

A Study of Body and Inscribed Gender Roles in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

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Abstract

Human body has always been the subject of learned discussion. Bodies are controlled, supervised and continuously molded to fit within the constraints of heterosexuality. Gender is considered as the natural part of the body. Bodies are categorized on the basis of gender roles: masculine and feminine. Gender theorists have investigated the terms sex and gender and the accepted natural link between the two. These theorists have concluded that while male, female sex is the biology of the body, masculine and feminine genders are cultural constructs. Bodies' adherence to these gender norms is only an act, a performance. This paper analyzes Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) from the point of view that gender is a mask, a camouflage, a performance. As Butler notes that if we carry out these gender performances differently, we might be able to disturb the restrictive categories. At the same time feminist critic Luce Irigaray notes that masquerade has the power to thwart the original concept. So she argues that through exaggerated femininity, women can bring out the hollowness of this notion. Characters' behaviour in the novel clearly indicates that gender is only an illusion maintained to suppress the revolutionary elements. As in the novel, female characters flaunt femininity and but have masculine traits and are strong and successfully challenge the conventional thinking. Male characters are mere caricatures; they are weak and unconfident totally at odds with the gender norms.

Keywords: body, feminine, masculine, gender, performance, culture, natural, construct

[I] 'm I this Buffo whom I have created? Or did I, when I made up my face to look like Buffo's, create, ex nihilo, another self who is not true? And what am I without Buffo's face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not Buffo. An absence. A vacancy. (Carter 1984:122)

Human body has always been the subject of learned discussion. "Of all the objects in the world, the human body has a peculiar status: it is not only possessed by the person who has it, it also possesses and constitutes him (Miller 1978: 14). Our bodies' behaviour is largely determined and regulated by the social and cultural rules. As Michael Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that "our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity" (1990:166). Bodies are controlled, supervised and continuously molded to fit within the constraints of heterosexuality. Gender is considered as the natural part of the body. A male body behaves differently from female body. The approved roles, behaviours, actions and features that are considered right for male and female bodies are called gender roles: masculine for males and feminine for females. While the ideals of physical beauty and size keep on changing, the notions of masculinity and femininity are somewhat constant. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive (Tyson 2006:85). Body adhering to the prevalent social and cultural norms of masculine and feminine is regarded as an ideal body. Hence, an ideal female is feminine i.e. when outer appearance (slim and curvy body for females; strong and muscled for males) matches the inner nature (emotionality, submissiveness and dependency female features; rationality, authority and boldness for males). Feminist critics have challenged this natural link between sex and gender. Delphy, a French materialist feminist, quotes Ann Oakley's following definition (*Sex, Gender and Society*, published in 1972) to clear the differences:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and feminine.' (qtd. in Delphy 1993:33).

This definition hints that although bodies are categorized according to masculine and feminine roles but these gender roles are not natural essences of a body but are socially defined roles and cultural constructs only to regulate people's behavior. More importantly the unequal and negative representation of female body and femininity has provoked the attention of feminist authors. These authors in their works decode the female body, both critiquing it and liberating it from orthodox patriarchal formulations. According to Maggie Humm: "It is in feminist fiction...that new accounts of the female body, and its potential cultural representation, amount to a feminist rewriting of culture" (1980:123). Angela Carter is a prominent feminist writer who provides an astute and tangible analysis of the female body and the concept of femininity in her novels. Her novels question the conjunction of femininity and materiality and the role of body in the construction of sexual differences and hence interrogate the very foundations of the symbolic

order. This paper aims at analyzing Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and I posit that notions of femininity and masculinity as gender roles are purely social constructs to maintain the patriarchal hegemony and are not natural essence of female or male physical body and how flaunting these norms leads to their destabilisation. Taking Joan Riviere's essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' as a starting point, this article relies on Judith Butler's theory of Performativity, Luce Irigaray's Masquerade as major theoretical base. Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism also becomes a useful inquiry tool to understand the voice of the marginal in the novel.

Joan Riviere in her essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade,' first published in 1929, argues that woman put on a mask of femininity both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it. To put it another way, 'feminine' behaviour may be seen as defensive and instrumental, performed (however unconscious) for a purpose in a world in which power and femininity are considered to be mutually exclusive. It is not simply the expression of an inherent femininity, for women have the capacity to be masculine as well as feminine. (Qtd. in Sceats 2007:84). Judith Butler goes a step further, proposing that gender is not part of an essential identity, but is discursively constructed or displayed in performative acts. Luce Irigaray notes that through exaggeration of feminine roles, women can unstable this notion.

