

## IDENTITY IN A. L. KENNEDY'S NOVEL *SO I AM GLAD* AND SHORT STORY *ORIGINAL BLISS*

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41 year old Alison Louise Kennedy publishing under the name of A. L. Kennedy possibly in the attempt to escape the gender label on her fiction is one of the most prominent contemporary Scottish, maybe even British, writers. Her work is a good example of both post- postmodernist and post-feminist literature as she belongs to the generation of writers who started their careers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the time when both post-modernism and feminism were losing their currency and fiction started to develop in all sorts of liberating and refreshing ways. In the case of writers like Kennedy whose Scottish background allows association of their writing with the discourse of post-colonialism this creative adventurousness is further linked with the rise and relative exhaustion of all the identity related writing modes in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> It is

maybe for this reason that subjectivity and/or identity in Kennedy's work comes across as evasive and intangible.

Although Kennedy's fiction defies all of the above mentioned theoretical and/or ideological clichés,<sup>2</sup> it is interesting to see how it indirectly engages with them all yet at the same time is slightly teasing them. The relation between postmodernist writing practices and women's fiction has been widely addressed. Lidia Curti, for example, accurately sums it up as follows: "Elements that are important in the shared discourse between feminism and post-modernism are the decline of a strong, steady, undivided subjectivity, the refusal of canonised forms, the opposition to a morality of consensus [...] the stress on the hidden and the marginal."<sup>3</sup> All of those elements are present in Kennedy's fiction. Subjectivity in her writing

<sup>1</sup> In the interview with Cristie Leigh March Kennedy testifies to this artistic liberty by saying that as opposed to Scottish writers just a few years older than her, such as James Kelman and Alasdair Gray, for example, she no longer felt obliged to write recognisably Scottish fiction set exclusively in Scotland and narrated in Scottish dialect. In the similar manner, she admits not feeling compelled to have an agenda as a female writer, which sets her apart from the female Scottish writers of the previous generation, such as Janice Galloway. Kennedy says: "Now it's easier. London publishers are saying, 'we

must have Scots.' And they don't really care who you are or what you write." (*Interview with A. L. Kennedy, Glasgow, March, 1999* by Cristie Leigh March, in *Edinburgh Review* 101, 1999, 109).

<sup>2</sup> M. Dunnigan, Sarah, 'Articulate Grace: the Fiction of A.L. Kennedy', in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (eds.), Edinburgh University Press, 2001, 144.

<sup>3</sup> Curti, Lidia, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation*, London: Macmillan Press, 1998, 2.

comes across as decentred and unstable. The best illustration of that is one of the characters in the novel *So I am Glad* which will later be analysed in more detail.<sup>4</sup> It is a strange presence – a combination of a contemporary man Martin who the protagonist Jennifer falls in love with, a ghost of the 17<sup>th</sup> century French writer and duellist Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac and, possibly, a part of Jennifer’s identity. Conversely, despite the apparent fluidity of identity, it is still coherent. Cyrano de Bergerac retains his 17<sup>th</sup> identity in his new life through his belief in the same things he believed in three hundred years ago and in abiding by the same principles. Feeling that he has been mistreated and humiliated by the local Glaswegian drug dealer who lured him into serious drug addiction he fights and kills him in a duel. Furthermore, as a writer who cannot write and a duellist who cannot fight for a living he feels compelled to find a new occupation which he is good at and which would have an aesthetically beneficial value to humanity. He thus turns to gardening. “I will be with flowers and make them grow,” he says.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he sufficiently fulfils the requirements of his new identity as Martin, enough for Jennifer to fall in love with him and for the rest of the household, except for one person, to never find out that he is not Martin. Furthermore, Kennedy’s narratives are always constructive of identity and her characters often if not always end up in a better, more stable position than the one they were in to start with. Jennifer develops a new integrity with herself and finds her own voice. Mrs. Brindle in *Original Bliss* leaves her violent husband.<sup>6</sup> Margaret in *Looking for*

