

Identities in Movement: Female Depiction and Gender Associations in Angela Carter's Work

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Abstract: The notion of identities in motion, proposed in the title of the thesis, is understood as a kind of investigation of the construction mechanisms of social narratives explored by Angela Carter in her novels and the process through which gender relations are built in them, as well as the author's critical stance on the way in which such relationships are articulated by the dominant ideology. The goal is to highlight her ability to expose aspects of society capable of challenging the relationship between sex and power, which almost always leads to a reflection on men and women's roles. In this sense, the characters in Angela Carter's two novels *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve* constantly question and reframe female identity and gender relations. We'll also talk about how her novels deal with female representation and gender relations, putting them in the setting of female literature. We'll look at how female demonstration and gender relations are handled in the novels she's chosen.

Keywords: Gender, Female identity, Angela Carter, Heroes and Villains and The Passion of New Eve.

Introduction

Studying the representation of women in literary texts and writing by female authors implies identifying how the actions of women sought to reconfigure the public social space, defined as male par excellence, so that it would become a place of coexistence between genders. It is not uncommon, however, to still find images that associate women with the mythical ideals of femininity, whether in the media or even in literature, opposed by feminist criticism and gender studies. Representations have crossed the ages and established symbolic thinking about images of the feminine: on the one hand, the figure of the mother, the devoted, sublimated wife; on the other, the corrupter, the sensual, and the witch. Representative figures such as Eve permeate the imagination of Western society, considered responsible for the fall of man and his misfortune, the expulsion from paradise. The term femininity¹ is associated with the notion of a culturally constructed feminine "essence" in the model of patriarchal society, expressed through imposed standards, which are taken as natural. Such patterns are the result of the binary oppositions that constitute the patriarchal value system, in which the feminine is normally expressed as negative, while the masculine as positive. Therefore, the paradigm of sexual dualism organizes the social and cultural axes. Through the same insightful path, with its own enhancements and modifications, the fairy tale emerged for Angela Carter as a vehicle for socio-political commentary. When resuming the dialogue with gender in her novels, the author uses this narrative form as a means of weaving her critique of patriarchy, whose values were still in force in twentieth-century England.

In this context, the spaces of each one were designated: men had their place in the public sphere, a place where the political world, the empire, work, in short, power, were concentrated, while women were entrusted with the private sphere, that is, the life of the domestic world, where the role of mother, wife or daughter was reserved for her. The limits of femininity, determined by the male order, were for a long time a way of demarcating female identity. Despite the growing recognition of criticism after his death, coming to be considered a kind of "urban legend" (Gamble, 1997, p. 1) in academic centers due to the increase in the number of studies about him in England and the United States, reaching more than forty proposals for doctoral theses between 1992 and 1993 (SAGE, 1994b, p.3). Considering the scientific scope of the author abroad, we carried out a survey of the main researches developed in the academic environment. Reading works related to Angela Carter's literary style and interviews as a foundation to better understand her writing, as well as her biography.

Some theoretical works and articles were of great relevance for the execution of the work, helping us both in understanding and analysing the texts. The articles written by the author, gathered in the collection *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writing* (1997), were also important for the analysis of novels, as they created a link between our object of study and the context of creation, given that, if human thought is directly related to the social-historical space, this link can elucidate and raise numerous considerations. We hope, with this research, not only to elucidate how Angela Carter worked the narrative techniques in her work, but also to point out how, through these, the author sought attempts to think about the human condition in an oppressive environment. We also hope to contribute to the studies carried out on the life and work of Angela Carter, which although they have increased in number.

Review of Literature

According to Bordieu (2007, p.117), the social world works as a market of symbolic goods dominated by the male view: to be, when it comes to women, is to be perceived by the male gaze, whose gaze is marked by categories of the same gender. In this context, to be feminine is to avoid the properties and practices that can function as signs of virility, denying you the right to the attribute that is characteristically masculine: power. Makeup, inserted in the symbolic capital reproduction system, is part of the group of social signs that characterize the female subject. However, Angela Carter subverts the meaning of the sign by associating it with the character's control when painting her own face. So she has the power to create her own image. Interestingly, this domain seems to be reserved for the more experienced characters of Angela Carter. That same action returns with Fevers, in *Nights at the Circus*, and the Chance sisters, in *Wise Children*.