Judith Butler developed her theories on feminism in 1990, 1993 and 2004. Collapsing the sex/gender distinction, Butler argues that there is no sex that is not always already gender. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no "natural body" that pre-exists its cultural inscription. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (Butler 1990: 25). Butler elaborates this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990:25). Butler like Foucault, views discourse as productive of the identities they appear to be describing. When a baby is born and the midwife announces "It's a girl" she is not reporting a new matter but participates in a practice which constitutes that matter. The effect of repetition of acts of this kind is to make it appear that there are two distinct natures, male and female and two distinct genders, masculine and feminine. Gender and feminist critics have questioned the concept that sex is nature and gender is a direct copy of sex. Gender is a cultural construct and it "is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler 1990: x). Women are counted as inferior on the basis of biological differences between the sexes and this is considered a part of our unchanging essence as men and women. If one possesses a female body, one is expected to display feminine features and if one possesses a male body, one is expected to display masculine characteristics. Instead of being an authentic representation of sexed bodies, gender is "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place" (Butler 2004: 42). If a body does not exhibit the prescribed gendered behavior, it is excluded from the category of normal and is marginalized. Hence femininity is "not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, and punishment" (Butler 1993: 232). Since the gender is fundamentally socially constructed, the gendered behavior is the performance rather than the true representation of one's natural essences. Gender norms are imposed on

bodies to maintain the apparent coherence of gender dichotomy. Hence, Femininity and Masculinity become, broadly, bodily styles which our bodies incorporate to yield a gendered subjectivity. Gender can be like clothing, a disguise what Irigaray calls a masquerade, a performance, in which appearance masks 'reality' and one cannot tell clearly precisely what one has seen" (Robbins 2000:210). Irigaray gives the idea of mimicry/masquerade to resist the gender norms. "one must assume the feminine role deliberately, which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (Irigaray 1985: 76). Irigaray's strategy is to imitate gender norms and exaggerate these norms in an over-hyperbolic fashion so as to subvert the notion of the linkage between females and femininity. It is a strategy for women to reveal the fact that femininity is a construct. As Doane notes, "womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed.. .masquerade, on the other hand, involves a realignment of femininity...the masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolisation of the accoutrements of femininity" (2000:81-82).. Bakhtin notes that those bodies which resist categorization are marginalised and suppressed. But at the same time these grotesque bodies are sites of resistance and have the power to subvert the norm. By performing the acts and gestures of gender roles women can become active subjects rather than being marginalized and face exclusion as Butler remarks, "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (2004: 42). Gender is only performed in order to comply with the dominant discourse of society.

"Being in the demythologizing business," Angela Carter's fiction questions the conjunction of femininity and female body. Joanne M. Gass claims that the focus of Carter's

Entire oeuvre, from her first published novel *Shadow Dance* (1965) to her last *Wise Children* (1991), was the material world, its representations, and the effects of its representations, upon the body –particularly, but not exclusively woman's body (1994:7)

The present paper focuses on Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). Overtly intertextual, it is a novel about performance. The central figure, Sophie Fevvers, is literally-professionally-a performer as she works in a circus. The paradoxical status of her body in the novel exemplifies the contradictory condition of women and the feminine in the phallogentric symbolic order. It dismantles the ideals of female body and received notions of gender norms. As Robinson states, "For carter, to become a woman means to become naturalized into a subordinate position, regardless of one's 'official gender'.....gender is a relation of power, whereby the weak become "feminine and the strong become "masculine." And, because relations of power can change, this construction is always open to deconstruction (Robinson 1991:77). Therefore she questions "the social fictions that regulate our lives" (Carter 1983:70). In the novel, Carter shows how Fevvers and female and male characters display traits outside of defined gender norms and how Fevvers flaunting femininity unmasks the camouflage of gender. *Nights at the Circus* points out the arbitrariness of gender norms and how their imposition on individual bodies serves the hegemonic ideologies.

Woman has been portrayed as essentially a bodily being, and this image has been used to deny her full status as a human being (Spelman 1982:123). The unique body of Sophie Fevvers is a

challenge to heteronormative gender dichotomy. Wings on her shoulder contribute to the controversy that is she a bird-woman, which is against the biological evolution of humans or she is simply a hoax. An American journalist Walser sets to determine whether Fevers is actually a bird-woman or mere a hoax as body's categorization is an important aspect to determine its truth. His experience becomes an important aspect in unveiling the gender performativity.