*the Possible Dance* overcomes her inhibiting bond with her father and forms a mature relationship with Colin,<sup>7</sup> and Nathan in *Everything You Need* gives up his own interests for those of his daughter thus initiating her into writing and creativity thereby making their relationship as father and daughter meaningful.<sup>8</sup> Kennedy’s “refusal of canonised forms” lies in the narrative structure of both her short stories and novels, which undermines linearity to the point that it is impossible and unnecessary to restore the exact sequence of events. Conversely, although her narrative structure is deliberately convoluted, the stories always have all the main structural elements. Moreover, most of them are classical love stories with a kind of happy end. “The opposition to a morality of consensus” manifests itself in Kennedy’s exploration of deviant sexuality and her own conviction that “one of the greatest truths that [fiction] gives us is the humanity of those who do wrong, our vulnerability to their weaknesses, our imperfections and their ability to transform into horrors we would rather not recognise.”<sup>9</sup> This is to say that her writing focuses on the human condition of the wrongdoers underlining their similarity with and closeness to the readers. Nevertheless, although Kennedy often delves into morally corrupt minds, the way she does it – her refined style and extreme sensitivity – makes her writing the fiction of human compassion, the testimony of human suffering irrespective of how morally flawed the human being is. In fact, Kennedy goes even further and suggests that her average “wrongdoer” is

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *So I am Glad*, London: Vintage, 2004 (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, 2004 (1995), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *Original Bliss*, London: Vintage, 1998 (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *Looking for the Possible Dance*, London: Secker&Warburg, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *Everything You Need*, London: Vintage, 2002 (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *PEN Lecture*: Delivered at the Edinburgh Book Festival 2001, <http://www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/>

not an abstract outsider, a mere “other”, but any one of us. This in turn reveals the highly morally invested stand point of the author and the ethical character of her fiction, which nevertheless remains artistically sophisticated rather than dogmatic. “The stress on the hidden and the marginal” is especially prominent in Kennedy’s work and is reflected in her repertoire of characters such as the masochistic protagonist Jennifer of *So I am Glad*, the compulsive hardcore porn addict Edward E. Gluck in *Original Bliss*, several alcoholics, the most impressive example being the protagonist Hannah of Kennedy’s latest novel *Paradise*,<sup>10</sup> and a woman who buries her serial killer husband alive in the short story *Mixing with the Folks at Home* to mention but a few.<sup>11</sup>

Let us now look closely at how subjectivity and/or identity is played out in two of Kennedy’s longer works of prose – in the novel *So I am Glad* and the long short story *Original Bliss*. It is a particularly conducive problem in the context of post postmodern fiction. Firstly, it is the point on which the postmodernist, feminist and post-colonial perspectives interact by undertaking similar or different positions towards it. The former and the latter two, for example, take conflicting attitudes on subjectivity. The postmodernist perspective sees it as unstable and politically as well as ideologically passive, whereas the feminist view perceives it as having a clear agency and a strong transformative power.<sup>12</sup> In this respect

Kennedy’s fiction approaches the latter. Secondly, subjectivity and/or identity is the issue of overriding importance in Kennedy’s work, which might lead us to some useful observations not only regarding Kennedy’s fiction but also the interests of fiction at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Both *So I am Glad* and *Original Bliss* are structured as love stories and both can be called narratives of identity as they deal with major identity crises and their resolutions of the respective protagonists and/or the characters from whose point of view the stories are written. The novel *So I am Glad* is the protagonist Jennifer’s account of her love story with Martin/Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac written in the first person. By way of constructing the narrative of her and Cyrano de Bergerac, about them, she can be said to construct both his and her own textual identities. The figure of Cyrano de Bergerac who died three hundred years ago is catapulted back into life in Kennedy’s novel. He wakes up in a household that Jennifer shares with two other people and that happens to have a vacant room in which Cyrano de Bergerac finds himself. The household is expecting a new housemate who they are told is called Martin. As it happens, it is Savinien who moves in instead. This is how he recalls his first minutes in his new life: “It was you – you were talking about something. I could hear you through the floor. [...] I lay up there listening and you sounded happy and laughed. So there you are. That really would make you my mother, eh? The first woman I hear.”<sup>13</sup> In this way Jennifer becomes his symbolic “mother,” his first other, that is to say, the instance initiating him into life through her voice. When Jennifer first sees him, she

