



**The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman:
A Re-citing of the Self**



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Research paper :

Life-writing or self-narration has been a longstanding practice in the history of mankind. As part of the humanist tradition, life narratives have served to centralize and subjectivize the individual, legitimizing the authority of the author to narrate lived experiences. Traditionally, only lives of eminent personalities were considered worthy of narration. In contemporary discourses, any life with its peculiar interconnections can be written into existence. What

makes a life "narratable" is not so much the uniqueness or greatness of experience as the discerning perception of the writer who narrates it. The very act of autobiography subjectivizes a life, however insignificant it might be, and is essentially an act of resistance towards cultural mechanisms of subjugation and marginalization.

The twentieth century literary arena of Australia witnessed the efflorescence of autobiographies by Australian Aboriginal writers, especially the women writers, giving powerful expression to their thoughts, feelings, and their reactions and responses to racial segregations. An Aborigine in Australia has to experience a cultural schizophrenia wherein he finds himself in a country that does not accept him as a human being; he has to struggle with his contradictory identities, that of an Aborigine living as a European. So, it is natural for the Australian Aboriginal writers to be preoccupied with racial issues, the sufferings, triumphs and aspirations of the oppressed, and the inhumanity of segregation. The autobiographical genre has proved to be the best medicine for the literary expression of the trials and tribulations of Australian Aboriginal psyche, reflecting the hopes and aspirations of an oppressed community. They deliberately use the autobiographical form as a forum for public protest against the white's racial discrimination, and as a means of communicating with his/her own identity and subjectivity as well as with that of his/her community and race.

If applied to the work of Isabel Flick's autobiography, Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman, Erikson's concept of the formation of identity, results in the analysis of her three identities: 1. Personal, 2. Racial, and 3. Social. The personal identities of Isabel Flick deal with her role as a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a member of her family and community. Racial identity refers to her role as an Australian Aborigine, and the discriminations she experienced on being member of a marginalized group.

However, at a large stage in life, she went further than just being comfortable as a coloured person; she realized the strengths of her race. Her social identity is the identity of becoming an accepted member of a predominant white society.

Isabel Flick utilises the tools of fiction in reconstructing herself and her fellow beings. The focus of her writing is not herself alone but the numerous dauntless black women and the archetypal self of a black woman, who for centuries were denied their existence. Flick, as an Australian Aboriginal, had a history to respect and a duty to discharge. Through her writing, Flick has presented the Aboriginal woman in a flesh and blood model. Flick's genius as a writer is her ability to recapture the texture of life and re-create the past in its own sounds. The life and work of Isabel Flick are fully entwined. She has structured her autobiography in such a way that each section shows the dispersed identity crisis of the Aborigines in Australia. She became a pure communicator of ideas and thoughts.

A close probe into Flick's autobiography reveals that the land she talks about refers to the interior self, and the journey she embarked on becomes a motif of self-discovery. It is very important for the protagonist to return to the past, and try and relate it to the present. In conformity with the form of the bildungsroman, Flick has to undertake a voyage from early and innocent childhood experiences, to an initiation into an underworld which threatens to blight her talent and alienate her from society, to a subsequent re-evaluation of self and society and finally, to a statement of her position on the world of people. How she maintains the inner core of her life is noteworthy. Scrutinizing the many painful experiences that Flick records, one gains an insight into her inner world. She has to recall her early years in order to find an authentic self. Her challenge is to find and establish an identity of her own-an autonomous existence that is purposeful and hopeful. Her narration alternates between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy that both records and alters the events of her life. Most of the events are

significant not just as highpoints of her traumatised experience but represent points of self-awareness; so much so, she appears honest in her portraiture of the self in the autobiography.

Isabel Flick seems to develop through various stages of self-awareness. She jumps in and out of jobs, all the while exploring her life's mission. She is not at all melodramatic or ashamed of her past experiences; rather it forms the buttress of her identity. She begins her journey of life as a servant of a white lady and enters into a wide variety of professions like cook, sweeper, etcetera; but she finally realizes that her mission in life is to become a community worker and a social activist.

