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Womanliness as Masquerade: Tracing Luce Irigaray's Theory in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*¹

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Abstract

Published in 1977 with a great deal of controversy within European feminist circles, Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* presents the author's commentary on the modern phallogocentric culture, commodification of women and their counteraction disguised within the very patriarchal structures. Irigaray, for instance, views womanliness and female submissiveness as a strategy that women have always made use of in order to develop a much more unfettered self behind such masks. Women masquerade as objects to be consumed to achieve a freer voice from the patriarchal discourse and to establish themselves as the ultimate subjects of a never-ending cultural exchange.

Irigaray's views on female strategies such as masquerade and performativity are applicable to a feminist reading of Angela Carter's famous postmodern novel, *Nights at the Circus* (1984), which critiques the patriarchal ideology with its suggestion of a New Woman. Fevvers, the protagonist of the novel, imprisons the male voice in the novel behind the invisible cage of her own world of performances and uses her womanliness to suppress the male willpower to the degree of self-submission. In this respect, this study argues that Carter's generation of Fevvers as the New Woman is reminiscent of what Irigaray theorizes in her above article with respect to questions like womanliness, masquerade and performativity.

Keywords: womanliness, masquerade, performativity, New Woman, Irigaray, Fevvers

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Introduction

Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, a controversial and inspiring treatise on female sexuality, is first translated into English in 1985 having groundbreaking repercussions among Feminist critics with her introduction of such new terms to the feminist criticism as mimicry and masquerade as strategies women use to achieve discursive superiority. In a broader perspective, Irigaray argues in the book that throughout history, sexuality of the females have been termed by the dominant masculine discourse based on a sexual binarism that views male genitalia as "the only sexual organ of recognizable value" (1985:23). For her, women possess autoerotic capabilities thanks to their biological gifts like the two lips of the clitoris caressing each other all the time. Yet, women have always been distracted by the false premises that they can only matter if they "at last come to possess an equivalent of the male organ" (24). Irigaray defines such fantasies as woman's "masochistic prostitution [...] to a desire that is not her own which leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man" (25). Such tendencies distort women's potentialities in exploring their own biological and, thus, social primacy over men and in contributing to the deep-rooted female civilization to come up with a different discourse.

In patriarchal societies, where they are not given any voice in social and domestic spheres, women have always been confined to servitude for their fathers, husbands and brothers alternately or at the same time. In such an atmosphere, these women, especially those possessing a free spirit and intellectual ambitions, develop ways to cope with what is imposed on them by the male gaze and voice. In order to possess the phallus, metaphorically "the only visible and morphologically designatable organ, or the penis" (26), women have begun to make use of "all the masquerades of 'femininity' that are expected of her" (27). These masquerades involve all the social and domestic roles that are imposed on women or womanliness as a means of sustaining and reviving man's desire and reflecting his beauty, strength, superiority to himself. However, Heath contends that what masquerade implies is "a successful intellectual woman who seeks reassurance from men after her public engagements, reassurance above all in the form of sexual attentions" (1986: 48). Women, in time, begin to use their womanliness as a strategy to achieve their own voice behind this mask.

Angela Carter, in her 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus*, draws the portrait of an extraordinary female figure in a 19th century European setting, a kind of New Woman who makes use of such strategies to achieve sovereignty over men. Reminiscent of what femininity as masquerade implies, Carter's protagonist, Fevvers, appears to be at peace with her

femininity, even exaggerates it to some extent, to create a much freer personal space for herself behind what is seen. In this respect, this study argues that Carter's generation of Fevvers as the New Woman functions as an application of what Irigaray theorizes in her above article with respect to questions like womanliness, masquerade and performativity.