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *Paradise*, London : Jonathan Cape, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, A. L., *Now That You’re Back*, London: Vintage, 1995 (1994)

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, Paulina, ‘Jeanette Winterson : Lesbian/ Postmodern Fictions’, in: Neumeier, Beate (ed.), *Engendering Realism and Postmodernism : Contemporary Women Writers in Britain*, Postmodern Studies 32, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, 2004 (1995), 19–20.

says: “You must be Martin”, thus giving him a name, an identity that later on develops into that of Cyrano de Bergerac, but will continue to be explored and documented by Jennifer. She will retain this role of a “parent” for the rest of the narrative. She will be the one who takes him outside for the first time, thus introducing him to the complexities of the contemporary world. She will also be the one who will eventually accompany him back to France, to his roots, the place where he was born and died in his previous life and where he will vanish again.

In the case of *Original Bliss*, which is a third person narrative written from Mrs Brindle’s point of view, it is the famous psychologist who later becomes her friend and lover, Edward E. Gluck, who might be seen as creating a new identity for Mrs. Brindle. At the beginning of the story we see her in a deep identity crisis described in the text as “her surrender to the pointlessness inherent in ironing socks.”<sup>14</sup> As a way out of it she accidentally turns to Gluck’s voice that she hears on TV, which she keeps on as company throughout a sleepless night. In the morning she hears the same voice on the radio and this time takes note of the name of the voice’s owner. Later that day, she purchases a book written by the man whose voice she has been listening to. The narrator tells us that Mrs. Brindle does not believe in self-help books anymore as they have not proved to be effective. However, she is thinking of the prospect of reading this particular book in the following way: “She would be reading someone who really did know the mind: his own and other people’s. He understood things and she could be there in his book while he was understanding.”<sup>15</sup> This sentence is suggestive

of the structure of identity put forward in this short story and characteristic of many of Kennedy’s works. First of all, it implies a degree of influence one mind can exert on the other and the exchange between two or more people’s minds enabled by the medium of a text. This, in turn, is indicative of the impurity of identity and the overwhelmingly significant role of the other on anyone’s self. One cannot help but think here of Judith Butler’s and Diana Fuss’ theories of identity. They both suggest that the identity of the self is dependent on the other to such an extent that the distinction between the self and other is impossible to make. She writes: “Only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all.”<sup>16</sup> For Butler, the subject depends on the other and identifies with him/her to such a degree that it finally becomes coincidental with it although unaware of such a development. Similarly, Diana Fuss believes that a subject only becomes one by way of identifying with the other, whereby situating the other at the centre of the subject. Her theory of identity is summarized in the following statement: “Subjectivity is the name we might give to the place where I become other.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that Mrs. Brindle is looking forward to “being understood” by Gluck or by Gluck’s text whilst she is reading it suggests that she is offering herself to his interpretation and is therefore open to accept that interpretation of herself, her identity. She effectively agrees to become that new self, to adopt a new identity in a way. The narrator describes her experience of reading Gluck’s book as follows: “He personally assured her that she was the miracle which makes her.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, what Gluck ends

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, 1998 (1997), 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997, 196.

<sup>17</sup> Fuss, Diana, *Identification Papers*, New York, London: Routledge, 1995, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

up doing indirectly, via his text is entrusting Mrs Brindle with herself, which she would have been unable to achieve otherwise. As the story develops she becomes more and more aware of who she is and who she is not, of what she wants and what she does not want, and of what makes her happy and what does not. She develops a completely new and sophisticated self awareness. A similar dependence of one self on the other is present between Jennifer and Cyrano, whereby Cyrano/Martin says to Jennifer: "I feel constantly precarious and I need the weight of your attention to secure me and allow me to be justified."<sup>19</sup> This is to say that his existence is impossible without the justification of somebody's attention. One does not exist unless his/her existence is reflected in the existence of the other.

