

How does Alice Come to Her Identity?

--A Lacanian Perspective

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Abstract

Self-identity determines a person's perceived position in the society, and it became an important issue since the enlightenment. However theory of evolution made it much harder, as it claims the origin of humans as of the result of evolutionary process, rather than that of God's making. Under Carroll's pen, Alice is no exception of this ordeal. The moment when she comes to the underground world, she loses herself. The animals there put her in trouble of identification. Fortunately, she finds herself, knowing what differs her from animals and who she really is after series of events in which she has conversations or takes part in several activities organized by animals. Though Alice wondered in the 19th England, her journey of self-identification fits into the framework of Lacan's theory which indicates an ongoing 3-step effort labeled as mirror stage, stage of imaginations and of symbols.

Keywords

Self-identity, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lacan's theory.

1. Introduction

Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was published in 1865 when Britain was coming through dramatic changes as a result of industrialization and urbanization. The book features Alice who is thought to be "lazy and indifferent", (3) followed a rabbit through the hole down to a world where cats grin, cards talk, and caterpillars take water. Compared to the world from which Alice comes, and thinks as boring, the underground world clearly is a fantastic one. However, it is also a world of chaos and disorder, since the creatures there talk nonsense, and obey no settled or agreed rules or laws. The beings in this world each has their particular set of norms. And this disorder is also suggested by the plot. From the moment when Alice enters the underground world to the end of the book, she seems to wonder around, adventuring here and there without a purpose. However a close reading of the text may suggest Alice's development, therefore may point to the fact that the book serves an edifying purpose, aside from entertaining. Though Carroll was believed to be the first important writer of children's literature who started a new tradition of this genre, that is, more entertainment, less didacticism According to Orsolya Albert (2021), Carroll created a world in the book to mimicry the one he lived and wrote in, His created world was to mirror the Victorian time when England was in big changes and hence uncertainty. As his protagonist, Alice is supposed to make sense of the world. To do so, Alice has to firstly make sense of herself, that is, she has to identify herself, be certain of her own identity, otherwise it would be not likely that she get out of the chaotic underground world and come out of her dream, getting back to the normal.

But the question is how Alice could identify herself in such a nonsensical world. Identity is a complicated concept, since an individual could have more than one identity, like cultural identity, social identity, collective identity and identity in the household (Tao 2004, Zhang 2012, Xiang 2009). According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), identifying oneself is self-consciousness of individual's uniqueness, therefore it makes possible that the individual understands himself as

of the fixed identity, rather than change to somebody else. It is a constructing process in which an individual comes to the answer to the question of “who I am” permanently. And this is a process involving language, power, speech and others, with all of them playing their part in determining the answer (Xiang 2009). As Tao (2004) acclaims in his essay “Introduction to Identification”, self-identity is self-centered, laying emphasis in the individual’s mental and physical experience, though other forms of identity are also concerned with experience spiritually and materially. And he continues to point out that self-identity is not a static process, but dynamic, which points to the fact that identity is of liquidity (Wang 2005). To both scholars, facing changes in either body or culture, an individual may be at a loss of self-identity. And it takes time and efforts to re-identify himself or herself.

In the story, Alice is lured into the underground world where she finds that creatures and items are bizarre. They talk nonsense, not obeying the conversational principles and logic. And drinks and food make her large or small in size. Seemingly all the rules and norms that she knows by heart turn out to be useless in the new world which puts her in trouble identifying herself. Obviously by doing so, Carroll tends to give a lesson to his young and adult readers as well on how to hold on to self-identity in a world of changes. Alice succeeds in this, as a result, she escapes the ridiculous punishment, wakes up and leaves the chaotic underground world.

2. Loss of Identity--The Real

When Alice is lured by the White Rabbit down to the underground world, she lands on “a heap of sticks and dry leaves” (6), finding it “all dark overhead” (6). This darkness, according to Chen Weiwei indicates that Alice knows nothing about the new world she just has got into. And then she comes to a hall with closed doors around all its sides. Alice tries to find a way out, but failed. Her failure is a resonance of English peoples’ anxiety and frustration in the age of industrialization and urbanization, when they found the world around was hard to fatten with all the uncertainties and changes (Chen 2007).

