

Life Under Mask of Otherness: Tracing The Notion of Masquerade in *The Passion of New Eve*

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Abstract: Being known as a distinguished contemporary British writer, Angela Carter has attracted scholarly attention in the recent decades. Although Carter's oeuvre is not confinable to only one genre, the salient feminist themes in her works have propelled many academicians in the field of women's studies to investigate her works from feminist perspectives. The present paper as well centers around some notions in regard to feminine identity and women's submissive role in a patriarchal context. For this purpose, Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve* is under study. As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, the researcher will elaborate on the notion of masquerade as it is discussed by the prominent French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray. In addition, the researcher will explain in what sense Irigaray's theory is traceable in Carter's this particular novel. Since the focus of this paper is on one of the novel's characters named Leilah, a fully detailed analysis of this character will be presented and her oppressed state in a male dominated situation will be closely examined.

Key Words: feminism, identity, masquerade, patriarchy

Introduction

Angela Olive Stalker, aka Angela Carter (1940-1992) is a British novelist, short story writer and journalist whose special fictional world makes her known as one of the most influential writers in postwar English literature. Carter's emergence in the world of writing began by working as a reporter in 1959. One year later she was admitted to Bristol University where she experienced a new literary life due to her acquaintance with medieval English literature and concentration on the works of this period. This, furthermore, influenced her later attempts in writing stories which shared the same themes.

Generally speaking, Carter's narrative style is famous for its rejection of being limited to one specific genre. In other words, her works eschew an ordinary categorization. In her writings Carter explores different issues: Her works are usually known for such techniques of writing as magic realism, use of symbolism and surrealism. Carter's literary life, however, was not confined to writing. She experienced working in different positions such as Arts Council of Great Britain Fellow in Creative Writing at Sheffield University and visiting

professor in Writing Program at Brown University. Moreover, she taught widely in the U.S.A. and Australia.

A very brilliant event in Carter's life was her cooperation with the Virago Press a publication house which was established in 1973 and dedicated to publishing feminist writings. Although she published different works with this publisher, it was particularly by releasing works like *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), a rather long essay which draws on the unsuitable position of women and their sufferings, that she could introduce a new view of feminism to her audience. It is argued that "in discussions of Carter's portrayal of sexual politics, the most commonly cited intertextual influence is the work of the Marquis de Sade, the subject of her [Carter's] polemical text *The Sadeian Woman*" (Gamble, 2006,p.59).

Events abound in Carter's literary life. She was a committed writer who with her innovative writings in the field of feminism caused not only many people of the era in which she lived, but also those of later generations to pay special attention to the suppressed position of women. Among her works it was her last novels and short story collections which , by putting emphasis on sexuality, could display some instant forms of feminist classics to readers and critics. To put it in other words, "her [Carter's] radical concerns made her fictions a gift for academic studies of sexuality, gender as a masquerade, and 'postmodern' parody" (Sage,1999,p.116). Moreover, as most critics claim, these feminist works have some characteristics in common: It is their refreshing and novel features by which they can make a new direction in postmodern narrative strategies.

As it was mentioned before, the present paper is an investigation of the troubled identity of women and their role in a patriarchal society. To reach this goal, Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) has been chosen. The researcher thinks that some of the issues raised in this novel are in line with her academic research concerning the notion of masquerade, i.e. a theory which in part deals with the unsuitable position of women in a male dominated society. It should be noted that the presence of Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve* paves the way for tracing the notion of masquerade and makes it possible for the researcher to maneuver on Irigaray's concerns in this regard. In what follows there will be some parts which shed light on the theory in an illuminating way. Furthermore, the novel and the character of Leilah will be fully investigated.

The Theoretical Overview

Luce Irigaray is one of the prominent French feminist critics whose insights encompass different issues such as the formation of feminine identity, the psychoanalytic study of femininity and the ideas such as masquerade and mimicry. In her theoretical works Irigaray usually seeks to reconsider what happened to the critical works of her time and hence focuses on "deconstructive philosophy and the theory and practice of the 70s and 80s women's movements to find a place on the margins of patriarchal discourse from which to ask questions and engage in dialogue with male philosophers" (Holmlund, 1989, p.110). In her groundbreaking work *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) Irigaray's main goal is to apply a novel form of writing and to examine the formation of feminine identity in a manner different

from what her contemporary theorists have considered. In fact, what Irigaray highlights in this work is “an innovative mode of *Écriture Féminine*” (Castle, 2007, p.230). She claims that women’s identities were mainly judged by the patriarchal system in which they were trapped. Technically speaking, “Irigaray’s work has shown that femininity, as understood within the symbolic order, is a masculinist construct that privileges phallocentric ideas about gender and the production of desire” (Bainbridge, 2008, p.83). To solve this problem she offers a deconstructive solution in which the western philosophy is criticized and some alternatives are proposed.

