The Individual and the Nation: Self-Making and the Enabling and Disabling Frontiers in American Literature

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Abstract

This paper is a survey essay that explores the dialectics of nation-making and self-making in American literature. It traces how the idea of the individual evolved alongside the political imagination of the United States of America. The project of nation-making that began with the "Declaration of Independence" in 1776 not only attempts the creation of a national self but as a corollary provides individuals space to fashion themselves. However, these aspirational self-fashioning enterprises are subject to the existing legacies of power in the novel nation and carry undertones of how institutional power is exercised differently on different sections of people. Through readings of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Heman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and works by Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and others, the paper examines how American literature continually interrogates the limits of freedom and the metaphorical "walls" that define belonging and exclusion. In short, the paper contends that

American individualism, while envisioned as universal and liberating, remains haunted by its exclusions, and that literature serves as a space where these contradictions are repeatedly exposed, contested, and reimagined.

Keywords: American Literature, Self-making; Frontiers and walls; Nation making; Rights

The United States of America was imagined by a people, in a land, where they had little claim over its history. In the absence of a genuine claim over their land, the immigrant population consciously negotiated the terms of their self-making. Timothy Brennen argues in his essay "The National Longing for Form" that the newly created nation-states constantly search for appropriate aesthetic forms, themes, motifs, cultural fictions, etc., in literature to forge a national identity (58). The adolescent American nation did the same through the "Declaration of Independence." The assertion of freedom through the document written in the form of a declaration gave the new nation and its people an identity by establishing their autonomy. Alongside the task of nation-building, America had to locate the individuals who imagined the nation. Hence, the theme of self-making ran through two strands in early American Literature. On the one hand, it forges the self of the newly created nation that declared its freedom from a tyrannical monarch, and on the other, it located the individual with regards to the limiting powers and potential tyrannical tendencies of the state. These two strands proved not to be exclusive: the American individual could exercise their autonomy in the promise of a democratic political structure guaranteed by the foundational document that envisaged their nation. This idea of the individual holds resemblance to the modern-democratic conception of the human who thus formed acts as a check against the tyrannical tendencies of institutions (religious, financial, and political) that circumscribed the rights of citizens.

However, these aspirational ideas of self-fashioning in American literature are inextricably tied to the exercise of power. Not every individual or section of people enjoyed the same means to exercise their freedom within the limiting structures of the state and other dominant institutions. The US history and its literature provide proof for some of the most incriminating racist, sexist, and classist legacies. Therefore, the latter half of this paper explores how the guarantee of liberty applied differently to different classes of people and self-fashioning was contingent on the privilege vested only on some by virtue of their subject positions. For the study, I take the metaphor of limits—walls, frontiers, borders, and boundaries—as they appear in literature to make my claim.

The venture of nation building and self-fashioning was initially taken up by novels that cover and decipher vast expanses of American land. An example of this would be Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Through the people and the geography on the banks of the river Mississippi, an idea of America gets constructed. At the same time, when Huck Finn decides (rather) "to go to hell" (208) for helping the "nigger," he forges his own self with principles opposed to that of the dominant ideology of the "civilization." That is also to say, the type of individualism envisaged around the time of the American independence (rugged individualism) is not a narrow vision of the individual removed from society as often represented by the present capitalist culture, and is not unmindful of the question of the nation at large. It also forms the basis for the modern (democratic) conception of the human.

The *"*Declaration of Independence" is not limited to the imagination of America as a nation; more importantly it defines the individual by recognizing their "unalienable rights" to "equality," "life," "liberty," and "pursuit of happiness" through some "self-evident truths" (336). In other words, it guarantees the political freedom necessary for the individual to exercise their autonomy. Notably, the "Declaration of Independence" does not grant

individuals any rights, rather it *recognizes* the inherent rights of the individuals with which they are born. Since these truths are constituted by the creator, it is impossible for people to tamper with them. Thus, the document tweaks the divine rights theory. It no longer professes a model in which the sovereign's powers are derived from God; rather the "Laws of Nature" and "Nature's God" endow men with certain inseparable rights, and it is from the consent of these individuals that the sovereign derives authority. Since these rights are naturally present in everyone, it becomes a democratic vision. This model of government in which power flows upwards privileges the individual, and works as a source of motivation for writers like Henry David Thoreau to repudiate the government whenever it unduly circumscribes the rights of citizens. Then, the duty of the government, according to the document, is to facilitate a conducive atmosphere for its citizens to exercise their natural rights, in the abeyance of which, they are entitled even to take recourse to rebellion. This resolute sense of political freedom promised by the document is a reflection of the *enlightenment ideal* that ensures an atmosphere for the free play of conscience/reason, and is a necessary condition for self-making because it (self-fashioning) inevitably includes questioning, denying, and rewriting the status quo of society.