Alice’s failure in figuring out the way around and out is accompanied by her failure in working out her identity. She is lost in her question of “Who Am I”. It is important for Alice in a totally new world to find out who she really is, otherwise she will not be able to map things out. After drinking the liquid in a bottle marked with words “DRINK ME” (9), she grows smaller, which makes her doubt over whether there is “enough of me left to make one respectable person” (11). To Alice, half in body size does not count her as a whole body, therefore, Alice is not Alice anymore, at least not a complete one. She then tries the cake with the words “EAT ME” (12) on, hoping she will get large enough and get the key to the door to the garden. But she gets too big and it seems impossible for her to get through the door, even with the key, which frustrates her into tears. Shedding tears obviously is a shame to her, therefore making her not feel like herself any more, as she says to herself “You ought to be ashamed of yourself” (15). Despite of changes in her size, Alice even forgets “how to speak good English” (13), and starts to talk “nonsense” (14). As a result, she begins to question her own identity. “I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is, ‘Who in the world am I?’ (17) The “great puzzle” puts her in comparison with other girls she knows from school and neighborhood. She is certain that she is not Ada or Mabel, since the former has hair going in “long ringlets”, and the later knows “such a very little” (17), while she herself knows “all sorts of things” (17). However, after she tries the things she knows about, from Multiplication Table to Geography, she comes to the presumption that she “must have been changed for Mabel” (17), the person she hates so much of turning into, she would rather stay down in the underground world. To assure herself that she is neither Mabel, Ada or somebody else, Alice tries to repeat her lessons, but sadly she fails, “the words did not come the same as they used to do” (18), and even worse her voice “sounded hoarse and strange” (18). By then, Alice

is quite confused over her self identity, after struggles of proving herself as Alice the girl, Physically and mentally, Alice finds it hard to ascertain her identity, so she decides to leave the issue behind, and focus on her plan to grow back to her right size and find her way into the lovely garden.

Though Alice's self questioning of her identity comes to a stop, her eagerness of finding out who she really is remains. According to David G. Mayers(2006),identification is a process of identity construction in which others play a part, that is to say, others help an individual to identify him/herself. After Alice has a bite of a mushroom she could only finds which is eatable and guesses would change her size, she sees a Caterpillar smoking a hookah.The Caterpillar asked Alice "Who are you". Alice answered "I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present"(54). Alice's hesitation in voice indicates her uncertainty and doubt. When requested by the Caterpillar to explain herself, Alice says"I can't explain myself" (54), because she thinks she is not herself. And the reason why she is not herself is due to changes in her sizes and her failure to remembers things she used to keep in her mind. Apparently, neither size or memory is helpful in determine Alice's identity. Alice hopes that she could identify herself by taking to the Caterpillar, but in vain.

After the Caterpillar leaves, Alice tries a bite of the mushroom, and becomes larger. Her neck rising "like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her"(63) is spotted and mistakenly identified as a serpent. Indignantly, Alice denies by saying" I'm not a serpent" (63), but when confronted by the question " what are you"(65), she fails to provide any proof to convince the pigeon that she is a little girl. Since her neck is al long as a serpent and she eats eggs like serpents do, she must be a serpent. This is the pigeon's philosophy though, and Alice could do nothing, but accept what is being suggested. Seemingly, Alice is sticked in the game of her own identity, she dose not think she is the girl she used to be, and even worse she could not easily tell who she is in this new, buzzer and chaotic underground world. Alice's identity crisis resonates with identity scholars' acclaim that moving into a new place means a new identity.

3. Identification with the Other--The Mirror Image

According to Lacan's (1997)theory, While a baby reaches 18 months of age, it would smile at its reflection in the mirror and recognize this image as the image of itself. Therefore self-conscienceless starts at this moment when the baby comes to understand itself as different from others. Evidently, bodily difference is the significant indicator of a person's difference from others,helping him/her to identify himself/herself. Hence it would be safe to say that the look of an other functions as the mirror image.

Alice's entering into the underground world is very much like a baby's birth out of mother's womb, everything there is new to her, and after a while, she starts the efforts of identifying herself like the baby does. However Alice is different from the baby in the sense that she has knowledge about her body. to do this, she must firstly tell the difference between herself and others, whether these others being the ones she knows from the past or those she is going to meet.

