenon but has a long development as a 'cultural practice'.

VALERIE |

Laetitia, was known to Valerie, a woman who was one of the organizers of the exhibition. In the subsequent weeks I went to meet Valerie. She worked in an antiques shop. I spoke about my research concerns and showed my interest in knowing more about Laetitia and sources of her creative outpourings.

The lady, called Valerie used to be Laetitia's junior in *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Toulouse, south of France. According to her, "Laetitia had put in efforts to carve out a professional niche, bread and butter, own a shelter and a fulfilling companionship with dignity for herself. She had strived throughout the decades of seventies and eighties. Since, midnineties she has moved to a private mental asylum. Things have been difficult for Laetitia. Possibly, she always looked for straight explanations from complex socio-cultural situations. Maybe, she was either ahead or behind of her times. Perhaps, she took things too seriously." Valerie seemed annoyed with the system, rigid structures alongside with the frozen thought processes. Her concern and doubts were moving. I had to speak to more people who knew Laetitia, closely. I sensed that I was getting into labyrinthine spirals of Laetitia's life through other people. Biographical research is a sensitive responsibility. There were obvious pitfalls, and I had to tread carefully.

Scholars who work with biography, life history/story have always felt that this genre of work is a selective work, 'Memories are often seen as a major path to this selection and life stories also become 'memory works'. Certain aspects or events of a person's life assume more importance than other episodes. Therefore, in Laetitia's narrative, I have also worked with memories of her friend, colleague, companion and spouse. So, that a narrative structure could be developed. Thereupon, I looked for her description as recorded in the asylum where she lives. After having had accessed two kinds of sources I spoke to Laetitia at length in the third phase of my work.

I realized that although life stories 'dig down the past'. However, they also entail and omit certain prominent issues that are relevant for that person in recounting their life story.

In Laetitia's recital, the place she grew up, her immediate

surroundings, her bonding and affiliation with other women and men also her despair related to professional blockades and chagrining were prominent. However, few important strands in her life story have been added by others from the social world around her.

Moreover, an individual's life story narrative involves recollecting, re-discovering, along with the active processes of memorializing and constructing certain parts of social history, as well.

According, to sociologist Bourdieu, while working with a biography, "We also have to keep in mind that life stories are nested and enveloped in their, particular habitus their environment of assumption, social codes and languages through which they make sense."³ It is evident in Laetitia's life story. We have to keep these conditions in mind while trying to understand her stance and choices shaped by a set of circumstances. Besides, she is conscious of the personal choices she has selected. Episodes from her life are also about embodiment of profound emotions shaped by particular sets of social structure. There are visible and hidden social codes embedded in the structures. Embodiment is a relevant cultural practice in particular contexts. Those social codes also actively construct an individual's biographical narrative.

EMBODIMENT |

Anthropologist Csordas has addressed few similar issues around studying emotions and embodiment in a particular cultural context.⁴ He argues, that in a larger research framework of culture, cognition and self a paradigm of embodiment can be explored, because this framework explains how self is culturally constituted. In Laetitia's life story one sees various shades of fixed dispositions unfold. These dispositions express themselves through body language, political will, habits, ideas and mental attitudes. Nearly, all of these are culturally, socially conditioned and constructed.

LAETITIA |

I had met Laetitia for a conversation in November 2007. She spoke tentatively. In the course of conversation she surprised me with an admission. She had chosen by her own free will to live in a mental asylum. She said, "It's a simple logic, people do not appreciate or like me or my amicable, efforts. I do not like people, either. To protect myself from anger and repugnance.

I have chosen to live here. Though, I have had Epileptic fits since my teenage years. So far I have not been dangerously mad, a threat to society and people (smiled and laughed) No.. I am not. This place is my protective shell. I have studied myths, classical antiquity and paintings. To be an honest artist-one has to live with those ideas and those thoughts. That's not really possible out of these walls. I am not a truly a mad woman... I cherish my solitude.

We spoke about few other topics. Then, I left with this curve in Laetitia's narrative. My understanding about normalcy and insanity had shifted away like quick sand under my feet. I was reminded of the aphorism, 'Sometimes, madness is not an affirmation of power, but a product of powerlessness.'

Laetitia has lived in the asylum since 1997. Initially, she had been admitted there for the symptoms described as hysteria-epilepsy along with, Homophobia. Though, she is not necessarily violent towards people. However, occasionally displays phobic and self-effacing responses in certain set of situations. She paints on and off. She prefers to work in the garden and lawns for long hours. She listens to classical instrumental music of different genres. Sometimes, she chooses to go out or, meet visitors.