It is worth mentioning that Irigaray is in no way the first critic who dealt with the notion of masquerade. Notwithstanding, the significance of what she tried to demonstrate by this notion has made her claim be considered as a stepping stone for investigating works of literature. Irigaray brings up masquerade in her *This Sex Which is Not One* in which she defines the role of woman in a male dominated society where the issue of subjectivity or entering into the law of father is of great importance. Here she introduces woman as a subject who is entrapped in the masculine desire, a situation where that deep-rooted lack of male sexual organ makes her use the masquerade of femininity as a tool to submit herself to whatever expected of her as a woman.

But on the exchange market - especially, or exemplarily, the market of sexual exchange-woman would also have to preserve and maintain what is called *femininity*. The value of a woman would accrue to her from her maternal role ,and, in addition, from her “femininity.” But in fact that “femininity” is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity. The fact remains that this masquerade requires an effort on her part for which she is not compensated. Unless her pleasure comes simply from being chosen as an object of consumption or of desire by masculine “subjects” (Irigaray, 1985, p.84).

Moreover, to highlight what she tries to explore by this notion Irigaray remarks that woman is the subject of man’s desire. Since a woman is put in a system where she is only a stranger or has no specific authority, she has to meet the sexual needs of men and participate in whatever man expect from her to satisfy his desires. This is to say that “In the masquerade, they [women] submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to retain “on the market” in spite of everything” (Irigaray, 1985, p.133). Masquerade in this formulation, as Craft-Fairchild (1993) puts it, indicates that it is the woman who "desires to be desired; by catering to male fantasies, she becomes objectified as a spectacle” (p.54).

Apart from what has been mentioned above, in a most frequently used reference concerning the notion of masquerade, Irigaray describes the term as follows:

[It is] an alienated or false version of femininity arising from the woman’s awareness of the man’s desire for her to be his other, the masquerade permits

woman to experience desire not in her own right but as man's desire situates her (Irigaray, 1985, p. 220).

Plot of The Story

The Passion of New Eve is mainly about the labyrinthine life of a young misogynist man named Evelyn. The story begins when the protagonist sends an application form to one of the universities in New York and soon after this request is admitted, he sets off for the United States. Life is but not so delightful as he expected. To his surprise Evelyn enters a dystopian New York where days of bad omens await him. In a short period he is rejected by the university and his only friend in the looted city of New York is killed by a group of violent women.

Being completely hopeless and poor Evelyn experiences a distressful life. It is but a sudden acquaintance with a dissolute dancer named Leilah that makes him forget about days of desperation. He starts an amorous relationship with the dancer and after quite a short period she is impregnated. Evelyn's reaction to such unwanted child is very unpleasant, however. He has to leave everything behind him particularly because he receives a message from his parents conveying that he is supposed to be the heir to a relative. It is time to leave New York and the young man has to embark on a new destination.

Not everything goes as Evelyn has devised. Soon after his departure he loses main route and is desolated in a desert where he is captivated and taken to the strange city of Beulah. It is particularly the ritualistic welcome by a goddess named Mother that shocks him to a great extent. First, Evelyn is raped by Mother and then he goes under a forcible surgical sex operation which turns him into Eve because Mother has some plans to develop. She believes that Eve must be impregnated with the only remainder of days of manhood or her own sperm and give birth to a new Messiah. This is the beginning of life as a woman and she has to learn to tackle with it.

Life in Beulah is very intolerable to New Eve. She thinks of a way to flee and does so. Eve is now a stranger to herself, the person whom she doesn't know at all. Moreover, it seems everything is even getting worse: This time Eve is captivated by a one-legged and one-eyed infertile poet named Zero. He rapes Eve and soon decides to make the woman his eighth wife. To Eve, Zero is a cruel man whose satisfaction lies only in two things: copulation and revenge. Zero thinks that Tristessa the Hollywood actress, whom Eve adored in her days of manhood, made him infertile and he should take a revenge on her.