More on Masquerade, Mimicry and Performativity

Irigaray elaborates on the masquerade in her abovementioned book and introduces a new term, which she borrows from post-colonial theory, to the feminist criticism: mimicry. In her reinterpretation of the term, she defines mimicry as a defence mechanism a woman must wholeheartedly put into practice in order to "recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (76). In other words, a woman must play with the idea of "mimicry. She 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" (76). Irigaray's redefinition of the term adds a positive meaning to mimicry as a subverting strategy based on a deliberate assumption of feminine posture so that women can uncover the male strategies:

[Mimicry] means to resubmit herself [...] to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible [...] "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere [...] (76).

Irigaray's terminology is quickly adopted by other feminist critics and theorists who direct their attention to masquerade and its masterfully use against sexual and social subordination of women to men. Castle, for instance, describes masquerade as a microcosm in which this subordination ceases to exist. For him, "the masquerade symbolize[s] the signs of exchange and domination, and independent of the prevailing sexual economy" (1986: 255). He draws attention to the strategies practiced by women with an emphasis on men's obsession with physical appearance in their definitions of womanliness. He observes that the masquerade is "from the start ideally suited to the satisfaction of scopophilic and exhibitionist urges. Bodies were highlighted... The event put a premium on the sensuality of the visual. Not surprisingly, masked individuals were seen as fetishistically exciting" (38-39). Riviere, on the other hand, approaches the issue from a different angle and emphasizes the action rather than appearance in the employment of masquerade as well. He describes masquerade as a strategy to "court approval through flirtatious performance in order to pre-empt the anger [a

woman] feared might ensue for taking her place in what she perceived to be a male domain for power” (1986:39). For her, womanliness is a means “to show that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” (35).

With regard to Irigaray’s understanding of the masquerade and mimicry, it is possible to argue that she bases her conception largely on what Freud called ‘femininity’ and a possible subversion of it for a greater purpose, to come up with a hidden voice under the guise of womanliness. She argues:

The masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in men’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain “on the market” in spite of everything. But they are there as objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy. What do I mean by masquerade? [...]The belief, for example, that it is necessary to become a woman, a “normal” one at that, whereas a man is a man from the outset. (1985:133–34)

In this respect, women must strive to become a normal woman, a typical one in appearance and manners or to guise themselves under the masquerade of femininity or to appear to have enveloped themselves “in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men” (133-134) to achieve their own. Doane also agrees upon the same interpretation and views masquerade as a means to fill in what Lacan verbalizes as the ‘Lack’ or to possess the ‘phallus’:

Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic [...] To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image (1982:81-82).

Such an argument is reminiscent of what Butler proposes as the definition of her idea of ‘performativity’, in which she contends that gender is a social construct performed on the surface of the body through bodily acts, gestures and desire. In this context, human beings create social roles for themselves “in the sense that the essence or identit[ies] that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1999:173).

Womanliness as Masquerade in *Night’s at the Circus*

Irigaray’s and Butler’s theories of performativity and masquerade are applicable to Angela Carter’s *Night’s at the Circus*, especially in the protagonist’s, a free-spirited winged

female aerialist named Sophie Fevvers, under-handed subversion of womanliness into a strategy for fulfilling her own desires. While posing as a Cupid and a prostitute in Madam Schreck's brothel on the one hand, she fires toy arrows to men on the other. Fevvers even exaggerates her womanliness to the point that she imprisons the male protagonist of the novel, an American journalist named Jack Walser, into her world of performances.

Angela Carter, in her monumental novel *Nights at the Circus*, attempts to challenge the false assumptions that female roles in society are fixed and problematize the validity of Grand Narratives that claim to be the voice of all-encompassing definitions. With Fevvers' defiance of all the social impositions and shattering of all conventional expectations from a woman in the modern society, Carter turns the social and sexual binaries and hierarchies upside down and gives the womankind wings which symbolize her liberation from the patriarchal order. She gives a voice to the 'New Woman' in her novel, a voice that writes history from the female perspective which the men, Walser in this case, cannot help but consent to. With her rhetorical narrative skills, Fevvers manages to suppress the male voice in the novel and to make Walser dependent on her story to come up with a rational explanation.