She had grown up in a Catholic family in the small town of Castres, in southern France. Her parents were from the teaching community in the local school. Eldest among four siblings Laetitia did not want to be an educator. She wanted to pursue several other ideas. She was interested in concepts and ideas which were not repetitive and structured. Her well wishers had cautioned her in no uncertain terms. They argued that a monotonous profession brought financial and social stability. However, Laetitia wanted to experiment with several kinds of social and cultural codes, though at her own pace. She was a woman of few words. Her companion was a young man called Bernard who understood her well enough. They had been into a decade long relationship. He divided his time looking after his father's bakery. Also, he worked in a printing press. Laetitia wanted to explore sources that could inspire her to create art. In the year 1972 she had applied to study painting in the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*, Toulouse. Her application was accepted. It was an established art school. This institute had influenced generations of painters since, 1680. Though, she did not have any major scholarship throughout her student years. Nonetheless, to support her studies she worked as a part time model for aspiring sculptors/painters. On the weekends she worked in a Spanish restaurant. It served economy meals to students and artists in that area. There were not many job offers as a sculptor or painter's model. Payments were irregular. It was erratic, therefore frustrating. Part time work as a sculpture or portrait model tired nerves and muscles. Each session brought terrible episodes of fatigue. It meant hours of sitting in a certain bodily posture. Nevertheless, she had continued with conviction. Since, she had apprehension towards conventional and pre-designed careers. Her parents were not enthusiastic about her choice of career as an aspiring painter. However, she was taciturn and unyielding, about her decision.

JEAN CLAUDE |

Laetitia used to frequently discuss and debate about the spirit of creativity by women and men. Jean Claude has been one among of her male friends and also a colleague. She would ask, 'Is there a marked difference between the two modes of creativity? If the differences are apparent does it affect material value of the art produced? In any case attributes of masculinity exists in women and feminine traits surface among men as, well. They may be in conflict with each other. Can't they exist in sporadic substitution or complimentary to each other. It is a complex process.

These were some of the discerning questions that engaged Laetitia's art production and cognition during years as a student in the painting school. Throughout, five years of her degree she continued with these queries and doubts. Furthermore, she contributed actively to several workshops and seminars. She had

delved deeply into these questions. Her teachers at the art school encouraged her to think and carry out trials through her work. Her friends and colleagues thought she was walking through a thick, lengthy and hazy path. Though, some foresaw at the end of her cognitive and creative stretch flashes of brilliance and innovation art waiting to be processed by her. Despite the fact remains, that her journey could get lonesome and morbid.

Additionally, the fear of looming seclusion and melancholia propelled the young artist for more experiments in work, life, ideas and interpersonal relationships. Several times it was noted by her friends and colleagues that uncertainty brought out the best innovation in her. Laetitia seemed like an illustration of all such incongruities. Likewise, they also felt that she did not have adequate structural and systems support to sustain her creative, gendered and cognitive experiments. It thwarted professional recognition and material achievements for her. This frosty realism began to sink in her during her mid life. However, Laetitia still paints and writes Haiku style poetry. It speaks of her pledge to question creativity and unyielding gendered codes that clasp the milieu around her, to the point of stifling and, extinction.

BERNARD |

Bernard had grown up in Alibi town close to Castres. He recounts with mixed emotions his decade long relationship with Laetitia. He spoke about her with nostalgia and a reconciled acceptance of her intricate situation. For him and Laetitia an important landmark was Goya museum. In her younger days Laetitia was remarkably, influenced by work of the famous painter Murillo. Bernard had an eye for bright colours and baroque illustrations. He used to work in the local printing press as a proofreader. He liked the sense of knowing art, paintings, museum and his closeness to Laetitia, then a budding artist. Even though, Bernard and Laetitia were not particularly religious but both of them were baptized, in this cathedral. This edifice and related local system of rites, customs and beliefs too had an intrinsic impact on the couple.

CREATIVE OUTPOURINGS |

Despite the fact that, professional pace did not build-up the way Laetitia had aspired. She had strived to paint women in all possible forms. She tried to paint them in pure sensual forms, or as girls, mothers, ladies in salon, friends, with lovers etc. Nonetheless, as her professional life moved ahead so did complexities in her artistic expressions grew. There were times for several weeks she could not work on the canvas. Somehow, only red and black colours inspired her. Her preoccupation with the two colours was interpreted as lack of imagination and creative vision by the art gallery experts and commissioning agents.

As a, rebuttal response for her work she argued with conviction, "black & red are the only two colours women know intimately. The colour of life forces is red (Eros) and the colour of death and annihilation is black (Thanatos). A mother's womb can be a closed chamber that simultaneously introduces life and death to a living being. The whole world is about life and death. In the middle of these two events there are less important affairs and

moments. These exist to link up other less important incidents in people's lives, represented by other colours. Other events are minor in comparison to life and death. A true artist also has to be a candid person. She or he has the freedom and imagination to say things sometimes, people do not want to address and listen. Though, an artist's freedom is cherished. Nonetheless, an inability to make real and basic changes in an oppressive situation is actually, depressive. That despair keeps pulling them down. It is a barrier for ingenuity and creativity."