It is similarly significant that in Kennedy's fiction such dependence is never single sided. At the centre of most her stories is a couple, both members of which exert transformative influence on one another. When Mrs Brindle seeks refuge in Gluck's apartment in her flight from her husband's violence, he funnily puts her in the spare room in which he also keeps his pornographic films and magazines. Here is Mrs Brindle's conversation with him on this topic:

– It's like ... a library...

– I know. It's not good. You could stay in my study instead. [...] now I have to say that I am making use of you – your presence – because it keeps me out of there.<sup>20</sup>

No matter how ridiculous the circumstances of Gluck's moral conversion are, they are effective and at the end of the story he

emerges reformed, using the internet not to download more material for pornographic use but disseminate "ethic, nonsense, morality."<sup>21</sup> Although it is Jennifer who first initiates Cyrano to his new life and on whom he is dependent for survival, very soon he becomes the main force behind her positive change. Jennifer is looking back at a happy patch of time spent with Cyrano de Bergerac: "If I consider those weeks now, I know that I spent them forgetting the difference between being with another person and being with more of myself."<sup>22</sup> She literally cannot feel the difference between his and her own selves. In both examples we see that the influence of one member of the couple on the other is so big that they imperceptibly become one. Sarah M. Dunningan suggests that in *So I am Glad* such fusion implies the Platonian idea of an ideal individual consisting of two halves male and female, in other words, the logic of "the duality of souls."<sup>23</sup> I would argue that a heterosexual couple in Kennedy's work and especially in the two works in question becomes the metaphor of the self, a symbol of the symbiosis of the self and other, in which the other is also the self, the part-ner. However, it is the metaphor of the self, not in the sense of two beings complementing each other in order to only be complete in their unity, but on the contrary, the metaphor of the self that is always incomplete and indefinable in its complexity and non-singularity.

Identity in *So I am Glad* and *Original Bliss* as well as in many other of Kennedy's works is associated with enunciation, speech and above all is embedded in narrative. In the compilation of essays on subjectivity conceived

<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, 2004 (1995), 44.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, 1998 (1997), 160.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, 2004 (1995), 100.

<sup>23</sup> Dunningan, 2001, 153.

by Jean-Luc Nancy he asks all of the contributors to answer the question: “Who Comes after the Subject?”<sup>24</sup> thus imposing a way of thinking about subjectivity outside the limits of a subject limited by predication. In other words, he asks the contributors to try to define subjectivity not in terms of the “subject-of,” but otherwise. In his book *The Self after Postmodernity* Calvin O. Schrag aptly summarises Jacques Derrida’s attempt to do so by the following pair of questions: “– Do I exist? – Who wants to know?”<sup>25</sup> He explains by quoting Derrida himself: “The singularity of the ‘who’ is not the individuality that would be identical with itself [...] It is a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification.”<sup>26</sup> What they mean by that is that structured round the question *who* as opposed to *what* the subject presupposes the existence of the other that is always there before the question of the subject is even asked, that is, before the very existence of the subject. The other is always already there, it always precedes the subject. Another particularity of the subject Derrida’s quotation evokes is that it is not singular, that it is able to split, to multiply itself in order to fully be itself for the other. This suggests that the subject is always something else as well as being him/herself. These thoughts on subjectivity are helpful in thinking of identity in Kennedy’s work as it is, as I suggested, indefinable, evasive, and impalpable precisely because of its textual character.

<sup>24</sup> Cavada, Eduardo, Connor, Peter, and Nancy, Jean-Luc, (eds.), *Who Comes after the Subject?*, New York: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Schrag, Calvin O., *The Self after Postmodernity*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Cavada, Eduardo, Connor, Peter, and Nancy, Jean-Luc, 1991, 100.

