

Gender as a Trouble in Angela Carter's *the Nights at the*

Circus

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Abstract

This paper will focus on Judith Butler's work on gender and performativity. It will use Butler's example of drag queen and gender parody as a way to understand the reality of female gender from unreal one. It will explore that the reality of gender is not fixed as we generally assume it to be and the purpose to this paper is to expose the weakness of gender reality to create a true model of gender. This essay is examined the works of Angela Carter. The novel under the study is *Nights at the Circus (1984)* Understood through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity, Fevvers, the main character of the novel dramatizes the idea that gender identity is not fixed in nature but it relies on culturally constructed signification. He will emphasize that gender is something that is attached onto the body through socialization, and not something that is fixed at birth.

Keywords: Gender, Performativity, Carter, Butler, Identity

1. Introduction

Butler holds an influential but controversial place in contemporary feminist and democratic theory as "she has pursued these commitments by the way of unrelenting critique of feminism as an identity politics" (545). She is not a post-feminist but she is responding to the numbers of "women who, while, leading lives that the movement made possible, repudiate feminism for what they perceive to be its intolerance, anger, and insistence or representing them as sexual victims" (Disch, 545). As a matter of fact, Butler has collapsed the sex/gender distinction to argue that "there is no sex that is not always already gender. In fact, 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" (Salih, 55). She tries not to tear sex alone but both sex and gender from biological essentialism. She insists that "as soon as we imagine sex (woman/man) as naturally given, and gender (feminine/masculine) as a product of social forces, we fall into the very gender essentialism that we seemingly called into question" (Levinson, 81).

In 1989, Butler was most concerned to criticize a spreading heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory. She sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity (Butler, viii). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), she sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is prevented by certain habitual and violent presumptions. The text also "sought to undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimize minority gendered and sexual practices. To her point of view, this doesn't mean that all minority practices are to be condoned or celebrated, but it does mean that we ought to be able to think them before we come to any kinds of conclusions about them. (Butler, viii). Butler speculates about "what kind of will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire." (Butler, 185) For Butler, the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that "what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures" (Butler, xvi). She claims that:

Such acts, gestures and enactments, generally constructed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (185).

These social illusion passive verse active, subject verse object, superior verses inferior, strong verses weak, emotional verses logical are daily repeated with the "strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame" (Butler, 198). To view gender as performance implies that there is "no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured" (Butler, 192). If one accepts this view of gender, then one takes the initial step toward collapsing the borders separating and prevailing the sexes. As matter of fact, Butler emphasizes that "gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notion of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity and femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender performative characters" (Butler, 192). I will suggest in this essay that Carter manifests several such as performances in her narrative. Through an evaluation of the role of performativity, I will make the argument that Carter creates a discursive space that poses a threat to the security of a male-dominated society organized according to false categorical distinctions which are supported through oppression and exclusion. In addition, the aim of this paper is to claim a female space and subjectivity in an effort to claim a piece of territory and to de-marginalize women. If as Simon De Beauvoir mentions, man is the absolute, subject and woman is Other and if this binary perception of the sexes is deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness of Western society, then it is the goal of this paper to blur this sexual difference and so as to destabilize the notion of superior and inferior between the sexes. I have thus suggested that Carter by foregrounding weird female body, participate in challenging and therefore changing, the media-depicted, male-constructed image of the idealized woman. She deliberately focuses on the physical difference of Fevver and provides the path to show the wrong perception of idealized woman and creates the new representation of woman. To assist in my reading of this argument, I will be drawing on the work of Judith Butler who posit gender as performative. Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* engages with and explodes all such measurements and definitions. Their central female characters break gender boundaries both sexually and professionally, "taking on the so-called masculine traits in order to become New Women and they court deviance in order to further their own evolution, ignoring the social imperative of marriage and the evolutionary imperative of maternity" (King, 132). Carter begins to call into question "accepted notions of identity and the binary logic on which they depend, as she attempts to create a new female subject that seeks to satisfy feminist aims" (497). Angela Carter destabilizes the active male/passive female dichotomy by depicting a diverse array of female characters that maintain their sexual desires even while being victimized. Carter's refusal to negate female desire even when it is deeply disturbing has led to extensive scholarly debate about her position as a feminist author. Reflecting on Carter's complicated and diverse feminist statements, Alison Lee aptly notes that Carter "called herself a feminist, but her feminism is no more monolithic than her representations of female sexuality" (Coolen, 399). As a matter of fact, Carter's novels thus challenge the traditional association of female with femininity and of male with masculinity through the depiction of characters that confound accepted gender norms and polarity.

