

FEMINIST DECONSTRUCTION AND GLIMPSES OF COLONIALISM IN A. CARTER'S *THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE*

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Abstract

Angela Carter offers in her short story belonging to the larger volume *The Bloody Chamber* a highly appreciated spectacle of reversed significations in terms of feminine 'clichés' and/or social standards, which are to be (de)constructed by a doubled-perspective image on Otherness created through gender and colonial issues, as theoretical tools of (re)constructing **meaning**. Transylvania as 'a land of vampires' – a metaphor of otherness and exoticism is further strengthened by the feminine narratives in Western literature through the figure of the Countess and her ambitious attempt of pseudo-colonizing the rational Westerner. Yet, after a process of complex feminine de-genderizing, a counter-colonisation framed within gender reasons may be reinterpreted as a rendering of feminine gender as a social prototype. We may interpret this as an opposition of Western 'authorities' in the field, in front of the Eastern standard of femininity, eventually imposing their own rules.

Key-words: feminist literature, vampirism, gender studies, colonialism, exoticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

We have proposed to read A. Carter's present short story in the light of a psychoanalytical perspective with feminist intrusions, all framed in a poststructuralist colonial discourse. The very spatial context in *The Lady of the House of Love*, reinforced by the almost mythical journey of the Westerner toward an exotic country of Eastern-Europe, has determined us to reconsider gender relations through the lens of colonialism:

A young officer in the British army, blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled, visiting friends in Vienna, decided to spend the remainder of his furlough exploring the little-known uplands of Romania (Carter, 1979: 116).

Exoticism understood as the presence of the Other emerges in a psychoanalytic discourse of youthhood as uncanny in a reversed initiative game of seduction. A question of the dominator/dominated, the power relation between the young British man and the bloody Romanian Countess is scaled in different degrees of distance, as we shall try to depict in what follows.

From a feminist perspective, the text displays a two-phased labelled image of the exotic woman. The evolution from a socially constructed image of woman-vampire to the ambivalent mask of adolescence and eventually to the governed woman who eventually sacrifices herself through death, deconstructs the reader in a postmodern expression of the *mélange* between traditional Eastern tale (*basma*) and Western gothic fiction. We may even dare to say that a Romanian reader is colonised as A. Carter transfers an autochthon pattern to a Westernised spatial discourse, eventually encountered by Western authorities in the field.

II. NARRATIVES OF (FEMININ) BECOMENESS. A THREE-STAGED PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

The three-staged phases of *the woman* in this short story (and eventually on a geographical and historical background) are pondered by a *difference* of perspective, as the narrative voices intertwine in a specific postmodern stream of inner reflections and self-reflections. In a feminist light, at the beginning of the short story¹ we find a powerful, self-aware female-vampire, yet tormenting in a poststructuralist ambivalence of both girlhood and womanhood, questioning chastity and freedom of choice: "perennial sadness of a girl who is both death and the maiden" (Idem, 122). In this first phase, we deal with a paradoxical discourse² of an *Id* that wants to protect a socially fabricated Ego as a resistance manifest in a patriarchal society, translated actually by a monstrous (disintegrated beauty) image, or appearance. This veiled image, or *masquerade* might represent "an experience (...) perpetually on the border between the once inhabited self, and the erasure of that self" (Martin, 2013: 141).

But the Countess herself is indifferent to her own weird authority, as if she were dreaming it. In her dream, she would like to be human; but she does not know if that is possible. (Carter, 1979: 114)

But now she is a woman, she must have men. (Idem, 115)

The second phase represents the narrative perspective of the male character; the image of the woman is distorted and thus, dominated by the *male gaze* that deconstructs the social mask of 'vampirism', revealing yet a masculine stage of the female adolescent. In this phase, the Countess represents "the gothic heroine as a girl who is both innocent and knowing" (Martin, 2013: 136). But this actually can make appeal to a repressed *Id* of girlhood, or the age-specific self-awareness and fear of hideousness and consequences of (conceal). In the symbolic order, perhaps the male gaze represents a social mirror of the Truth, as in Sartre's

¹ We may consider that this coincides with the dawns of feminism in patriarchal societies, such as communist Romania (as Carter's volume was released in '79, ten years before the Revolution in our country).