The first mirror image which comes to Alice is Ada, however Alice does not identify herself as Ada, since Ada's "hair goes in such long ringlets"(17),and her own hair "doesn't go in ringlets"(17). Not like the baby of 18 months in age, it tends to take the image reflected in the mirror as itself, Alice fails to identify Ada as a reflection of herself. This is because Alice has knowledge over her appearance, that is, she is familiar with her own image, knowing the physical features of her body, even though she changes in size after drinking the liquid. But it is true that she is not so confident to tell who she is exactly. Never the less, she carries on with her adventure in the new world.

Alice gets confused again over her identity because of the changes in size. And this happens when she meets a caterpillar who asks her the question "Who are you" (53). Realizing the fact

that she has changed in size, Alice is at a loss, she answers the question quite uncertainly with hesitation. And after the Caterpillar tells her that it would not feel queer “at all” (54), even if it has to “turn into a chrysalis....., then after that into a butterfly”(54), Alice is quite shocked. Alice’s failure to answer the caterpillar’s question on her identity,” feeling she is not herself, because she “cant’t remember things as “, she sued —and she doesn’t “keep the same size for ten minutes together”(56).

Alice thought the caterpillar would be a help, since it changes physically. But it left with only an advice that Alice takes the one side of the mushroom which will make her “grow taller”(61), and the other side “shorter”(61). And with a bite of one side of the mushroom, Alice’s neck turns much longer, which leads to a pigeon’s mistake of identifying her as a snake. Pigeon’s mis-identification clearly comes as a result of Alice’s long neck. And once again Alice faces the challenge of her bodily resemblance with a snake. But this time she is not so hesitant in saying that she is not a snake, in doing so, she succeeds in telling herself from a snake with the same physical feature. Meanwhile by claiming not a snake, Alice makes her effort to convince the pigeon that she is “a little girl”(65), and at the same time, she is self assured that she is a little girl. Till that moment, Alice is able to identify herself physically, getting used to her change in size. She knows clearly that she can change her size by eating one side of the mushroom, but her identify of being a girl remains the same. With this in mind, Alice get back to her right size, and is certain about the next thing she is going to do is to “get into that beautiful garden”(67).

4. Identification with Ethics and Rules--Symbolic Order

To Lacan (1997), Once a child reaches a certain age, it starts to acquire language, and this is also a point at which the child gets to be invited into a world of social system where rules and laws rule which are encoded by language apart from others being signified by signs. Only if the child abide by those rules and laws, he/she then will be accepted as a social being. And the world of rules and laws is proclaimed by Lacan as the third order of universe. Therefore, according to Lacan, a person normally lives in the world of three orders, and if a person fails to abide by the third order, that is the order signified by father’s law, in the terms of psychoanalysis, then he/she may be rejected by that world, as a result he or she will be an outcast of that world or society. In other word, Lacan’s third order of the world points to a person’s social life, that is how he/she socialize with others and how he/she gets around in a society of like-beings.

The first creature Alice meets in the underground world is a mouse, when she is trying to make her way out of a pool of her own tears. Alice clearly offends the mouse by starting the conversation with the question in French “ Ou est ma chatte” (22). Realizing the fact that she may have displeased the mouse, she endeavors to convince the mouse that cats are not always so annoying or frightening, since her own cat at home Dinah is “such a dear quiet thing” and “such a nice soft thing.” (23) However the mouse does not want to continue the conversation this way, to him, cats are “nasty,low,vulgar things”, so he cried to Alice,”don’t let me hear the name again’.(24) Following the mouse’s message, Alice carries on the conversation by changing her subject matter to dogs. Sadly enough, Alice’s dog in the conversation “ kills all the rats and —“ (24). It is evident that the dash here points to mice, even though Alice stops and pronounces “ oh dear” (24) instead.Her killing story obviously angers the mouse, which drives him away. And his turning back to Alice is possible with Alice’s promise of not talking “about cats or dogs” any more. Thus it can be argued that Alice’s socialization with the mouse is granted by her acceptance of the mouse’s rule of not touching on the subject of cats or dogs verbally. Submitting to the mouse’s rules, Alice is invited to the mouse’s circle, and identified as one member of the animals, then afterwards was invited to a Caucus-Race.