Carter describes Sophie Fevers as 'Aerialiste. Hoverer. A magical, seminal being: a bird woman, a star, her hair is unique, blonde as a peroxide moon and excellent white teeth' (Carter, 5, 8v).¹ She arises public's habit of codifying a body in the gender dichotomy as she asks audience is she real or fiction? She possesses a unique body. She is born with wings on her shoulder. For public, she is a woman and at the same time a miracle because of her wings. She "is an object of most dubious kind of reality" (Carter 1984:290). Nevertheless she consciously makes use of her status as woman and miracle. As Carter says, "Showbusiness, being a show girl, is a very simple metaphor simply for being a woman, for being aware of your femininity, being aware of yourself as a woman and having to use it to negotiate with the world" (Trevena 2002: 269). Fevers's job as a circus performer facilitates her exhibition as a feminine woman. She makes herself "heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise," although she is the femme-fatale of the moment, Fevers is far from being ravishingly beautiful like Helen as she calls herself "Helen of high wires" (Carter 1984:8). She is taller than most women (six feet two inch), she does not have the best manners and her facial traits and make-up deconstructs the conventional notions of feminine beauty:

Her face, thickly coated with rouge and powder so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, is wreathed in triumphant smiles; her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood's grandmother"
(Carter 1984:17).

Walser, when he first meets Fevers, even wonders if she is not in fact a man. Fevers performs her feminine part to the satisfaction of male audience for she knows that to earn her livelihood "she must give pleasure of eye or she is good for nothing" (Carter 1984:185). She creates "Fevermania" to fascinate others. It is through her exaggeration, she becomes the active subject and exercises complete freedom. She takes control of her identity as contrary to traditional role of being a passive object. However, Fevers' body does not remain untouched of patriarchal oppression. Duke objectifies her and Mr. Rosencreutz imagines her as an offering to be sacrificed. Though Fevers barely escapes Duke she realizes that her real potential lies not in the fixed bodily appearance but in its performativity, to move between hetero-normative boundaries:

"She would be the blonde of blondes, again, just as soon as she found peroxide; it was as easy as that and meanwhile, who cared! And of course her wing would mend" (Carter 1984:345)

As Butler notes, "the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm and expose realities to which we thought we are confined as open to transformation" (2004: 215). Body, as the site of exploitation, is the place in which the subversion lies as well. Fevers' body acts as a resistance to the gender categorisation in the heteronormativity. By mimicking the femininity, she exposes its weaknesses and further that it is only a cultural construct, a camouflage to keep the bodies' functioning under control.

While women used to be positioned as objects of male gaze and expected to act accordingly as desirable objects to attract male gaze, women can also use this standard for their own purpose. Fevvers constitutes herself as a wonder to be watched: "Look at me!...she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvelous present too good to be played with" (Carter 1984:15). She is the object of male gaze as an actor but at the same time she is the controller of this gaze. Furthermore, she "turns an active gaze on the male spectator, and in the process, causes quite a bit of discomfort" (Robinson 1991:122). Peach also notes, "Fevvers lives through entertainment, masquerade and spectacle by making a living from a hyperbolisation of the accountments of femininity" (1998:155). She is the 'imagined fiction of the patriarchal culture' (Gass 1994:71). Therefore, she assumes the imposed position of being a wonder deliberately, "the bigger the humbug, the better public likes it," to subvert the traditional male gaze projected upon her (Carter 1984:147). She intends to "undo the effects of phallogocentric discourse simply by overdoing them" (Moi 1985:140).

"The inner truth of gender is a fabrication" which is "instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies" (Butler 1990: 136), men and women may not necessarily exhibit the prescribed gender roles. The behaviour that was thought to be appropriate for the stereotypical woman was "passive or weak", "non-aggressive, and dependent" and thus, resulted in her being understood as "essentially incapable of a strong, independent and autonomous existence" (Eisenstein 1984:59). Women characters in the novel are strong and face danger courageously while men are weak and are dazzled when face danger. Fevvers is called an angel because of her wings but she is not docile or tender as she is expected to behave. She displays masculine features. Her body is huge. In brothel, she carries a sword which is unlike feminine feature and she fights with Duke, a man. Hence Fevvers defies gender norms. Similarly Princess of Abyssinia saves Walser from danger in a "masculine fashion" during a fight while the coloney "breaks down and blubber like a baby" when he faces danger (Carter 1984:165, 179). Hence what Gonzales notes about the female characters of *Sexing the Cherry* is appropriate for the female characters of *Nights at the Circus*, "the female stands by itself as a positive, assertive and powerful entity" (Gonzales 1996:285). When a group of outlaws attack Walser and he becomes unconscious, Olga saves him. She awakens him by kissing him on the forehead. This is a total subversion of sleeping beauty fairytale, where "women are portrayed as passive and dependent, waiting for a prince charming to save them. Here Olga, a woman, saves Walser, a man. Ape-man who dominates Mignon, is full of anger, violence and who thinks himself "superior to the entire sex on account of [his] muscle" (Carter 1984:276). Susan Bordo rightly comments

"of course, muscles have chiefly symbolized and continue to symbolize masculine power as physical strength, frequently operating as a means of coding the 'naturalness' of sexual difference" (Bordo 1993:193)

Ape-Man is strong physically but internally "he was a great sentimentalist", a tender spirit (Carter 1984:167). Emotions and sentiments are attributed to women while rationality is attributed to men. Hence these characters expose the gender fabrication as their acts do not comply to the prevalent gender norms. Thus gendered behavior is not an essence of body but only a body performance.

