



Rebellion against Patriarchy: The Employment of the Gothic tradition in Angela Carters' selected stories

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to closely analyze **Angela Carter's**(1940-1992) representations of femininity in selected examples of her writings with the aim of demonstrating her very special approach to the portrayal of women . It reflects on Carter"s use of the Gothic and her relation to this literary mode It focuses on the use of the Gothic characters and themes in Carter's works to explore one of the main issues of the century: the role of women in society and the relationship between the sexes. It deals with the literary mode of the Gothic which has not lost its fascination over the centuries .The use of Gothicism characterizes her as a sophisticated writer, capable of mixing different literary devices to create an original and powerful kind of writing. She uses Gothic as a foil to reflect upon depiction of femininity . In this paper , I will therefore bring one important aspect of Carter's writing which has fascinated me most about her works: the female Gothic mode of her writing

Gothic literature has fascinated readers of all ages, men and women alike. Interestingly, the Gothic as a literary mode is as "shadowy and nebulous" as the atmospheres it describes. For Botting , "Gothic literature depicts feelings and characters in their extremes, thus alluding strongly to the reader's imagination and his or her emotions"¹

Botting points out that Gothic fiction aims to provoke feelings of horror and terror. Of course, there are further characteristics which are important for the Gothic mode. The Gothic story is usually "set in times and places different from contemporary life."² The story's setting is usually "desolate, alienating, and full of menace."³ This setting helps to create the typical gloomy and suspenseful atmosphere in Gothic fiction. This atmosphere is often caused by a menacing darkness that surrounds the protagonists, which leads to the characters losing control over the situation and makes their imagination run riot.

Botting points out that Fascination with "objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic"⁴ is another feature of the gothic mode . He asserts the negative attitude in general that men had concerning women and their potential in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, he also illustrates how men regarded women in relation to their roles as readers of fiction⁵. One has to recall the role of women and their reputation prevailing in the time of the emergence of Gothic fiction In the 18 the century, reading fiction had the reputation to spoil the people's character and women were seen to fall into this trap even more easily than men. Nevertheless (or perhaps because of their bad reputation), novels and romances were extremely popular and quickly gained an immense readership . Women avidly read fiction also because this was a discourse accessible to them. As they were denied access to higher education, it was almost impossible for them to participate in discourses concerning fields like philosophy, politics or science. Thus, women were virtually "excluded from discourses of modernization"⁶, which signified a severe discrimination of their rights as human beings.

However, women found ways to partly "sail around"⁷ the obstructions

set up by a male-dominated society, and one of these ways was the writing of Gothic fiction.

One feature of these Gothic texts by women writers is that they are female-centered, which means that they usually revolve around a female protagonist and her dilemma. The Gothic heroine is seen to destabilize the patriarchal foundations underpinning the eighteenth century's critiques of women as writers, readers, family members. Wright explains that argues that "Gothic feminism enables its heroines to *masquerade* as victims in order to survive the patriarchally nightmarish spaces through which they travel"⁸

Angela Carter reinvents the Gothic mode in order to discuss contemporary fears and problems in our society .Carter says: "We live in Gothic times"⁹ .The Gothic demonstrates the hidden fears, anxieties, uncertainties and desires of the society. In other words, Gothic characters like monsters are the embodiment of our hidden desires which have been repressed by the society¹⁰.Carter demonstrates;

Though it took me a long time to realize why I like them, I'd always been fond of Poe and Hoffman.... The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism....Its characters and events are exaggerated beyond reality to become symbols, ideas, passions....style will tend to be ornate, unnatural-and thus operate a against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact.¹¹

Moreover , Hogle mentions the concept of physical or psychological haunting. The haunting can take different shapes, which are known as stock Gothic figures and characters: ghosts, specters, monsters (combining elements from different modes of being, often human and inhuman), corpses, evil aristocrats, vampires, and skeletons¹². Whatever form these



figures take, Hogle observes, they "manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view"¹³. Botting has a similar view. He believes the Gothic mode developed in response to various anxieties and uncertainties of the age: "political revolution, industrialization, urbanization, shifts in sexual and domestic organizations and scientific discovery"¹⁴.

Carter's work has consistently dealt with representations of the physical abuse of women in phallogocentric cultures, of women "alienated from themselves within the male gaze, and conversely of women who grab their sexuality and fight back, of women troubled by and even powered by their own violence"¹⁵.