Heroes and Villains, according to Lorna Sage (1994a, p.19), "allows readers to see how binary oppositions (inside/outside, culture/nature, male/female) are challenged." Above all, this questioning is conceived in terms of gender. The insistence on the regime of opposition and exclusion that characterizes both the Teachers' and the Barbarians' communities is seen in the novel as an effect of the prevailing misogyny of both societies. By refusing the patriarchal discipline of the Teachers' rationalism at the beginning of the narrative and resisting the irrational oppression of the Barbarians, Marianne finds herself in a sort of in-between, which allowed her to recognize the other in herself. Plural identities are being discussed in today's world. Stuart Hall (2001, p.7) claims that in post-modernity, the old identities that once stabilised the social world are in decline, giving way to new identities and resulting in a fragmented character for the modern individual, who was previously seen as a unified subject. According to the author, the so-called "identity crisis," or the crisis of paradigms arising from Reason Illuminist's conception of science and knowledge, is part of a larger process of change that displaced modern society's structures, shaking the cadres that provided individuals with a stable anchorage in the world.

Gender relations and Female identity in selected novels

In 1975, Angela Carter wrote an article for the British magazine *New Society* in which she revealed her obsession with the female image. She begins the text by claiming that, at the time, she had spent a mind-blowing weekend, staring and snipping at the faces of women who appeared in women's magazines, in an attempt to understand what was supposed to look like women should have and why. When questioning these images and the conceptions and social roles attached to them, Carter concludes that the represented feminine, in fact, constituted itself as a character, since it did not portray the real, but ideal woman, and the idea of femininity in which these images are based on products, or rather inventions, of a male society.

The suggestive title of the article, "The Wound in the Face", refers to one of the images that caught the author's attention, as she comments in the course of her discussion: the use of black lipstick and red eyeshadows, a satire of cosmetics, adopted for a brief period of time in the late sixties. For Carter, by inverting the colors commonly used in such products (red lipstick and black eyeshadows), the entire theory of cosmetics, produced to beautify those who wear them, was also inverted. The best part of the joke, as she satirizes, was that the look itself was monstrous, instantly converting any pretty woman into a grotesque figure: "every face a work of anti-art" (Carter, 1997, p.111).

Despite the disparity of the act, Carter says it took a lot of courage to remain in such a state of "visual offense." Painting the eyes as if they were self-inflicted wounds, according to the author, was to make evident, in one's own face, the violence inflicted by the environment in which they lived:

"Women are allowed - indeed, encouraged to exhibit the sign of their symbolic castration, but only in the socially sanctioned place. To transpose it upwards is to allow its significance to become apparent" (Carter, 1997, p.112).

The feminine identity in question: "Woman" and gender Gender studies emerged and asserted themselves as a result of the broadening of the theoretical frontiers of feminist criticism, arising, in turn, from

the intellectual and political aspects of the women's movement. Considering that gender systems, that is, the relations between male and female, are historical cultural constructions that do not emanate from the nature of bodies, but from a patriarchal symbolic order, it became politically necessary to look at discourse as a locus representation, since it is also an important place of contestation of naturalized social practices.

Based on gender as a constitutive element of social relations founded on the perceived differences between the sexes, Joan Scott (1990) claims that it is a first way of giving meaning to power relations. The differences are based on culturally available symbols, which evoke symbolic representations and myths. Normative concepts emphasize interpretations of the meaning of symbols, and strive to limit metaphorical possibilities that binary oppose the conceptions of masculine and feminine.

From the representation of gender, it is possible to perceive the concrete and symbolic organization of social life and the power connections in the relations between the sexes. Simone de Beauvoir had already explained the condition centered on a gender perspective on women and the established patterns of female behavior in *The second sex*. Reflecting on the artificial character of a socially constructed femininity, she questions:

Everyone agrees that there are females in the human species; they constitute today, as in the past, more or less half of humanity; and yet we are told that femininity "is in danger"; and they exhort them: "be women, remain women, become women." Every female human being is therefore not necessarily female; it must participate in that mysterious and threatened reality that is femininity. Is this secreted by the ovaries? Or is it frozen at the bottom of a platonic sky? (Beauvoir, 1988, p.11)

The passage draws attention to the distinction between biological identity and social identity, in addition to pointing to the male origin of ideals about women that prevailed over the centuries. In this sense, Beauvoir starts from the biological definition of "woman" for the social construction of the female gender. By delinking sex and gender, Beauvoir constructs the notions of male and female as products of a cultural system.