² We have analyzed the text as a two-voiced structure; we may speculate the presence of a passive one (imaginative, see dream) - the female's one, and an active one - the male's one. Active/passive - Masculine/feminine, as specific binary oppositions in gender studies.

terms, “the Other is simultaneously the origin of self-consciousness and the source of its destruction. To be looked at, or recognised by, the Other, is to become an object of his world, an event which undermines the self-consciousness of one’s own world” (Tripp, 2000: 97). This might also work hand in hand with Freud’s concept of *primary narcissism* and the dependence on the alterity’s reflection as a *replacement* of the desired object. At the same time, the Englishman’s bicycle wheels as a metaphor for the Reason – that is, the symbolic, are reiterated within the Countess’s eyeglasses. Once destroyed, the chances of remaining in the symbolic are erased forever, and her femininity emerges, meaning that she evolves from the sexually neutral girlhood toward womanhood.

The seduction stage of this phase may also depict in the case of both youngsters the uncertainty of one’s own identity and shame of one’s incompleteness (Idem, 98). The question of nakedness and the Countess’s need for obscure lightning in her girlhood stage is also build in a nexus with the Other’s gaze, as Sartre puts it: “I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other...Shame is by nature recognition. I recognise that I am as the other sees me...Thus shame is the shame of oneself before the Other...But at the same time I need the Other in order to realise fully all the structures of my being” (Sartre in Tripp, 2009: 98).

She raises her hands to unfasten the neck of her dress and her eyes well with tears, they trickle down beneath the rim of her dark glasses. She can't take off her mother's wedding dress unless she takes off her dark glasses; she has fumbled the ritual, it is no longer inexorable. The mechanism within her fails her, now, when she needs it most. When she takes off the dark glasses, they slip from her fingers and smash to pieces on the tiled floor. There is no room in her drama for improvisation; (...)

What is she to do now? (Carter, 127)

At the same time, the narrative projection within the unknown/exotic/gothic enhances on the otherness understood as strangeness, in association with *le mal*³, as “the Others are not seen as fellow individual members of the human community, but rather as part of a chaotic, disorganized, and anonymous collectivity” (Nicholson, 1990: 160-1).

Eventually, the utmost stage of colonialism is attained in the third-phase of the Countess’s evolution, when she becomes a governable woman in *a re-inverted expression of the dominator’s seduction discourse*. From womanhood, she is now reduced to a simple object of desire: the doll-woman, in a specific Westernised consumerist understanding of otherness. Her exotic abnormality is wanted to be erased by the dominator and subdued in a West-patterned mechanical re-production of humanness:

We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares. (Carter, 129)

III. CONCLUSIONS

All in all, or instead of conclusions, whether personal scientific achievement and reading experience influences our vision on a literary text, we would dare to assert that there should be a quite strict boundary between pleasure/amateur type of reading and criticism. A literary critique has many things in common with a lawyer; his case – the text; his persuasive strategies – the theoretical approaches that are to be scientifically mastered in an epistemological trajectory toward a never-to-be-fully-attained Truth. As we are inevitably caught within *enunciation*, or in-between strategic attempts of a (syn)thesis between critical approaches, sometimes between sciences. Nevertheless, all these theories/approaches aren’t but the different *façettes* of the same prism of Humanism. But languages are as well in the same situation; within the same referential

³ As for instance, in fundamental patriarchal societies, women were associated with the figure of the Devil.

system, S/s in language A will always differ from the S/s in language B; translation remains a scarce transfer element, yet unlike the transferring process in physics, the very grain of *alétheia* will dissolve and re-incorporate within *intuition*. Because as already said, all critical approach represents nothing but an *attempt* of grasping an infinitesimal percentage of our infinite humanness.

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