As Gina Wisker puts it, Carter's style is "excessive, elaborate filled with . . . elements of the gothic to critique social constructions and suggest alternatives"¹⁶. Actually, as Wisker points out, Carter does not call herself a feminist, but she "can be seen as aligned with the values, beliefs and behaviors of the Women's Movement,"¹⁷ as she "took up and dramatized arguments of sexual equality and celebration of women's sexual energies in her lively tales of powerful women".¹⁸ She defines genre in which the security and stability of ideologies are questioned as they reinforce an order more supportive of dominant middle-class white masculinist beliefs and behaviors and not so generously inclined towards the needs and lives of women.¹⁹

Carter considers the oppressive and destructive power of the social system in which men are regarded as the authority within the family and society. She managed to free the women from patriarchal society which keeps women passive and men active. The term "patriarchal," as Chris Weedon puts it, "refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interest of men"²⁰. In her depictions of how female



identity is determined by a patriarchal society, Carter often takes a radical path and is therefore nicknamed "the avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism."²¹

She encourages women to do something about this degrading representation by rising up and fighting against the inequality. Those who support Carter's ideas argue that "she indulged in . . . risky strategies in order to deconstruct the powers structures which render women vulnerable to . . . sexual exploitation."²²

Carter doesn't accept her women to be objectified and confined to a domestic life of cleaning and cooking. Herself being a radical libertarian feminist she promotes her beliefs about giving the women the power to escape from oppression. She thinks that women are able to prove their identity without resorting to men. In her novels Carter manages to save women from oppression through the use of Gothicism. The main feature of gothic literature is that of transgression which means, as Billard argues, "going beyond what is commonly accepted"²³. All Carter's women are going beyond what is commonly expected of them by their society. They can cross the boundaries of what is expected of them by reversing their roles with men. Though they are gendered as females but they are regarded more as masculine than feminine. They do not have to be beautiful, charmed or innocent, and they don't have to be obedient, responsive, cheerful, kind etc but they might become "androgynous persons,"²⁴ or women who possess both good masculine traits and good feminine traits. By possessing masculine traits they are transgressing the boundaries of gender and they partake in dangerous activities. The masculine features that enable a woman to possess a masculine trait are self-confidence and courage. Almost all Carter's women have self-confidence and courage that is why they are said to be more masculine than



feminine. Since Gothic fiction aims to provoke feelings of horror and terror. Carter's women protagonists stand out – they provoke, they shock, they surprise. They also stir pity and open the readers' eyes to problems they may never have conceived before. No reader will ever stay “untouched” by Carter's women characters.²⁵

In the " Loves of Lady Purple" (1974) the heroine plays the role of a young girl who murders her step-father and his wife and then begins a life of unthinkable crimes and sexual promiscuity. Using her irresistible beauty, she charms men, makes them fall in love with her and finally kills her lovers in a bestial manner. As a result of her monstrous acts, she turns into a marionette that the professor uses in his dramas. This drama is performed every night until the story reaches its climax: the puppet turns into a real woman when the master kisses her. This real woman does the same to the

master as she used to do with her lovers in the enacted stories: she sucks his blood, kills him and then escapes to engage in a life of promiscuity and prostitution²⁶. The inhumanity of her acts makes Lady Purple decay physically and morally, her community casts her out. She lives on drowned bodies she finds on the beach until she metamorphoses into a wooden puppet. The metaphorical resonance of the vampire as domineer, parasite and especially predator is quite clear in this story. The coming to life of the doll, as mentioned earlier, was narrated using highly vampiric imagery.²⁷ Lady Purple springs to life in response to her master's kiss and sucks his blood. What she does to the professor is exactly the same as the scenario which he wrote for her and she performed. Even after becoming a human being, she has no self and no control over her actions. She cannot do anything beyond what the patriarch has decided for her. With a deadly inevitability, she plays out the script written for her. In other words, her sexuality as a woman, just like her sexuality as a puppet, is



programmed and pre-determined. Her sexuality has been constructed for her by the society and she behaves according to what is expected of her. The relationship between the puppet and master is symbolic of the relationship between men and women in the society. The puppeteer here represents patriarchy that writes roles for women and makes them behave according to pre-determined codes²⁸. The puppet, a highly significant symbol of women's situation, has no self and no role in determining her life and conduct. She does not have the least control over what she does. She is just a puppet who cannot choose what to do and what not to do. Lady Purple is the incarnation of what the male dominated society, symbolized by the puppeteer, cannot accept.²⁹ The image of the vampire in this story is exploited to show the horror of a sexually empowered woman. Vampires, these highly attractive images of domination and dependence, like many other Gothic figures, symbolize what we fear and desire at the same time. This kind of Gothic writing usually presents the central female character as both a victim and a brave heroine. The Gothic mode has always been used to deal with problems of gender distinction, structures of power play between the sexes and women's rebellion against patriarchy.³⁰

But a point suggested only at the end of "The Loves of Lady Purple". The fact that Lady Purple becomes a vampire. When the puppet comes to life, she does not become a "conventional" woman, but a vampire woman. She is able to break free from the strings that keep her under the ventriloquist's control. As Funck argues, the same violence that bounded her is what frees her and allows her a satisfaction of her own desires, not those of the ventriloquist³¹. Not only freedom from the violence of the sex/gender system's control, but also from the male desire is represented in Lady Purple's vampire feeding upon her master: his desire, which found in her its materialization, awakens her own desire independently from his³².



In this sense, I would say that the importance of the vampire figure in “The Loves of Lady Purple” is that, through it, Carter demonstrates an alternative way to represent women’s sexuality. The vampire feeding on her master symbolizes the possibility of women’s acting upon her own desires as an alternative to simple repetitions of the performances that are rendered sexually transgressive by the male desires and fantasies that inform patriarchal discourses. What relates this story to its historical context, the 1970s, is exactly this claim of sexual freedom for women.