2. Gender: Subversive Bodily Acts

"Fevvers who calls her "Helen of High Wire" (Carter, 7) is like "Helen of Troy, was *hatched*" (Carter, 7). Her body is

"in steatopygous perspective, shaking out about her those tremendous red and purple pinions, pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she. And was a *big* girl. Evidently this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts" (Carter, 7).

Her strange and odd appearance and body arise some questions in this essay: Does she play her natural performance as a woman? How does she clarify her gender role as an artificial? How does she transgress the rigid regulatory frame? The answer of these questions centre on Fevvers' unusual body, the wings that grow at puberty and can hover "for just the smallest instant no longer than the briefest flutter of a butterfly... I'd hovered" (Carter, 31) and they will be replied by Butler's notion of performativity and drag queen. The insistence on the performance of femininity is manifested right at the beginning of the novel when Walser, the reporter was watching Fevvers and refer to illusion and dissimulation:

"Something fishy about the Cockney Venus-[...] on lash off, one lash on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror with impersonal gratification. [...] She tipped the young reporter a huge wink in the ambiguity of the mirror and briskly stripped the other set of false eyelashes". (Carter, 8)

Fevvers' feminine appearance makes him think of masculinity body, of drag "Her face, in its Brobdingnagian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships. It flickered through his mind: Is she really a man?" (Carter, 35). Walser does wonder if she might be a "he". For him to consider such a possibility not only highlights the instability of gender reality, but also reinforces Butler's opinion that:

"The moment in which one cannot with surety read the body one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question" (Butler, xxiv)

In other words, when such categories come into question, the reality of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be "real", what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality (Butler, xxiv). While she was on the display, Walser describes watching her:

"Now, the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, or, as we should say, the arms, and the skeleton of a wing does indeed show elbows, wrists and fingers, all complete. So, if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all, for it's her arms that ought to be her wings!. Put it in another way: would you believe a lady with four arms, all perfect, like a Hindu goddess, hinged on either side of those shoulders of a voluptuous stevedore? Because, truly, that is the real nature of the physiological anomaly in which Miss Fevvers is asking us to suspect disbelief" (Carter, 15).

Clearly, Fevvers is creating a performance of femininity in this scene. From Fevvers' point of view, the reader understands fevvers' actions as performance and construction. Through Fevvers, Carter shows how easily gender can be performed to look "real", which in effect highlights its constructedness, as there is no such thing as "real" gender. Walser calls Fevvers' performance a "fake", he is amused but suspicious. He notes the deception of Fevvers' appearance:

"It was the limitations of her act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable-that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief. For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman-in implausible even that such a thing existed- have to pretend she was an artificial one?" (Carter, 17).

Judith Butler argues that if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true no false, but are only produced as the truth effects of discourse of primary and stable identity. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, anthropologist Esther Newton suggests that the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place (Butler, 186). Butler also suggests that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. Newton writes:

"As its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says [Newton's curious personification] " my, 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine "(Butler, 186).

It could be argued that Fevvers' female travesty constitutes the most discursive impersonation. As a matter of fact, Fevvers illuminates drag perfectly: she in feminine drag suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her performance destabilizes the very distinction between the natural the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates (Butler, xxxi). Through the novel, when Fevvers removes her eyelashes, she reveals the imitation of her gender identity:

"She batted her eyelashes at Walser in the mirror. From the pale length of those eyelashes, a good three inches, he might have thought she had not taken her false ones off has he not been able to see them lolling, hairy as gooseberries, among the formidable refuse of the dressing-table" (Carter, 40).

Similar for Butler, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original:

“Just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a "figure" in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin (Butler, 188). Butler believes that the construction of the identity is a fancy, and gender parody can be a path to change a form of Other and how gender is an imitation that there is no original for it. .The novel sets up expectations that the mask will eventually be stripped away to reveal a hidden self, only to show, how on the contrary, Fevvers' identity is constituted in and through performance”

3. Conclusion

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) works to answer the question in the introduction: woman is a real or illusion can be unraveled how the constructed image of femininity in the society and opens ways to escape the gendered confinement. The discussion attempts to highlight the fact that Fevver's essence or identity is false. It becomes clear how to understand the real from unreal. This paper comes to understand that we can reproduce the produced inside of gender identity. It is illuminated that Fevver's involves crossing gender as she has a wings with a feminine appearance. The process she goes through teaches us that gender is not fixed as a tangible series of properties in the natural world but is located the mind.

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