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Self and Continuity in Pamela

Pamela Lu’s Pamela is a loosely autobiographical novel without any real sense of time or action. Events in Pamela do not happen in the traditional sense, but are rather distorted and distanced through the lens of memory and personal reflection into an intentionally vague depiction of an unspecified portion of the author’s life. This process of distortion and refraction then creates an unusual dynamic with the characters of the novel, who are usually abbreviated down into their initials, framing the characters as almost simple mathematical variables, fluctuating and unknown. Lu’s depiction of her friends and acquaintances in her novel is constantly shifting, continually questioning the stability and continuity of their identities. Throughout the novel, Lu seems to believe that identity is less something internal to a single person but is rather fleeting and transient, determined in large part through external behavior and one’s relation to their immediate context rather than any sort of internal, intrinsic essence that has independent meaning.

Lu makes most explicit this idea of the same body hosting two different people at different points in time most explicit in her depiction of L, who she had met, interacted with for “the better part of a year” (77) before L moved to a foreign country and “modulated into a different L entirely” (77). Upon meeting L after this modulation, L appeared to the narrator to be almost an entirely different person, to the point where it was under consideration that the entire nominative convention of the novel be changed to distinguish L from her before and after personas. As this change was never realized, L is used within the novel to denote a real physical body, but the narrator still takes care to distinguish between pre-departure and post-departure L, as in the following sentence: “This new L was taller … and, though having met the first L a number of times, … bore no resemblance to her at all” (77). The phrases “new L” and “first L” distinguish between two different people, marked especially by the phrase that connects the two, “having met,” which suggests that the narrator conceives the two to be distinct identities, that the new L is disconnected at a fundamental level from the previous L. In fact, what spurs this suspicion is the vastly different behavior that the new L shows; the nature of the narrative in Pamela is such that characters are reported from the lens of a highly subjective memory, and while L may “insist upon being L in the original form” (77), the structure of the book as consecutively relayed personal memories casts doubts on such a claim. The narrator has no insight into the internal life of L during the time which L was away, and as such, the vastly different people that she appears to be are delineated by the narrator into two fundamentally separate identities.

The author’s concerns with the continuity of one’s identity are not only apparent with friends that she meets at different points in their lives. In the ending passage of Pamela, the narrator expresses a “sudden, unstoppable panic” (97) on a flight between Tokyo and San Francisco in “preparation for the approach of a new, mysterious replacement” (97). Here, the author is expressing a fear similar to her earlier suspicion that L had been replaced by an entirely new person, except that now, the subject of that feeling is herself. If L’s dissociation had been triggered by a completely different set of behaviors, so is the author’s own dissociation. Immediately prior to discussing her flight, the narrator talks about R’s perception of flights, in which she is “terrified she could arrive, … rearticulated in another tongue such as French” (96). This rearticulation is not reflected in any real tangible sense, as is reflected by the narrator’s experience of the same phenomenon, wherein “nothing horrible had befallen me; nothing even remotely urgent had happened or was about to happen” (97). R would still be inhabiting the same body as she was before the flight, but simply would be transformed into a completely different person in her behavior. This difference is clarified more in the reverse of this situation, in which R is also terrified of the fact that she “could climb back on board and return home in English, with the foreign aspect of her neatly folded up and hidden from view” (96). The root of R’s terror is that her own identity is a function of her surroundings – in particular, either being at home or in a foreign culture pulls out certain parts of her. In the sense that L was treated as two different people, R in Paris and R in Philadelphia would have different identities as well.

With L, however, the specific point of discontinuity is unknown – the disconnect dragged out for a long time, throughout the entire period in which L was living abroad. In the case of R, that point of discontinuity is compressed into a period of just a few hours. Furthermore, during those few hours, there is no obvious way of deducing what part of the self ought be extracted by context. Note that the examples of the flights are all international: Tokyo to San Francisco, San Francisco to Tel Aviv, Philadelphia to Paris (97). That selection is intentional, as it highlights the erasure of cultural context during the flight; if R is reconstructed into French and English identities through her being around those respective cultures, no such identity presents itself in the isolated and sterile environment of an international flight cruising tens of thousands of feet above an ocean alongside people from all over the world. That inability to determine identity as a function of external context is what leads to R, while on the flight, “[awaiting] the return of herself” (96). Such confusion about context is also reflected in the focus on local time. When the narrator writes about attempting to “recover sensations of gravity and local time” (96) and of losing time during the flight, it is because of this inability to conjure a coherent self-identity during the light. While concrete locations like Tokyo and San Francisco yield to the narrator a sense of identity, the context of the flight yields no such thing and degrades the time spent on the flight into a meaningless thing that needs to be recovered after landing.

The examination of the personal perception of time is expanded upon in the narrator’s distinction between Pamela, P, and herself. “The larger work of Pamela” (59) is a sort of meta-textual reference to the project of the novel itself, a “form suitable for larger display” (59), whereas P is the author's perception of her past self, who “survived the present tense by avoiding it altogether and prolonged the past” (60). The author feels distinct from both of these characters but gives Pamela a special sort of power, where she could “acquire dimension only by pretending to be Pamela, by simulating the details and actions of Pamela’s life” (60). This is the same type of concern that bound her on the airplane – she could only realize some coherent identity when induced by context. In this case, that context is the audience of her book, friends and strangers alike, and she must imitate their expectations of Pamela (from the impression of her exterior representation in the novel) to gain identity, just as R reconstructed herself to fit French or English expectations. The specific names that she chooses are also reflective of their respective roles: Pamela, the reflection of other people’s perceptions of her (through the impression of the novel), gets the full name, and is, critically, the name used by other people to refer to her. The naming hints at another deeper idea as well: consider the author’s treatment of L, in which she believes in a distinction between old and new L, such that they are different people in the same body and extend that to the author herself. Then, for all intents and purposes, for everyone else, Pamela is the same as the author, and a change in Pamela, the author’s outward expression, is a change in identity, just as a change in L’s outward behavior convinced the author of the change between new and old L.

Pamela opens with an epigraph, a quote from Patricia Campell Hearst. Hearst was captured by the Symbionese Liberation Army and subsequently seemingly changed into a completely different person in the aftermath, robbing banks and improvising bombs. The quote itself is suggestive of the fragility of her identity, with Hearst proclaiming the existence of “forces out there, … which are ever threatening and which are stronger than any single individual.” Those forces, the social structures around her, shaped who she was at any point in time. During Berekely, she was a student and an actor, but after the SLA indoctrination and brainwashing, she became a domestic terrorist. She, in much more stressful times and in a much stronger sense than the author or L or R, changed identities. And the world recognized this discontinuity: where L’s or R’s changes in identity were deeply personal and only realized by their close circle of friends and family, Hearst’s was recognized by the president, getting pardoned in 2001 in a reflection that Hearst was a fundamentally a different person. She is the hyperbolic end of the externally induced identity, the strongest possible example of the discontinuity of one’s self.

Works Cited

Lu, Pamela. *Pamela: a Novel*. Atelos, 2007.