While Fevvers consciously flaunts her femininity, Mignon assumes the traditional role unconsciously. Forced into prostitution for survival, she always plays the role of a passive and subordinate woman who has no autonomy over her body and mind. As Moi writes, “ throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men...denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions” (1985:92). Nevertheless through Fevvers’ and Lizzie’ assistance, she becomes aware of her oppression as this “coming to consciousness” is necessary for “struggle to begin” (Delphy 1981:75). She rids herself of unconscious passivity and from the control of others and creates herself anew in a lesbian relationship with the princess” (Peach 1998:156). Her singing voice stuns everyone because it comes out of a body posited as absent. In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, Cixous characterises liberated female speech as an expression of the body: ‘Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body’ (Cixous 1976:881). Hence Mignon’s voice is contributes to her newly discovered agency along with loving and equal relationship with the Princess.

Irigaray notes that in the role of a prostitute, a woman is “a commodity...divided into irreconcilable ‘bodies’: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values” (1985:180). Prostitutes are viewed as sexual objects to be enjoyed, however, they use their status as sexual objects , act out a sexual performance in accordance to male expectations to earn their living. Their behavior in Irigaray's use, is a 'parody' to the constructed notion of woman/women, allows for the appropriation of femininity with the female as subject (Sawyer 1999:3). All they need to do is to “behave like women” to be in the business (Carter 1984:40). Consequently their acts illustrate the notion that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990:28). Prostitutes’ manipulation of gender roles is a clear example of gender imposition.

Heterosexuality is regarded as the normative discourse. However, as Butler suggests gender is a matter of bodily style and performance and there is no natural link between gender and bodily shape, then the alignment between anatomical shape and gendered performance is open to destabilization and change. For Butler homosexual practices are one way of destabilizing the normative links of gender and heterosexuality. Mignon’s lesbian relationship with the Princess of Abyssinia is a direct subversion of heterosexuality. Mignon was oppressed and victimized by male partners. Similarly female convicts at panopticon are excluded as part of normal society and are expected to regret their crimes. However these women form intimate bonds of friendship between them which is a source of security to them against the male oppression. Olga and Vera are the first homosexual couple and soon others follow their example, “desire..lept across the great divide between the guards and the guarded..., it scattered seeds around in its own turn” (Carter 1984:216). Although heterosexual relationships are represented negatively and oppressive, Fevvers hope to have a happy relationship with Walser. After the attack by outlaws, Walser loses his memory. His mind is a tabula rasa, it “is in preparation for the subsequent reconstruction of his masculinity” (Palmer 1987: 200). Now he is not interested in categorizing Fevvers as a woman or wonder, but views her as a human being and asks her, “Have you a soul, can you love?” (Carter 1984:300). Fevvers is hopeful to turn him into a new man, a fitting mate for the new woman in a new century. This new century symbolizes the unbiased view of bodies

as equal human beings, where women will not be thought of as inferior or outcasted and marginalized if they display non- feminine characteristics, a new century where 'body seizes (its) destiny...refashion the world in (its) own desires' (Pastourmatzi 2002:13). Hence Delphy is right when she says "belief in the possibility of change is the catalyst for genuine change" (1981:69). *Nights at the Circus* ends on an affirmative note of change.

Angela Carter perceives body as a space to explore one's unique individual identity, to experience pleasure and to establish bonds to others. She lays bare the notion of femininity and she is able to show that gender norms as masculine and feminine are only discursive practices and are not natural part of a male and female body. While male and female is the sex of a body, masculine and feminine are the characteristics that a body is expected to display and when a body fails to comply to these social and cultural constructs, it is labeled as unacceptable. A male or female body has no inscribed roles. It is as a part of society, we learn to act and behave in a particular fashion but a body is not an object of social control. Hence masculine and feminine norms are only performative part of a body and an exaggeration of these roles can lead to their destabilization. *Fevvers, Mignon, Prostitutes, female convicts, Ape man and Walser* all exemplify that gender is only a fabrication, an inscribed role, a performed part of body as a female body may not always be curvy, weak and a female can be strong and rational while a male body may be muscular but at the same time he can be emotional or weak by nature. And similarly heterosexuality is not always normal, homosexuality opens door to a loving and equal relationship between bodies.

Endnotes

¹ Carter's Handwritten notes on *Fevvers* and *Nights at the Circus*. Available at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-notes-on-nights-at-the-circus-by-angela-carter>

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