Isabel Flick's narration of personal experiences involves the exploration and interpretation of the many roles she has had to play in life. Each role informs and transforms the other; and her identity emerges as a discursive formation of the dialectical relationship between the many roles. Her sexual identity which is initiated after the birth of her son, Ben, had further strengthened after she enters into a relationship with Ted Thorne. Flick's identities as a daughter, mother and wife are all part of her personal identity. There are many instances of racial discriminations as well that Flick and her community had to encounter. No matter how hard they had demanded their rights of access to public places as citizens, the shops and the pubs, the streets and the schools, are all closed to Aborigines on racial lines. There was certainly no chance of black kids then getting educated in schools. The Superintendent of Schools used to dampen the spirits of the eager coloured children by his insidious remarks that they could not rise against certain limits. At the hospitals they have had to line up there at Outpatients and pay the dollar before they could see the doctor; and often the doctors neglected those Aboriginal people. All these situations reveal the kind of segregation and hardships that the Aborigines had to undergo in the whites dominating Australia, which was in fact, the former's own native land.

The need to provide security and stability for her family and community, propels Isabel Flick to be on the look out for any opportunity that comes her way. She has to emerge as a person of self-esteem and that depends on how the world accepts her, and she succeeds in establishing her social identity by later joining various groups that work for the welfare of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Isabel Flick's work celebrates the quintessential Aboriginal woman, and serves as a powerful documentation on the intrinsic culture of the Aboriginals in Australia. Her work embodies universal truths, although what connects the tapestry is her own life presented in a powerful and simple language. Unlike male autobiographers who strive consciously for an irrepressible spirit, Isabel Flick is able to achieve it with the primal image of the continuity of life itself-birth, death, hope and wonder-rising beyond artificial conventions of race.

Isabel Flick assumes importance as she explores the time tested diversity of ideas, culture and aesthetics in Australian Aboriginal women's intellectual tradition. She provides new ways of understanding the multiple dimensions of collective Australian Aboriginal experience and its dialogic relationship to racism and marginalization. She reveals the Aboriginal woman's sense of identity through her own narrative. Hers is the critical voice which speaks of, and outlines an identity that is constituted in the experience of racism, marginalization, and struggle. She has reconstructed and reshaped social reality that helped her to survive in a system bent on denying freedom, equality, and beingness. It is an exploration into her life and experiences that illuminates the Australian Aboriginal woman's identity as black. The act of writing, for her, was an act of resistance which proclaimed her intellectual abilities and asserted her humaneness. Writing is a symbolic act of redefining in contrast to the dehumanising images of black women. It was also the culmination of her varied experiences of different

professions, as also an emancipatory act from the confines of racial discriminations. Sometimes it is the celebration of the human will, not just to survive in the face of adversity, but to conquer a space both for oneself and for her black sisters as well. It also proves that Isabel Flick, through her writing, shows what it means to be humane, to dream and to struggle for an identity in an aggressive and hostile world.

The crises in women's self-formation surface only when they break out from their silent spaces to question their sufferings and triumphs on the racial, social, political and personal levels. Through this autobiographical mode of narration Australian Aboriginal women have revolted against racism and the entire fabric of inequality, by asserting themselves and launching multiple assaults against their suffering. They have now chosen to break free from the shackles of racial discrimination and marginalization, which have more or less been thrust upon them over generations. How Aboriginal people make narratives of the past relates to the way they constitute themselves in the present, and those enunciative sites are never fixed. Each reciting is a re-citing of the self. Collectively they recall different moments in history, and constitute different socio-political sites of Aboriginality in the present. As Langton reminds us Aboriginality arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white people. Before the arrival of white invaders there was no Aboriginality in the sense that it is meant today. It arises from an intercultural dialogue and is constantly remade as relations between black and white Australians change (98-99).

In short, the ideals propagated by Isabel Flick serve to promote the will to stand for one's rights, and defend it for the betterment of the overall condition of Aboriginal community in Australia. In this regard, Flick's life, her problems of identity and survival strategies assume supreme significance in contemporary society. Her story infuses strength to resist exploitative and oppressive forces among the unprivileged, inspiring them to realize their full potential against

formidable opposition arising from the harsh realities of everyday life. In short, the auto/biography of Isabel Flick captures the different phases of her life and the formation of an identity that gives both meaning and purpose to her life. Through this confessional and autobiographical mode Flick has, in fact, actualised her own individual, racial and social pasts and beings, and that of the Aboriginal people in Australia, taking up in the process issues of identity, segregation and marginalization.

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