DOWNSLIDE |

Gradually, Laetitia was being perceived as capricious and vain within professional circles. Such an attitude affected her social standing, work opportunities and finances, significantly. Bernard tried to pull through difficult times for more than a decade. In the meanwhile, Laetitia's medical condition grew from simple epilepsy to hysterical epileptic. She expressed her vexation through several forms of self-effacing affectations. Her behaviour was interpreted as an extension of other mental health complications.

Though, in her teenage years she had been diagnosed as an epileptic by the family physician. According, to her family chronicles there had been other women with epileptic history. Clinically, such women were not insane but they could not be entrusted with responsibilities and enduring hard work. The seizures could occur anytime and disturb vital matters, significantly. Child bearing was an important matter that could not be carried out smoothly by epileptic women. Bernard's submissive acceptance about their relationship also bemoaned the fact that they could not have children within the time span they had wanted. Later, medical interventions could not be resolved in their favour.

INSANITY MYTHS |

Laetitia's life story proposes intertwining of myth, allegory and a life story in a given sociocultural milieu. It can add up to deeper understanding of her habitus and conspicuous symbolism which surround her.

Since, the beginning of human history, epilepsy was perceived to have feminine underpinnings. The ancient Greeks attributed it to the annoyance of Goddess Artemis. She had the power of striking the mortals by making them epileptics. Myths of Artemis are complex and extensive. Since, her powers extend from heaven to hell. She has different names in the two realms.

In the heavens she is Selena the goddess of the moon. In the infernal world she is Hekate, the goddess of the souls of the dead. According to Greek, and later, according to Roman interpretations, epilepsy attacked those who had sinned against Selena and epileptics came to be known also as, 'lunatics.' The darker side of Hekate is also related to epilepsy. According to mythology, Hekate was kidnapped by the God of hell while collecting flowers & fruits. She fell inside the kingdom of shadows, i.e., in a state of unconsciousness. Later, she tried to go back to the earth. She ate fruits thus, broke the fast prescribed in hell. Consequently, as a punishment she was allowed to stay on earth only half a year. While, the

other half year she must stay in darkness, i.e., subject to epileptic illness. It is a punishment for her transgressions, noncompliance and free will. Nevertheless, Selena – the moon is also an eminent motherly figure. Since, she regulates the monthly rhythm of women's fertility and the seasonal rhythms of the earth's fertility. These are the two pillars of nature and nurturance upon which Mediterranean cultures rest.⁵

Parts of life history of Laetitia can also be read in the context of this myth. She has willingly adorned herself with shades of transgression and defiance. Subsequently, she has exposed herself to the curse of dwelling in the shadows and darkness for having rebelled and transgressed the established norms.

FEMINIST CONSTRUAL |

Feminist historians have addressed the flawed nature of the gendered perceptions of mental health. Leading edge perceptions of mental wellness is intrinsically linked to the social indicator of success, happiness and prosperity. Accepted and common sense reasoning works in a cyclical pattern. Gradually, this template begins to choke people with stigma, that works against them, consistently.

Feminist and clinical psychology Phyllis Chesler has looked at several of such sites and polemics.⁶ Thus far, feminists of different hues and slants have sought to understand whether madness is 'real' or simply another form of social control.⁷ Chesler has questioned repeatedly, whether those with mental problems were really just the victims of an oppressive (professional and patriarchal) forms of discourse or, otherwise.

Laetitia's life story is about the impasse and other such issues, related to the gendered nature of mental well-being. This approach is influenced by the existence of strongly held beliefs about what does it mean to call someone insane. Also, about the ways the mentally disturbed are treated. Several shades of feminist discourse emphasizes that more strands of women's experiential accounts need to be dissected and analysed. For the reason that, the dominant forms of historiography seem to be seeped with the practices that is, HIS-STORY. Frequently, history writing is, produced from a masculine and patriarchal standpoint.

Moreover, specifically, women are marked as insane who simply refuse to conform and obey the assertive cultural codes and norms. Such women are mostly, pawns for a repressive socio-cultural and political order. Furthermore, the way insanity is defined has been inherently sexist. Besides, living in a male dominated society places a unique strain upon woman's lives. In this scheme of things, madness may be a social product as well as a social construct. For example, in medieval European society hysteria patients were passive anti-patriarchal protesters whose symptoms were a symbolically encoded language. For several such women hysterical episodes were an occasion for coded communications.