After *Some Years*, American philosopher Judith Butler takes up Beauvoir's assumptions and asserts in 1990's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that being a woman is not an essence, but a performance, that is, the gender configuration is socially constructed and learned. Butler claims that while the unity of the notion of "women" is often invoked to construct a solidarity of identity, a division intrudes into the feminist subject through the distinction between sex and gender. Originally conceived to question the formulation that biology is destiny, such a distinction, according to Butler, serves the thesis that, as indisputable as sex may seem in biological terms, gender is culturally constructed. Thus, if gender is the junction of cultural meanings assumed by the body, it cannot be said that it stems from a particular sex. "Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexual bodies and culturally constructed genders" (Butler, 2003, p. 24).

Locating Angela Carter's writing in the context of female authorship literature through the perspective of feminist criticism and gender studies, we can say that the Cartean work allows us to broaden the understanding of the issues that permeate the feminine, dialoguing and even anticipating certain discussions, as the question of the relationship between sex and gender present in the contemporary feminist debate. As we will point out as, Angela Carter proposes to discuss, through fiction, how this relationship can promote inequalities, but it can also be challenged.

Angela Carter describes *The Passion of New Eve* as a deeply moral novel, destined to teach men a lesson, in an interview with Santiago Rey (1991, p.24). Unlike most novels, where the author explores the image of castration symbolically, Evelyn's penis is surgically removed and a female anatomy is created. Adopting a female name is part of the effort to reacquire this new persona with the universe of gender experiences with which she must come to terms.

Over time, women were the object of a historical report that relegated them to silence and invisibility, since their performance took place almost exclusively in the private environment of the family and home. The public space belonged to men and few women ventured into it. Consequently, female identity was shaped by male discourse.

The women's movement showed us that, since women's insertion in the public sphere in the second half of the 20th century, the private world, where they were reserved for the roles of daughter, mother or wife, became insufficient, as it limited their freedom to make decisions, as well as their right to express themselves. From this position, women reaffirmed the importance of their voice, considered as subjects endowed with their own identity. The insertion of women in writing, a universe that until then was essentially masculine, allowed the breaking of the cultural barrier of the separation of incommunicable worlds, and the woman made her voice heard, which was silenced before. As the feminist vision became more and more present, the roles and representations of women began to be critically analyzed, seeking to break existing paradigms in the cultural sphere that were based on the values of the patriarchal model of society. Studying the representation of women

in literary texts and writing by female authors allowed us to identify how the actions of women sought to reconfigure the public social space, defined as male par excellence, so that it would become a place of coexistence between genders. By offering significant tactics for the construction of new subjectivities, women's contemporary writing seeks to map new territories of female autonomy. We believe this to be the case for the English author Angela Carter.

In this work researcher proposed to show that Angela Carter's novels are texts that, from a feminist perspective, open space for discussion on the notion of female identity in all its complexity. Although the author's relationship with the critic was often ambivalent, being accused of reproducing and even reinforcing the patriarchal regime against which she writes, as Patricia Dunker, Avis Lewallen and Robert Clark claim, for example, we proposed to discuss how, from the beginning of his literary career, Carter spoke out in favor of a social order in which women are not subjugated.

In her early novels, she is accused of placing female characters in the face of the manipulation and imminent destruction of powerful male figures, reinforcing the woman's condition as a victim. We demonstrate, however, that the author places her critical stance on patriarchal values between the lines of her works, presenting in her fiction the desire to understand, elucidate the condition of women and not to repair gaps left by violence, domination or invisibility, exploring, through the practice of writing, the contestation of old paradigms. In this way, we stand alongside critics who understand that Angela Carter's work is in favor of the female subject.

Placing Carter's writing in the context of female authorship literature through the bias of feminist criticism and gender studies, we could say that the Carterian work allows us to broaden the understanding of the issues that permeate the feminine, dialoguing and even anticipating certain discussions, such as the issue of the relationship between sex and gender present in the contemporary feminist debate. In examining the ways in which gender is given as a social construction, Carter also calls into question traditional notions of identity and subjectivity. Her characters exist within a complex network of ever-changing relationships in which they are in a constant process of creating themselves. The affirmation of identity overcomes the essentialism of well-marked places, to move across borders, articulating not fixed identities, but identifications in process. We point out that one of the main ways in which Carter sought to subvert any culturally determined inequality was by claiming, as well as redefining, the stereotyped forms of female and male representations and their interrelationships. Questioning these images and the conceptions and social roles attached to them, Carter points out that the represented female does not actually portray the real woman, but rather an ideal image, and the idea of femininity on which these images are based is the invention of a male society. In this context, the representation of bodies helped us to understand gender relations, since the body is the catalyst for the social practices that surround it.