The influence of "the Declaration" is evidenced when the American formulation of the idea of the human finds expression in the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The UDHR defines human beings as possessing "inherent dignity" and "equal inalienable rights" (Preamble). Like the American Declaration, it even goes to the extent of recognizing human beings' right to resort to rebellion in case of gross human rights violations that wound the human conscience (Premable). Ralph Waldo Emerson works in this democratic tradition set by the American "Declaration." He takes a step further, identifying factors other than the sovereign or the state which prevent human beings from their self-realization.

The prominent shift brought about by Emerson's writings is that it substituted the Puritanical conception of the individual with the Romantic ideal. Until then, human beings were primarily related to each other through the sin they shared by virtue of their being born; they were not equal in any other respect. Contrary to this, Emerson envisages all human beings as possessing inherent virtues. He writes in "The American Scholar": "Its [Nature's] laws are the laws of his own mind… 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim" (516). Since human beings share these universal principles found in nature, they are essentially similar. Then it is natural that they should be entitled to equal treatment. This line of thought resonates with the American Declaration's recognition of the citizen's natural right to equality.

Further, as per Emerson's idea of "The Over-Soul," man is not to be reduced to the conscious ego that ties him to the mundane world (262). The ego is constructed by deceptions of the phenomenal world. The higher soul exists beyond all separations as true oneness. The individual who has undone all deceptions can have true self-realization (262). This is a peculiar kind of individualism. On one level, the individual is a part of the universal self, hence connected to everybody else; on another level, they are unique because in their true self-realization they can dictate their self-making in the phenomenal world. The former is a spiritual experience, and it is used to guide the fashioning of the self in the mundane world. This paradoxical nature of the idea of the individual, similar to others yet not the same, is in sync with the conception of the human in modern democracy, wherein the individual because of their similarity with others demands equal treatment before law, and because of their uniqueness demands autonomy to exercise his will without encroaching upon the rights of his fellow beings.

Randall Stewart in his essay "Three Views of the Individual as Reflected in American Literature" considers Emerson's Romantic conception of the human as the propelling force

for American democracy (298). Emerson's individual is inherently virtuous, hence responsible enough to participate in democracy. A divinely chosen sovereign or a self-righteous tyrant does not have a place in a nation where everybody is equal and virtuous enough to run a democratic government. Only when we learn to "walk on our own feet" and to "speak our own minds," he holds in "The American Scholar," will a nation "for the first time exist" (526). Hence, the education of man aimed at dispelling all deceptions that delude him does not just lead him to "self-reliance;" it creates a space where people accept each other's individuality. For Emerson, this space is the ideal nation; a platform for intellectual laissez-faire. Then, Emerson's individualism is a desirable condition for the making of an ideal nation. Clearly, his individualism is not corrupted by selfishness. It tries to bring the community to a higher level of consciousness.

Henry David Thoreau also shares similar beliefs. He writes in "Resistance to Civil Government," "I think we should be men first, and subjects afterward" (839). Here, Thoreau is not being an anarchist. He is for a better government. In other words, he wants the individual to be the moral compass for the herd. Thoreau makes use of the promise of freedom in the American Declaration to use his conscience even to disobey the government. It is a civil way of expressing dissent as opposed to the violent militant strategy of resistance. Thoreau does not deny his subjection to a good government, but it comes second to the existence of man as a free individual. Thoreau's individual is more liberated than the Enlightenment-man. According to Immanuel Kant's, "What is Enlightenment?" the individual cannot make private use of reason or conscience to disobey the government; he can only debate about its propriety in public. However, Thoreau recognizes the goodness in man and grants him the agency to correct the government. His individualism aims at the creation of a better government, hence is connected to the question of the nation and community.

Fundamentally, Thoreau, like Emerson, is against all those forces that enslave men. He is against all those walls that treat men "as if they were mere flesh and blood and bones" (845) and prevent them from their self-realization. This wall is metaphorical too, and refers to the walls that delude men from having access to an authentic Truth. Thoreau considers himself free despite being in prison because he has undone all deceptions that delude him. Hence, his *Walden* is not a misanthropic work; it is an economic and philosophical experiment that repudiates the enslavement of human beings by material pleasures. He is not against material possessions as such but he is against the attitude that reduces life's meaning to ideas like these (853). Here is where Emerson and Thoreau differ from the capitalist individualism of the 20th century. Their vision is not the Objectivism of Ayn Rand which limits man in his material existence, and defines man "as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute" (*Atlas Shrugged* 1571). For Emerson and others, the pursuit of happiness is not material nor unmindful of the autonomy of others. It is a state of independence.