With her fearless subversion of female roles in the patriarchal society, Fevvers amazes Walser, the possessor of the pen as the phallic symbol of power and the writer of his/story, to the degree of a magical spell and enslaves him behind the bars of her imagination. Walser cannot set himself free, because he wants/needs to learn the reasons and details behind her outstanding social stance. Yet, Fevvers' narration excludes the male point of view just as the whole western history and rationalism did in opposition to female voice. Walser, the writer of stories and master of rationalization, is now reduced to the position of a listener who ponders all the time: "How does she do that?" (4). As the whole male tradition has taught him, Walser tries to find reasonable explanations to what he sees in Fevvers' case, which proves futile until he gets rid of the male point of view at the end of the novel: "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!" (13).

Walser's obsession with verisimilitude deepens his dependence on Fevvers' story or voice throughout the novel and, even after the interview, Walser makes his mind to join the circus at the end of the first chapter, as he was deliberately left enchanted and with unanswered questions by Fevvers: "Her voice. It was as if Walser had become as prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife [...] Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a

siren's" (47). Fevvers deliberately creates an air of mystery during her narrations and during the interview, by which she prolongs her metaphorical death as the outstanding 'New Woman'. Walser's possible answers to Fevvers' mysteries will bring her to a kind of death if he manages to come up with a logical explanation in his interview. In other words, the more Walser manages to place Fevvers within the expected frameworks, the closer she will come to the end of her life as 'the' woman. In this respect, Fevver needs to keep up her stories which give the man a feeling of incompleteness, incapability and imperfection regarding her vision of life.

Similarly, Lizzie functions as a supplement to Fevvers' extraordinary story, which makes Walser feel "more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place; or a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night" (43). With her enslavement of Walser to her narration, Fevvers proves that she is not to be toyed by anybody and she is in charge of her actions and life. Fevvers never makes clear to Walser whether she is 'fact or fiction' and by that she gives the biggest response to a whole cannon of works written on women. Sceats also agrees upon such an interpretation and she contends that Carter's reaction is a battle against the 'social fiction' "to achieve some sort of agency for women in particular in the face of those constraints" (2007: 87) created by it. Fevvers deliberately steps out of the social expectations and makes the central discourse unable to define her being. Out of curiosity and hunger for a thorough knowledge of life, the male vision becomes possessed by what is unknown to him and the female voice guarantees its own survival.

Fevvers cleverly exploits the male power and uses it for her own survival; as Walser needs to keep her safe and sound to achieve a sense of completion and closure in his mind. "Fevvers lassoons him with her narrative and drags him along with her before he'd had a chance to ask questions" (67). She achieves a thorough control over her male partner with her stories and manages to overpower him, subverting all pre-determined gender roles. She manages to imprison Walser into her narration with her artful use of her femininity as a masquerade or her womanliness as a strategy "for specific social and psychological purposes" (Stoddart, 2007:38). From the very early pages of the novel, Fevvers plays with the loopholes within human perception and centres her magic right between reality and fantasy. While she performs her womanliness to the very extremes on the one hand, she denies this womanliness with a witty exaggeration of it on the other. She makes use of every single detail, ranging from dressing and make up to feminine gestures and manners, in her presentation of herself drowse her audience, particularly Walser, off throughout the novel: "One lash off, one lash

on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror with impersonal gratification” (Carter, 2006:4). Fevvers intentionally overdoes what is generally associated with womanliness and exaggerates the expected symbols of femininity as a parody of the social norms, to show that all these realities are no more than social constructs. Carter’s vivid description of Fevvers’ physical appearance in the scene right before her aerobatics supports such a claim: “Bouquets pelt the stage. Since there is no second-hand market for flowers, she takes no notice of them. Her face, thickly coated with rouge and powder so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, it wreathed in triumphant smiles; her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood’s grandmother” (16-17). Fevvers makes use of her physical appearance both to remain within and step out of the prescribed roles for women in the patriarchal society by deliberate exaggeration.