Through the trajectory of the characters within the universe in which they are circumscribed, it was possible to observe in the narratives a proposal for re-evaluating the experiences of women in Angela Carter's nine novels. We address the issue of violence in the patriarchal culture materialized in the image of the wound on the face inflicted on Ghislaine in *Shadow Dance* and in the relationship of automaton bodies; we point out how fairy tales are revisited in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Heroes and Villains* through the construction of the characters Melanie and Marianne; we indicate how the male gaze projects anxiety onto the female body through the women portrayed through the perspective of the narrator Joseph in *Several Perceptions*; we problematize the search for a viable body with Annabel in *Love*; we point out how the construction of marked bodies and the image of the muse occurs in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* imposition of standards and norms of behavior, interpreted according to the dominant ideology, following the interests and social imagination. By taking the discourse for themselves, however, the characters use it as a strategy to resist the system of patriarchal dominance, which excludes them as a subject, as is the case with *Fevvers in Nights at the Circus* and *Dora in Wise Children*.

The comparative analysis between Angela Carter's fourth novel, *Heroes and Villains*, and her seventh work, *The Passion of New Eve*, allowed us to discuss in depth the way in which the author explores the issue of identities in movement and of gender relationships in her writing. In the post-apocalyptic world of *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne, in the imposed condition of a bride, switches from the repressive patriarchal community, in which attempts have been made to define her in the terms of her father and the codes of the Teachers' community, for the barbarian tribe, who also tries to mold her according to the precepts of Donally, a kind of father figure, and her future husband, Jewel. As an object of value, the character's life in these communities follows, at first, a movement of subordination in relation to men, passing from the role of daughter to wife.

In opposition to the notion of the classic body, Eve's transformation also seems to evoke the image of the grotesque body, a concept idealized by Mikhail Bakhtin in his studies of Rabelais' work. Regarding these notions, Gil (1980, p. 64) points out that while the first follows a code of perfection, in which symmetry, harmony and organic unity impose precise norms for the construction of the figure, in which nothing excessive

can be seen, everything is balanced and in measure, "it is a finished body, rigorously delimited, closed, shown from the outside, not mixed, individual", the second unfolds the movement of life: "being neither closed nor finished, it surpasses itself, transposes its own limits" (Gil, 1980, p.64).

By bringing the materiality of the body to her text, questioning the way gender appearances are constructed, Angela Carter seems to distance the female representation from the high, ideal and abstract plane. It is this body, the one that sets itself in motion and exceeds its own limit that breaks with the norms, making room for recreation:

Often depicted as a double (...), it manifests the richness of the forms of life, their transformation, their death and their rebirth: thus shakes the entire system that would tend to constitute itself in power, that is, that would make of a 'technique of the body', of a rite, the means of its subjection. (Gil, 1980, p.64).

In *The Passion of New Eve*, the rigidity of the patriarchal model is represented by the poet Zero. Endowed with an eye and a leg (symbolically phallic characterization), the character brings together all the exacerbated characteristics of patriarchal power. His behavior is entirely defined by the desire to preserve a dogmatic attitude, accomplished by the tendency to reproduce male perception. Zero is the first man Eve has contacted with after being turned into a woman. By rescuing her from the desert he rapes her and forces her to marry him. Again, violence and oppression are seen as the double movement of patriarchal space.

The male gaze is reaffirmed by the film industry in *The Passion of New Eve*, which is part of modern technology for producing desirable sexual subjects. The cinematographic illusion creates an ethereal image of a woman displaying feminine virtues such as suffering and passivity. The on-screen image of a damsel in distress and abandoned conveys an erotic exchange for the audience, sadistic for the male, masochistic for the female. Tristessa is the iconic star who promulgates this type of femininity; the on-screen image of a damsel in distress and abandoned conveys an erotic exchange for the audience, sadistic for the male, masochistic for the female. The relationship between Zero, Tristessa, and Eve, as discussed here, reflects the production of male and female subjectivity.