Both couples of lovers in *So I am Glad* and *Original Bliss* might be seen as representations of such non atomic, non-singular, dividable textual subjectivities that are always more than what they appear to be. In the case of Mrs Brindle and Edward E. Gluck we have seen that it is Gluck’s voice and text, his narrative inside her head that is responsible for the change in her identity. He, in turn, is the genius of the human mind. His job is to write texts and give lectures about how the human mind works and thus bring relief and assistance to many troubled minds. He himself, on the other hand, suffers from one of the greatest human dysfunctions – inability to form an intimate relationship with another person and thus compulsively using graphical substitutes for sexual comfort that never comes and only compels him to indulge in it even more. The arrival of Mrs Brindle in his life enables him to move from his unidirectional texts destined for the audience of strangers to conversations with this woman who he is starting to get to know. In this way, his narrative inside Mrs Brindle’s head and their conversations inspired by that inner narrative form a symbolic textual totality of an identity. As it has already been said, the character of Cyrano de Bergerac is the best embodiment of the elusive textual subjectivity referred to previously also because of his contradictory textual nature. It is symbolic that he is a writer himself. As a dead writer he only loves through his own texts (Kennedy’s novel even suggests that some of his posthumously published works have been altered without his knowledge and in a way that he disapproves of). Furthermore, in the novel he is a writer who lives as such only through Jennifer’s narrative as she is the only person who knows his true identity. Finally, one might interpret him as a mere product of Jennifer’s imagination. Therefore, in the novel, Cyrano de Bergerac/

Martin is always more than one, always somebody else than himself. However, the main function of this character is the same as that of Gluck's. He is both Jennifer's part-ner and a part of her identity. In this way, we might say that the couple in both stories symbolise one identity, one self, which is more than one self who splits and thus composes itself to face the always present and preceding other.

The other that those textual subjectivities in Kennedy's works answer to is the other who precedes them and is outside of the narrative and the fictional, that is, the reader. In one of her public lectures Kennedy has described the writing of fiction in the following way: "a conscious, creative act, a demonstration of imagination and faith within which the author and the reader become united."<sup>27</sup> This statement is the testimony of the author's belief of her capacity to reach the audience and make a transformative impact on it. It is thus that the ethical character of her fiction manifests itself. Therefore, one should understand her often less than morally perfect characters' overcoming their perversity and change for the better by developing meaningful and responsible relationships with other people as a metaphor of the meaning of fiction. Both Jennifer and Edward abandon their deviant sexual practices by falling in love and taking responsibility for their respective lovers who both find themselves in precarious situations and are therefore in need of help. It is also significant that Cyrano de Bergerac's/Martin's and Mrs Brindle's fragility stem from acute social issues the contemporary

society suffers from – drug addiction and domestic violence and as such contains a modern ethical message. Furthermore, as Eleanor Bell points out, the ethical in Kennedy's work "appears to lie *in-between* the conscious and unconscious levels of the text."<sup>28</sup> This is to say, that moral ambiguities and controversies of Kennedy's characters and the situations they are put in that often have a strong comic effect constitute an important part of the ethical agency in her works. In this way the readers are drawn forcibly into a moral debate that can potentially be transformative.

To conclude, Kennedy's fiction is aware of the doings of the postmodernist and feminist idioms, but is careful to stay away from both of them. Quite clearly its interests lie elsewhere. Kennedy is interested in a complicated, multiple, flexible and indefinable subject that nevertheless retains his or her integrity and coherence. The structure of identity proposed in the novel *So I am Glad* and the short story *Original Bliss* is non-singular and yet non-binary. It is deliberately evasive and embedded in language thus residing between the text and the reader, "*in-between* the conscious and unconscious levels of the text." Kennedy's fiction embraces moral and ethical issues with extreme unorthodoxy as well as constructing textual, fictional and non-fictional subjectivity which is simultaneously deliberately impalpable and indefinable thus highlighting the complexity and controversy of the human condition.

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<sup>27</sup> A. L. Kennedy, PEN Lecture: Delivered at the Edinburgh Book Festival 2001, <http://www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/>

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<sup>28</sup> Bell, Eleanor, 'Ethics and Estrangement in the Work of A.L. Kennedy', in: *Manuscript* Vol. 3 No.2, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, 112.

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