In the second story "The Lady of the House of Love" (1979), Carter says , " Can a bird only sing the song it knows or can it learn a new song?"³³ This is a powerful metaphor for the question if it is possible for women to break free of their old, rusty roles and to reinvent themselves. This question is essential for Carter and her fiction and explores even more the figure of the vampire to show the same kind of limitation of women’s sexuality by the sex/gender system. Some Gothic motifs are explicit throughout the story: the haunted, decaying castle; the desolate setting with gloomy and mysterious atmosphere; the anxiety generated by violence and transgression; the dark setting; the focus on excesses(of senses and emotions); and the figures of the vampire, of the damsel in distress, and of the hero who releases her.³⁴

She is completely controlled by the expectations of her atrocious ancestors who want her to behave like a proper vampire .She is imprisoned in the traditions that her ancestors determined . In this story ,we have a young woman who feeds on the blood of men. As the only heiress of a very old family, she lives in haunted, decaying castle. The life of living on human beings goes on until she meets a young British officer. For the first time, she falls in love, as a consequence of which she dies as soon as she gives up her routine life and experiences falling in love with a man. She



cannot have a life other than what she has inherited from her ghastly ancestors.³⁵

Her belonging to the puppet-type becomes even clearer when the reader gets to know the thoughts of the young soldier who happens to be her guest. However, in the young soldier she sees a chance to finally change her life and, perhaps, to fulfill her wish and be

human . The soldier's fearless and un-prejudiced attitude and the fact that he is seeing her the way she *is* - and not how others want her to appear – gives her the strength to revolt against her ancestors and, at last, to change her life. She does not kill the young soldier – what would have been the expected behavior by her ancestors – but decides to let him live. This is a brave decision, as it entails her own death. She finally makes her own decision.³⁶

She especially emphasizes the situation of women and the dissatisfaction and isolation which is the result of the control exerted over them. Although the stories discussed in this paper take place in a non-realistic situation, they are highly characteristic of what takes place in the real world. All these stories depict women's rebellious behavior, especially in terms of sexuality. Nevertheless, Carter demonstrates that these so-called rebellious women cannot make significant change to their socially-constructed identities and characteristics³⁷. These transgressive roles are just another part of pre-determined, imposed identities others have created for them. Botting argues that Carter's women have no choice: "they should either conform to the social standards or face death or isolation"³⁸. In such kind of works, the heroine is a woman in conflict with the values of the male-dominated society and the role that the society prescribes for her. In this sense, the end of the story implies and as Lizbeth argues " there are no alternatives for those who do not want to accept the social prescription

of proper female sexuality other than to assume the social prescription of woman's sexual misbehavior prostitution and other perverse sexualities"³⁹.

Even if the sacrifice for her freedom is death. "In death, she looked far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human."⁴⁰ When comparing this transformation with the one of Lady Purple, it can be seen that here, again, the transformation does not succeed entirely. The protagonist of the second story manages to free herself from her puppet status and is successful in taking an important decision for herself, which is a good progress on the way from "Puppet-Woman" to "New Woman". Nevertheless, she cannot make much use of her newly-won freedom, because the price of this freedom is death.⁴¹

Carter tries hard to clarify what she sees as the kind of femininity that should replace the "puppet-type". Her women must be self-confident and powerful. They should not stuck in the traditional role determined for them by the male-dominated society. For Carter, this type of woman represents the ideal which she would like to see achieved in the future. She would like the future to bring, women who autonomously take decisions and who acknowledge and live out their sexual needs and desires.

Notes

1 Botting F. *Gothic*. (London & New York: Routledge press, 1996), p.28

2 Ibid, 27

3 Ibid, 28

4 Ibid, 33

5 Ibid, 32

6 Gelder Ken. *Reading the Vampire*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.98

7 Ibid, 56

8 Wright Lizbeth. *Literature and Gender*. (London: Routledge, 1996), p.88

9 Ibid, p.77



10Ibid,p.56

11Holly Veronica (Ed.). *Blood Read: the Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture.*(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). p. 7

12ibid.,p.6

13Hogle JE (ed.)The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction.(UK: Cambridge University,1998),p.56

14ibid,p.33

15Wright Lizbeth, 98

16Gina Wisker ,Gothic Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity.(Amsterdam: Rodopi Editions.1998),p65

18ibid,65

19ibid,p.33

20Chris Weeden, Angela Carter and Other Stories

21Ibid,p. 21

22Julia Kristene , *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Trans. Leon S. Roudiez.(New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).p,77

23 ibid,p.55

24Ibid,p.43

25ibid,p.46

26Chris Weeden p.32

27Ibid,p. 22

28Ibid,p. 98

29ibid,p.33

30 Neumeier B. “Postmodern Gothic: Desire and Reality in AngelaCarter’s Writing.” In *Modern Gothic*(UK: Manchester University Press,1996),p.44

31Ibid,p. 49

32Ibid,p. 42

33Hogle Jep66,

34Gina Wisker,p34

35Ibid,p22



36Ibid,p,65

37Ibid,p.67

38Botting,54

39Lizbeth,p.23

40Ibid,p.58

41Ibid,p.25

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