In the course of the plot, however, it is discovered that Tristessa is actually a man, revealing that her image is also a construction. Thus, notions of gender are brought to the novel as cultural constructions, not necessarily associated with biological character.

Tristessa aspires to be a woman because she is drawn to the feminine qualities she embodies. In her glass house, she becomes a ghost, as illusory as her celluloid image; for her, the concept of woman is to be everything and nothing at the same time, an absence of being. Her transparent mansion of hers is a metaphor for the Hollywood film industry and the production of desirable icons, presented as artificial, such as the numerous wax statues of artists present in her home such as Jean Harlow, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe.

Fittingly, Eve's first encounter with Tristessa takes place in this space. The glass tears that lie in the actress's garden are associated both with her name and the nature of the femininity she has built: as Evelyn sees, Tristessa's impact depends on mirroring others in a way that no real woman could ever achieve. If glass signifies the medium through which gender images are manufactured and transmitted, its rupture seems to allow Tristessa and Evelyn to relate to one another free from the distortion of external symbols and impositions.

If in *Heroes and Villains* Angela Carter makes explicit her critical stance in relation to myths and the attempt to perpetuate, through them, the hierarchy of genders with the reaffirmation of the patriarchal structure, in *The Passion of New Eve*, the criticism is carried out by the parody of character Mother and her matriarchy, as well as her attempt to subvert patriarchy by reconstructing the myth of origin.

While fleeing into the desert, Evelyn is captured by a group of women's movement she met in New York. The emblem of this movement is a broken phallus and the place where women live, Beulah, is an underground city whose architecture is modelled on the shape of a womb. The head of the matriarchy of this city is the Mother, entitled as the "Great Parricide".

We discuss how Carter portrays social roles in narratives, as well as how she tries to unmask, through fiction, the patriarchal oppression that consistently seeks to impose certain standards of femininity on women. By destabilizing gender as a natural and inviolable category, the author also called into question traditional notions of female identity, thus breaking with categories of representation of the female in different ways: myths and stereotypes are revisited in order to establish a critical stance to patriarchal ideals on which discourses about the figure of women are based. Whether it's by choice or necessity, her characters take on roles that others have assigned them. Identities are revealed as a series of roles or appearances in the worlds depicted by these narratives, which is to say: performance. It's for this reason we believe that Angela Carter's refusal to give her characters a fixed identity questions ideas like essentialism and the values imposed by society's patriarchal model.

The notion of identities in movement could be understood within the investigation process of the construction mechanisms of social narratives explored by Carter in his novels and the process through which

gender relations are built in them, as well as the critical stance of the author towards the way such relationships are articulated by the dominant ideology. In this way, we sought to highlight her ability to expose aspects of society capable of questioning the relationship between sex and power, and to lead, almost invariably, to a reflection on the roles played by men and women.

Conclusion

As we could see in the above discussion, Angela Carter's characters at the same time dialogue and break with categories of representation of the feminine in different ways: myths and stereotypes are revisited, in order to establish a critical posture to the patriarchal ideals on which discourses about the figure the woman. Next, we'll explore the theme further in Angela Carter's fourth novel, *Heroes and Villains*, and her seventh, *The Passion of New Eve*.

The end of *The Passion of New Eve* suggests a possible escape from gender stereotypes, to which performance is the condition for existence. The notions of masculine and feminine go beyond biological categories, they are roles that people must play. The recurrence of duality in the work, however, indicates Angela Carter's awareness that the notion of performance itself carries a contradictory meaning. On the one hand, this concept can be considered as liberatory, indicating a multiple and malleable subject, on the other hand, considering the number of accessible roles for the subject, it can be limited by the ideological structure within which it is located (Gamble, 1997, p.129). This problematization also seems to be present in *Heroes and Villains*. Although Marianne recognizes the performative character of her presence in the tribe of the Barbarians, the character is faced with the limitations of the social roles reserved for women in the patriarchal model of society: daughter, wife and mother. Faced with this problematization, Angela Carter turns to questioning the social narratives that reinforce this ideological structure, such as the myth of Adam and Eve, for example, in order to expose them also as constructions.

In this sense, we could see that Angela Carter constantly questions and reframes the female identity and gender relations through the characters in her novels, and that the notion of identities in movement can help us in the investigation of her thinking and writing.

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