Their quest, then, is to have an original truth to the universe. Humans are always told truths through books, school, traditions, religion, etc. The true Self is a given but blurred by the constructed truths of the world. This might be why Emerson separates "self" and "reliance" by a hyphen, i.e., Self is always already; it is for the individual to undo all deceptions and rely on it. His idea of self-making by dispelling all delusions has found much currency. Friedrich Nietzsche, in "On Truths and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," proposes how human beings are deceived by the knowledge they have constructed through their senses and language. We believe we seem to know reality through the images we see and the words we use when in fact it is a distorted and misrepresented version of the world to which we have no access. Since it is impossible to know the *real* reality, Nietzsche exhorts people not to be

fooled by false narratives; instead, he asks them to create their own myth and their own selves. The idea (also) forms the crux of the postmodern thought when Michel Foucault, in "The Subject and Power," discusses the way in which people are made subjects by discourses that influence their actions. For Foucault, a free subject, if aware of the discourses that make him, can always use strategies of power to dictate the terms of his subjectification (789). The main difference between these latter ideas and Emerson's ideas is that Emerson believed in arriving at a universal truth by following intuition. Intuition broke the constraints placed on man by empiricism and rationalism. Perception, here, is fated, and it works on a level of higher Reason which is not limited by constructs of the phenomenal world such as reason and experience.

Hence, American writers who shared the same vision of the individual as Emerson and Thoreau often preferred the unblemished state of infancy. An infant is not corrupted even by language. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson wants the man to have the nonchalance of boys (157). Thus, we often find plenty of adolescent rebels and non-conformists in American literature. America itself was an adolescent rebel at the time of independence. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and J D Salinger's Holden Caulfield have not grown into adulthood. Caulfield's vision of catching the children in the rye from falling is an allegory. It is a vision to preserve the Child in us from the forces of civilization. Interestingly, even after the recognition of the character by the society, these bildungsroman novels do not show a complete integration of the character into the society. Huck Finn's resolution at the end of the novel is still rebellious. Since he cannot stand Aunt Sally's efforts to "sivilize" him, he wishes to "light out for the territory ahead" (281). The individual, then, is engaged in a constant struggle to question the biased virtues of society. For Emerson also, the individual's struggle continues till he attains the ultimate virtue of self-reliance. Other virtues do not have

anything inherently good or bad, and are just "initial." They must be questioned. Here again, the individual is the moral compass for society.

What this sort of individualism ultimately does is that it affirms the existence of human beings. They are not plagued by guilt (both religious and secular) anymore. They do not feel sorry or pity for existing. Instead, it celebrates life and existence. Walt Whitman celebrates existence in "Song of Myself" when he writes "I celebrate myself, and sing myself... Nor do I understand who there can be, more wonderful than myself" (84). He even scoffs at the Puritan man by celebrating the animals who "do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins...who do not make me sick discussing their duty to God" (118). Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance," "Accept the place the divine providence has found for you" (146). Here, the god mentioned is not the Christian God but an immanent-personal god. It asks you to affirm your life, and act, if you want to change it, making salvation an agential earthly phenomenon. The spiritual experience is separated from religious institutions, and man is given agency over the choice of his relationship with God if at all he wants to have one. Man even finds a place on par with God, having the agency to mold his life. Ultimately, self-making boils down to the question of agency and autonomy. The ordinary citizen in American thought had the agency in national-determination; they get agency to fashion themselves in the political freedom offered by the state; they (also) get the agency to determine their relation with God. The autonomy of man in socio-political and religious fields is the result of the constant struggle for self-making. That is, we see, the motif of a nation and its individual negotiating boundaries to negotiate their self-making.