Days pass so unpleasantly and Eve is so tired of living here and there. One day Zero takes all his wives including Eve to the glassy abode of Tristessa the place where Zero's struggles with the former Hollywood actress makes the new figure of celluloid goddess be revealed. They find that Tristessa is a man and all these years he has only played the role of a woman.

Tristessa's old secret makes Zero think of a new way to torture him. He urges Tristessa to marry Eve and make love to her. Meanwhile, Zero is completely unaware of what

is going to happen next. The glassy abode of Tristessa collapses and all people except Eve and Tristessa, who succeed in fleeing, are killed. The couple then goes to the desert and experience a completely new life there. Nevertheless, this romantic life ends in so harshly when a group of teenagers find them and kill Tristessa before Eve's eyes.

Eve has to flee again. Life is, however, generous this time. She meets Leilah who is now named Lilith and is the leader of a group of armed women. Lilith wants Eve to go and see the Mother on the coast. There Eve is invited by the Mother to be reborn. She takes Eve to a cleft that symbolizes the uterus of time for this process. In spite of being symbolically reborn, Eve who has learned that being a good woman is better than being a perverted misogynist man does not accept to return to his sadistic past and be a man again. Moreover, she goes to Lilith and tells her that she wants to give birth to her child. In the last scene the old Mother dies and Eve prepares herself to begin a new life.

A Brief Critical Review of Novel

The Passion of New Eve (1977) is a novel which discusses "the ideological construction of femininity in contemporary culture by combining motifs drawn from dystopian SF with a fantasy vision of the United States." (Mason, 2007, p.66). In this fictional world that Carter presents to her audience, the reader is confronted with different characters the life of each has a significant role in the development of her ideas about feminism and identity. One of these important pictures is about the double representation of characters or their lives under mask of otherness. Among the characters who fulfill Carter's writerly strategies in developing masquerade throughout the story, the role of a black prostitute named Leilah is considerable. In fact, the presence of Leilah in the novel has a two-sided manifestation. In simpler words, her life is divided into two different phases. In the first phase, she is a woman completely submissive, the one who behaves in accordance with Evelyn's sexual desires. In the second phase, a new page turns and she appears as Lilith who is the leader of fighting women in the dystopian city of New York. What specially makes Leilah's character noticeable is her masquerade, i.e. the mask she wears in the course of story and by it manifests a rather new identity.

The Analysis of Leilah's Character

Among Evelyn's lovers Leilah is one of the first women whose name is explicitly mentioned in the story. Moreover, the impact her presence has on the life of Evelyn is of great importance. She is the light of hope on the days of desperation when Evelyn is forsaken in the strange city of New York. "She was black as the source of shadow and her skin was matt, lustreless and far too soft, so that she seemed to melt in my embraces [...] I was lost the moment that I saw her" (Carter, 1977, pp.14-15).

Leilah is a nightclub striptease dancer and a professional seductress who enchants Evelyn with her sexual performance and by being the object of gratification for Evelyn's corporeal needs. She dedicates her body to Evelyn to be used for his satisfaction. However, as

the time passes this sexual relationship begins to fade away and remains nothing but the moments of torture and resentment.

In their critical review of Leilah's character, Hughes, Punter, & Smith (2016) emphasize that "Leilah is a combination of Carter's Justine and Juliette in *The Sadeian Woman*" (p.113). These two characters symbolize the ideal women in the eyes of men, those whose mere vocation is to be subservient and gratify man's need for sex. Carter describes both of them in *The Sadeian Woman*. In order to provide the reader with the characteristics of Justine, Carter writes:

Justine is a good woman in a man's world. She is a good woman according to the rules for women laid down by men and her reward is rape, humiliation and incessant beatings. Her life is that of a woman martyred by the circumstances of her life as a woman (Carter, 1979, p.38).

Juliette is also described by Carter in a similar manner. To introduce this character to her readers, Carter says:

The life of Juliette proposes a method of profane mastery of the instruments of power. She is a woman who acts according to the precepts and also the practice of a man's world and so she does not suffer. Instead, she causes suffering (Ibid, p.79).