The Caucus-Race is proposed by Dodo to dry their bodies, as they all get wet in the pool of Alice’s tears. Once again, Alice is in confusion over the rules of the race, when finally every

participant of the race turns out to be a winner and Alice is given an award which belongs to herself in the first place. Thinking that the whole thing is very absurd, but Alice does not “dare to laugh”, or say anything offensive. She “simply bowed, and took the thimble, looking as solemn as she could”. (32) After they all finish eating the comfits offered by Alice as race winning awards, the animals beg the mouse to tell something. Alice pushes a little , with careful language ,in case that the mouse would be offended again. Sadly, Alice makes the mouse unhappy again, and even worse, she drives all the animals away by mentioning her cat Dinah chasing and eating birds. Alice’s mingling with animals proves to be a failure, as a result of her not knowing animal’s social norms or especially the rules of the underground world. She is not identical to animals, then left alone.

As agreed by many, self identification is a process of knowing who you are, and in Lacan’s views, this is a process in which a person gets to the third order of the world which is represented by rules and laws. In Alice’s case, her endeavor of socializing herself fails, hence her identifying with the animals turns out to be a failure. Her politeness and good manners do not work out in the underground world, since they are manners which only apply to the world where she comes from. On the one hand, Alice is rejected by the animals when she talks them into loving her cat, on the other hand, some animals identify her as one of them, as the pigeon does.

To identify as a human, Alice must follow her own ethics and moral norms rather than those of the animals. So when the Duchess violently tosses the baby in the air, Alice feels sorry for her, and takes care of the baby with tenderness, her human virtue is awoken and aroused. As soon as she shows these human emotions and senses, she is taken out of the house by her own cat. She uses her human mindset, and rules to get out of the craziness of the Mad-Tea Party, breaking the rules and laws set by the animals. She claims that they are crazy. And this claim is made as they are against what Alice believes in as good behaviors.

In the underground world, Alice encounters a number of weird people and takes part in a bunch of odd events. It seems that she would be kept there in an endless manner if she does not get out of the world of animals . To get back to the human world, in another word, to get rid of all the animal features, Alice needs to do something. And according to Carroll, Alice’s back to human needs a wake up call from her dream. In the book, Alice came back to her reality from the dream after she said to the Queen “you’re nothing but a pack of cards”(168). The fact that she identifies the animals on the game as “a pack of cards” suggests she has established a set of rules in identifying figures different from herself, which results in her identification of a human being. In doing so, Alice gets back her human identity. Therefore her going back to the human world, that is to wake up from her dream of the underground world is suggestive of her reclaiming of her identity of a human being, which is suggestive of her difference from animals and subjects she meets in that wonder land.

5. Conclusion

19th century witnessed the great changes brought over by the industry revolution. These changes put English in big troubles of self identity. Particularly Darwin’s theory of evolution made things worse. People were confused with the idea that humans are the results of animal evolution, in another word, humans are identical to animals, or even worse, are animals in a basic sense.

Alice’s adventure into the wonderland is out of her curiosity, though it is a rabbit who lures her into the underground world. And her journey underground is full of oddness. Odd, because she never encounters anything like those when she is on the ground. And this oddness drives her back to the human world, since she does not identify herself as one of the members of the underground group, finding events and people weird, abnormal to everything she is used to. However, Alice’s self-identification with human being does not happen in one try. Factually it

takes several steps and Alice makes some efforts. The first thing Alice does is to differ herself from others by measuring her own size . To do so, she tries drinks and foods which turn her into different sizes. After this, she talks to others, learning from these conversations that she is different. From Lacan's theory, Alice's learning from others about her own identity equals to a baby learning about itself by looking into the mirror. Here others serve the function of the mirror which helps Alice with the question of who she is. But even at this step, Alice still has doubt over her identity. This is demonstrated by Alice's hesitation in saying that her name is Alice, when the Queen asks about her identity. Though there is hesitation, at least Alice is closing the mission of her identification. The triumphant moment comes when Alice defies the Queen bravely by claiming she and her objects are only cards. Clearly Alice is confident that she is a human, rather than a snake-like animal or other. This definiteness is possible because Alice once again applies the norms and rules which mankind establishes, which includes the ethics denying tossing babies around , or taking away lives freely.

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