Frontiers, Metaphorical and Real: The Limiting Structures Hindering Self-fashioning

However, the story of the formation of the United States of America is also a story of breaking, making, and remaking frontiers, limitations and boundaries, which is essentially

tied to the exercise of power. It should be noted that all the dictums pertinent to self-fashioning addressed the man. The categories of exclusion are deeply entrenched subliminally and often explicitly in the American thought. Not everyone reserved the rights to manipulate these frontiers to forge their aspirational selves. The Pilgrim Fathers crossed the Atlantic to the New World to practice their faith freely; they breached the boundaries imposed by the land and the state to preserve their autonomy. Yet, after arriving at the "promised land" they had to place boundaries and walls to "ward off" the native Indians to establish their sovereignty. Then again, they have acted in ways that are unmindful of the boundaries that they themselves have placed. This is evident from their vision of the "manifest destiny" and the countless interventions they have made in foreign soil from the Mexican war to the Gulf War and the ongoing interventions in Panama and Gaza. They had also breached the limits placed on the individual self by the Puritan faith by seeking to transcend the bondage of tradition and the phenomenal world. Walls have also been placed among people to establish the supremacy of one people over the other, and to repress and suppress the "undesirable elements" in society. Jim Crow laws that made the barrier of the skin the basis for social and political segregation is a good enough example.

From all this, it is fairly obvious that Americans sought the power to determine frontiers for themselves, and frequently, for others as well. It needs to be emphasized that the American civilization itself is a result of its people's engagement with all these frontiers. It is difficult to devise a foolproof theory to define the nature and functions of such frontiers in the American context. Yet, it can be said that the privileged/powerful maintain considerable agency to dictate the frontiers (this even includes the physical frontier of the mighty American nation itself), i.e., they retain some amount of freedom to tamper with its limits, fashion themselves, whereas the impoverished masses possess very limited agency in dictating their boundaries, in effect limiting their self-fashioning abilities. Fundamentally, the

questions of limits in general, and the agency to manipulate them are intrinsically related to the exercise of power and the freedom to do so.

American literature has time and again explored the limits of freedom. Miss Poly Baker in Benjamin Franklin's "The Speech of Miss Poly Baker" questions and reinterprets laws to push the limits of freedom to make space for the individual. Henry David Thoreau crosses the precarious line of law to prove a point. The laws by nature, encapsulate the "undesirable element" through various mechanisms. Thoreau is against all those walls that treat men "as if they were mere flesh and blood and bones" (845). Still, Thoreau is one of the lucky ones. The power of walls is so overbearing that it can completely crush the entity it is trying to suppress. I wish to focus my attention now on the less privileged people, ideas, thoughts, etc.,—those unheard and unseen, internal and external others on the other side of the walls.

Sigmund Freud's concept of repression is best suited to describe those deliberately kept behind walls (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Borders of a strong sovereign authority are very tricky; they only allow the right kind inside. Like the thoughts in the unconscious that pop out through slippages of dreams, the repressed sections of people often bear great difficulties to cross borders, and in the process, we chance upon oneiric images of children like Alan Kurdi[1] lying on the frontiers—not quite here, not quite there. They are frontier beings in the literal sense, often trapped in the "liminal stage" but not quite making the transition.

Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" gives a comprehensive account of the repressed lot in any civilization. Omelas, supposedly a Utopian

[1] Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old Syrian Kurdish boy who drowned on September 2, 2015, while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea with his family to reach Europe. His small body washed ashore on a beach near Bodrum, Turkey, and a photograph of the scene quickly became a global symbol of the human cost of the refugee crisis, sparking widespread outrage and compassion.

city, is happy precisely because its citizens can "understand the difference between what is necessary; what is unnecessary but not destructive; and what is destructive" (5). Hence, they know how to keep the destructive elements out of the social equation to maintain the sanity of the civilization. These destructive elements are kept walled not because they are offensive but because they can reveal the unpleasant side of the civilization. In the story, the success of Omelas is attributed to a child who is made to suffer by keeping it away in a dungeon. The narrator never really reveals what exactly is destructive about this child who is dehumanized and is referred to by using the pronoun "it." Perhaps, "its" exclusion might be because of a myth that mandates it for the success of civilization—we never know. However, the repression of this internal other from the conscience (and subsequently from the consciousness) of the society is like the repression of an undesirable thought from the conscious mind. It is the price any civilization must pay to flourish. The people who are thus made strangers are deprived of their autonomy.

The process of making strangers within a society is discussed by Alice Walker in "First, They Said." It is the act of making a discourse that manifests the differences. The differences are not active till a discourse is made around them. The speaker in the poem is told by "them" (divisive discourses are always made about the under-privileged by a powerful "they") that they are inferior, immoral, backward, gluttons, etc., hence not relevant. However, the speaker realizes that what "they said" is untrue. Here is when the "They" in the poem comes up with a new solution. They problematize the existence of the "other" (6-7). When the existence is rendered a problem for the health of the civilization, further justifications are not needed to exclude them. Like the Jews in Nazi Germany, the others can be ghettoized, excluded and even exterminated with rabid conviction.