In a likewise manner, Pérez-Gil (2007) deals with the personality of Leilah as a woman who "performs a kind of femininity that is unnatural to her, that only dramatizes Evelyn's chauvinistic convictions" (p.223). This is but only one side of the coin. In the last parts of novel the reader is confronted with a completely different person whose manners are at odds with her initial appearance. There is even a change in her name. To shed light on this pretentious identity it can be said that:

The soft pornography of Leilah's seduction of Evelyn and Evelyn's subsequent treatment of Leilah is undercut later in the text when Carter deploys the motif of the doubled representation of woman. That Leilah is black echoes imperialist ideas about primitive female sexuality, but this is confounded when Leilah is revealed as Lilith, the armed guerilla, politically engaged in revolutionary action; that is, she is an agent in historical time rather than a passive sexualized and colonized body (Catmell, Hunter, Kaye, & Whelehan, 1998,p.74).

Game of Reflection: The Role of Mirrors in Revealing a New Identity

To explore the notion of masquerade in the novel one should take the role of mirrors into account. Being a motif in *The Passion of New Eve*, mirrors are useful because they reflect a new identity of some of the story's characters one of whom is Leilah. She is a character whose ornate face, exaggerated performance and life under the mask of otherness are the issues highlighted throughout the story by using mirror. For example, the mirror

“serves as a sexual theatre for Leilah” (Filimon, 2014, p.233). In the initial part of the novel Carter describes Leilah as a black, ugly girl who lives in a filthy apartment. However, when it comes to prepare herself for her nightly profession which is performing in some public places like clubs, restaurants and theatres ,i.e. where she is supposed to be alluring enough in men’s gaze, Leilah has to wear a mask in order to hide her real identity and become someone else. This has been narrated in the story by Evelyn as follows:

I would lie on her bed like a pasha, smoking, watching, in her cracked mirror, the transformation of the grubby little bud who slumbered all day in her filth; she was a night-blooming flower. But, unlike a flower, she did not grow beautiful by a simple process of becoming. Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to me to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah. Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection (Carter, 1977, p.24).

Evelyn describes that Leilah spends a long time to make herself ready for the performance. This is to say that, to make herself a temptress entrapped in the patriarchal system, Leilah has to become another one, to create an alienated self which is solely chosen for exploitation and sexual gratification.

These preparations extended over some hours. To decorate the other was her sole preoccupation at these times; she did not hear me if I spoke to her. When at last she assumed the darkly luminous appearance of Lily-in-the-mirror, she became her; every day Leilah disappeared immediately. My Leilah was now wholly the other one (Ibid).

According to Šnircová (2010), “the image of the mask of femininity signifying the active role of a temptress adopted by the character Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve* [...] showing that in patriarchal society the mask of femininity plays a crucial role in the process of objectification of women”(p.12). This is also what Irigaray mentioned when she drew on the notion of masquerade. In other words, masquerade of femininity makes women be submitted to what is demanded from them by men.

In presenting such artificial identity, it should be taken into consideration, the cracked mirror reciprocates Leilah’s bisected reflection and helps Evelyn to find the woman of his dreams.

To watch her dressing herself, putting on her public face, was to witness an inversion of the ritual disrobing to which she would later submit her body for, the more clothed she became, the more vivid became my memory of her nakedness and, as she watched me watching the assemblage of all the

paraphernalia that only emphasized the black plush flanks and crimson slit beneath it, so she, too, seemed to abandon her self in the mirror, to abandon her self to the mirror, and allowed herself to function only as a fiction of erotic dream into which the mirror cast me. So, together, we entered the same reverie, the self-created, self-perpetuating, solipsistic world of the woman watching herself being watched in a mirror that seemed to have split apart under the strain of supporting her world (Carter, 1977, p.26).

Conclusion

One of the issues observable in *The Passion of New Eve* is the role of masquerade in exhibiting another identity of woman, the one which is in accordance with male desires. Zooming in on this notion the present researcher believed that an idea as such was in line with what the French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray, suggested when she referred to masquerade. It was concluded that amongst the characters there was a black striptease dancer named Leilah by whom the notion of masquerade could be traced in the very story. In her emergence in the novel it was in particular the first phase of Leilah's life that helped the present researcher to conduct her research. In this part Leilah was a subservient woman who in gratifying Evelyn's desires tried to wear a mask or become someone else.

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