Fevvers mimics the expected female roles and appearances throughout the novel in order to hide her true intentions. In other words, she produces herself as an object in order to escape objectification. She openly confesses her true intentions to Walser during the interview with a realistic evaluation of her current situation, saying:

I existed only as an object in men's eyes after the night-time knocking on the door began. Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world? I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! (42).

By giving her protagonist such an awareness to the socially constructedness of the gender roles in the late 19th century setting, Carter evokes Butler’s ideas regarding performativity of gender and that individuals live “within a complex network of ever-changing relationships, in which they are simultaneously created by others as they (recreate themselves in relation to how they are seen and what they see” (Root, 1999:3). In such a despotic patriarchal society, however, Carter’s Fevvers makes use of this performative nature of gender roles and manages to develop her own way out of the limits of the male gaze in the creation of her identity.

Through Fevvers’ being a show woman, a whore and winged heroine, Carter also problematizes the false assumptions dominating the 19th century societies regarding the social roles and occupations of the women, either as the angel in the house or as an indecent woman outside the patriarch’s command. The settings Carter chooses for her novel also provide the ideal atmosphere for subversion of pre-defined gender roles, as the brothel, the freak museum

and the circus are places where the residents usually wear masks and live double lives on and behind the stage:

By choosing places like the brothel, the museum and the circus as settings Carter seems to discuss the object status that women are prescribed by the patriarchal order. Such places of confinement used as the settings of the novel help the reader think about the place of women in society. So, it can be said that thanks to the choice of these places of confinement, the concept of woman as an object designed to be looked at penetrates *Nights at the Circus* (Kılıç, 2009: 102).

Fevvers apparently does not feel ashamed of the fact that she is selling her body as a show woman or as a whore to men, as she is aware that she is wearing the mask of a whore to hide her true personality. She confesses to Lizzie that she has always worn two masks to achieve a voice of her own: “My being, my me-ness, is unique and indivisible. To sell the use of myself for the enjoyment of another is no thing; I might even offer freely, out of gratitude or in the expectation of pleasure. [...] But the essence of myself may not be given or taken” (333). At the end of the novel, Fevvers manages to turn the image of women as a fragile and submissive being upside down and to reveal that there is no such thing as sexual or social superiority in nature: “Her released feathers brushed against the walls; [Walser] recalled how nature had equipped her only for the ‘woman on top’ position and rustled on his straw mattress” (347).

Conclusion

Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex which Is Not One* proves a rather controversial and groundbreaking treatise on the phallogentric culture and commodification of women as well as how they can counteract such impositions from within the patriarchal structures. As Irigaray argues, women can and should use their womanliness and ‘assumed’ submissiveness as a strategy to produce a much more unfettered and self-sufficient identity beneath the surface. Thus, women achieve their voice independently of the patriarchal discourse on the one hand while masquerading as submissive, fragile creatures on the other. By objectifying themselves on the face of it, they secure their position as the ultimate subjects of a never-ending struggle on the cultural, social and personal levels.

With an eye to Irigaray’s views on female sexuality and potential strategies, it is possible to do a feminist reading of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, which offers a critique of the patriarchal ideology by means of an untraditional female character masking herself under traditionality. Fevvers incarcerates the male voice in her own world of

performances and uses her womanliness as a means to debilitate the male willpower to the degree of self-submission. Carter, thus, manages to destabilize commonly-held gender roles and to write the myth of the New Woman who determines the social and sexual framework she should fit into. She anticipates what Irigaray and Butler propose as the key to an independent female voice, like an awareness of the performative nature of gender roles and the chances to subvert womanliness as imposed on them by the patriarchal system. Through the voice of Buffo, the chief clown, Carter gives the overall message of the whole novel: “We can invent our own faces! *We make ourselves*” (141, italics mine).

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