Some French theorists also, believe that madness 'has been the historical label applied to female protest and revolution'. Also, one cannot ignore the fact that sometimes asylums are dumping ground for unwanted women.

Additionally, in the everyday life, ceaselessly, deep-rooted derogatory terms related to psychological health are heaped upon women. For the simple reason, that such women do not “listen” to the patriarchal reason, or do not surrender to the dominant thoughts structure. It is indeed hard to be categorised as an insane woman. Regardless, of the sociotemporal context any act of defiance by women against the rigid social and patriarchal codes could be pigeonholed, with the mental health categories. To be subjected to this kind of inequity is devious and self-effacing.

Yet, there are countless ways of non-compliance that open up various outlets and exit points. Several art forms, creative practices, writing are indeed worth giving a serious shot. Few crucial questions have emerged through delving into life stories of women. How has women’s experience of her body shaped creativity? How do creative women respond to social structures that impose harsh conventions and contexts on women’s identities? How are women’s body conduits for ideological messages? Undeniably, large questions. This essay revolves in its explorations of lesser known women artists with such queries.

Furthermore, we have to look into the fact that creative processes emerge from specific women, set in a given social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Subsequently, distinct visions and traditions come together. Chances are that expressive cultural forms can become politically charged because different actors have unequal chances to make their voices heard. The depiction of situations where cultures and positions blend makes both an analytical and a political statement. The cultural contexts in this essay may appear as dialogues or conversations rather than a simple ethnographic text.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through glimpses from a biographical narrative this essay has taken up women and creativity. It has done so with a view to shift the focus away only from the aesthetic realms. Instead to consider the ways in which creativity is more broadly implicated in gendered based discourse in everyday life. Moreover, it attempts to include shaping of the anthropological knowledge about gender, mental well-being and creativity.

The appeal of biographical research is that it explores diverse interpretive ways to understand individual accounts of life experience. Such narratives can be understood within a particular cultural and structural setting. In the process mapping major societal processes that are consistently formulated under way. Also, it raises queries around several junctures constituted by an individual’s life story narrative. If a biographical narrative constitutes a person by what she or he remembers, what about all that they do not remember but, they know. Or, there are parts, which they remember but, would prefer to forget. On the positive side the construction of self through narrative offers a certain vantage point. It is also a kind of freedom that enables people to creatively fashion themselves, remembering one thing and not another, changing the stories people tell themselves and to others about themselves.⁸

For numerous people life history narrative is a creative

construction. There is a point at which a person’s life and the stories he or she tells about it begin to merge. However, stories require interlocutors. The right to establish authoritative versions never rest solely with the individual telling of the story. Our memories are shaped in part by the narrative forms and conventions of our time, place and position.

As humans, we draw on our experience to shape narratives about our lives, but equally our narratives shape our identity and personality. People emerge from and as products of their stories about themselves as much as their stories emerge from their lives. Through acts of life story narrative they strive to render their lives in meaningful terms. However, it also cautions us towards obvious fissures. The perils lie in two directions—a fragmentary narrative and failure to produce an account of minimal coherence, or in the construction of an excessively determined narrative in which there is an over identification with a particular kind or a typical character. Moreover, personal memory and narratives are relentlessly connected to the social narrative. The self and the community are intertwined in the personal narrative. Besides, the self and the community are also the imagined and preferable constructed products of a continuous process.⁹

Though, such transmission between an individual, the social world and community is mediated at several points. Thus, internalised experiences of selfhood are linked to autobiographical or life story narratives. Therefore, these can be linked to forms of therapeutic intervention and theoretical formulation about the subject. Life history evokes certain epistemological queries regarding history, forms of sociality, selfhood, experience and identity. They have become explicit in anthropological theory, wherein ethnographic method and life history narrative have been base ground for cultural reproduction. Likewise, such an exercise brings in reification and amelioration of various cultural forms.

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For reasons of privacy names and identity markers have been changed with an agreement with all the people mentioned in this essay. It is part of the ethnographic work done for my PhD dissertation, EHESS.2004-2010.

NOTES

- Castres is a commune and capital in the Tarn department and Midi Pyrénées region in Southern France. It is located 49 km east of Toulouse.
- The Goya museum is an art museum located in Castres. It is named after the Spanish painter Francisco Goya. It has the largest collection of Spanish paintings with works by Goya, Zurbarain, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Ribera etc. The museum was originally established in 1840. It is particularly known for a collection of Baroque style of paintings. The popularity and success of the Baroque style was encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church.
- Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1617-1682) was a 17th century well known Spanish painter. He was best known for religion themed

works. Murillo had also produced a considerable number of paintings of contemporary women and children (Mother & child).

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