Audre Lorde in her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" raises a similar point with a slight difference. She writes, "Too often, we pour the energy

needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all" (86). Lorde admits that there are differences that need to be recognized among people. At the same time, she points out that "through systematized oppression" these "barriers" are made "insurmountable," and the people who are separated by such barriers are made to feel like the "surplus" or to put it bluntly the expendables in society. The process of creating barriers and keeping the powerless sections walled off, then, is an active process. It happens due to the exercise of power by the privileged.

The surplus in American society, for Lorde, is mostly made up of "Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people and women" (85). Their walls are mostly made for them. Mostly, their agency in dictating barriers is limited to the making of walls between themselves. The speaker in the poem "As I grew Older" by Langston Hughes is also a surplus. He/she/they is an African American who is kept away from his/her/their dream by a wall. The wall for those on the other side does not function like a gate; it is closed and does not permit much movement. They can only remain in the shadow of the wall. Unlike the Puritans who could realize their dreams, the surplus in society can only have unfulfilled dreams precisely because they are not allowed to cross the frontiers that limit them. Hence, their dreams are dried and emaciated like a raisin in the sun.

The walls are often treacherous for writers, especially when the writer who speaks truth to power is from the surplus class. The isolation and the freedom (a private-personal space) that a room provides by virtue of its walls are imperative for a writer like Virginia Woolf. But for Jane in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," once her struggle with herself begins the room becomes perceptibly villainous and uncanny. The room is counter-productive for a writer like Jane because she is forcibly put in it. Her confinement and the lack of freedom to write is fatal for Jane as a writer. Here, the room robs her of her

sovereignty. Again, the walls are imposed on her in the form of proscriptions and prescriptions. She, being a woman or a patient, is deprived of the power to dictate her frontiers (Gilman 1659-70). Similarly, Bartleby, in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is also put in an environment that does not value creativity. The moment he stops contributing to the economy of the Wall Street, he becomes a surplus. His alienation is poignant and complete as it is multifarious; he is isolated by the walls imposed around him in his dingy-claustrophobic workspace by his employer; he is alienated as a linguistic being as he cannot engage in the mendacious and mechanical linguistic enterprise of a law firm; he is also isolated by the ideology that values productivity over creativity, originality, and freedom. Bartleby also does not have the agency to dictate his boundaries (Melville 1157-83). His resistance is mute and ends up being self-detrimental as the walls surrounding him (even in the form of ideology, which, according to Louis Althusser, is man's imaginary relationship with the reality that alienates him ("Ideolofy has no History)) are extremely powerful.

Apart from determining possibilities for individuals and communities, walls have played a significant role in inducing mystery in American Gothic fiction. Walls are suggestive of the mysterious, and the mysterious is often unwelcome and ghostly, probably because it is from that part of the consciousness and the world that a culture wants to wall out. In Edgar Allan Poe's tales too, the unwelcome mysterious element breaches all fortifications to take part in the plot. In "The Masque of the Red Death," the Red Death finds its way through to join Prince Prospero's ball (Poe 1881). Here again, the concept of repression holds good. What is repressed finds its expression through slippages. Sometimes, it is a secret or the guilt associated with an action as in Poe's "Tell Tale Heart" wherein the dismembered corpse—a secret—lying beneath the floor finds its way through the conscience of the protagonist to his conscious mind (*The Poe Museum*). Invariably, what is kept hidden behind the wall is unwelcome. It is the uneasiness of having the ghostly in one's sovereign

realm that is haunting. The surplus of society once it is made ghostly often makes it to the other side. For instance, Alan Kurdi crossing the Mediterranean Sea was represented and sensationalized by the first world media more than any other refugee's success stories and more than another refugee's suffering as he could present himself in a ghostly form on a Turkish beach.

Therefore, the desire to control the frontier is universal. However, the ability to dictate frontiers is a testament to the sovereignty one possesses. America as a power-hungry imperialist force has retained their agency to dictate their frontiers. What began as a desire to establish a free state against an oppressive entity has morphed into a desire to dictate frontiers for others. The original promise of freedom from its foundational declaration variably applies to its citizens and others based on their subject positions. The ability to dictate the limiting frontiers depends on the weightage one holds in the existing power equations. For the privileged, every wall is more or less a gate, as Emerson puts it, whereas for the disadvantaged walls are rigid—an impasse. This does not mean that the "surplus" people have not dictated their frontiers and fashioned their "selves;" they indeed have. Even when repressed into the unconscious realms of society people have emerged free overcoming great difficulties, and in the process, many have perished and remained trapped permanently in the liminal stage.

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