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A COMPARISON OF ANGELA CARTER'S FAIRY-TALE MOTIFS IN POST MODERN  
FANTASIES WITH HER PREDECESSORS UNDER BUTLER'S GENDER THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Conducting a comparative study of Angela Carter's fairy tale motifs in postmodern fantasies with her predecessors under Judith Butler's theory of gender was the purpose of the present study. This study argues that Carter's female characters are caged in a role that restricts their movement as an individual and that the feminine role Carter creates for the protagonist resembles Butler's perception of gender in relation to norms which function as a restrictive factor rather than a liberating one. Following the analysis of the selected stories the findings of the story revealed that gender serves to impose social limitations on females in the works under the study and Carter's work is almost the same as her predecessors in this respect under Butler's gender theory. The present study gains significance as the findings can shed more light on an important aspect, namely gender factor in the development of relations throughout the stories under the study and besides that the applicability of Butler's gender theory to the selected stories of Angela Carter.

**Key words:** postmodern feminism, postmodern sexuality

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INTRODUCTION

Several postmodern fairy tale motifs such as 'phallic mother', 'vagina dentate', 'monstrous feminine' etc. have been introduced, coined and analyzed by different scholars but the present study traces for gender based motifs introduced by Judith Butler's gender theory in Angela Carter's selected stories which serve to limit, lower and degrade female to animal and base identity and to compare Carter with her predecessors in this respect. The most important thematic aspect in Carter's works is the critical depiction of the gender, sexuality and identity with a focus on women and according to Bristow (1997) "few contemporary writers have looked as long and as hard as Carter into the cultural construction of male and female sexuality" (p.2). Carter employs fairy tale context to work within and against the conventions of this field and allow the critical discussion and deconstruction of the traditional discourses according to Muller (1997).

Review of the related literature

Without any doubt the main thematic aspect in Carter's works is nothing but the critical depiction of the gender, sexuality and identity with a focus on women and this engagement is mentioned by many and

among them Sears. According to Sears (1993) “few contemporary writers have looked as long and as hard as Carter into the cultural construction of male and female sexuality” (p.2) and that Carter reopens old fairy tales to portray that women are powerful enough to fly freely on their own wings, and through their free flights they can resist the set norms of society (p.8). Muller (1997) trying to describe the applied technique by Carter argues that Carter employs fairy tale context to work within and against the conventions of this field and allow the critical discussion and deconstruction of the traditional discourses (p.60)

Susan sellers in Angela Carter’s *Mirrors and Mothers*,” creates a “destructive definition of woman” (118) and such a destructive categorization is originated social norms that place value on essentialist definitions, such as feminine surface beauty and virginity. These systems objectify women and destroy the fluidity of self. Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* analyzes this distinction in gender, mentioning how in most fairy tales, “the beast is male and can be disenchanting only by the love of a female and that it is the female who has to overcome her view of sex as loathsome and animal-like” (285). Trying to highlight Carter’s controversial course of writing Simpson (2006) describes the heroines of Carter’s stories as struggling out of the straightjackets of history and ideology and biological essentialism (p.230). Focusing on how Carter deconstructs mythical concepts of Creation Hope Jennings (2007) argues that Angela Carter’s demythologising of origin myths and investigates the extent to which her fictions offer viable alternatives that allow for productive representations of women and gender relations outside patriarchal paradigms (p.132)

### **Method**

The present study is a qualitative research based on Judith Butler’s gender theory which is carried out on Angela Carter’s selected stories within the framework of fairy tales. Judith Butler (1956) is professor of comparative literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley and is well-known as a theorist of power, gender, sexuality, and identity. Butler prefers those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted contexts. In other words rather than being a fixed attribute in a person gender should be considered as a fluid variable that shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. She argues that when men and women say that they feel more or less like a man or woman shows that the experience of a gendered cultural identity is considered an achievement. Butler describes how the category of sex is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs and whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power and the naming of gender is at once the setting of a boundary and the repeated inculcation of a norm. Hence identity is within a language of a given society that restricts movement. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler discusses how social constructions and regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter. This “revisable” quality leads to a hope that the other can be viewed in a manner that breaks through constricting boundaries. Warren expresses this revision as an eco-feminist goal, stating, “a central project of eco-feminism is to creatively replace structures, practices and policies of unjustified domination with genuinely non-oppressive liberating, life-affirming, cooperative, and just ones” (“Introduction” 140). Butler argues, “The body that is reason dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason...one which requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it [the rational man] will not perform” (*Bodies that Matter* 49). Therefore, the rational and idealized man, while impossible to uphold, perceives the body as negative and rejects it into the realm of the irrational where women and animals also find themselves placed. She argues that naming places individuals or animals in a place of societal order, confining their movements. This notion is reflected in Butler’s analysis regarding how societal norms constrict those placed in particular essentialist categories, particularly based on sex and gender and that the task is to refigure this necessary ‘outside’ as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome. But of equal importance is the preservation of the outside, the site where discourse meets its limits, where the opacity of what is not included in a given regime of truth acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability (*Bodies that Matter* 53).

### **Are feminine bodies governed and dominated by men in Angela Carter's fairy tales?**

It is essential to create a feminine identity largely because of the contradictory relationship existing between feminist and postmodernist philosophies as well as the poststructuralist linguistic and textual presentations which characterize such theorizing to neutralize its assertions of essential femininity' and of a particular and exclusive domain of feminine experience.

It seems that the feminist views observed in Carter's novels are frequently repeated and restructured to serve Carter's goal of outlining the boundaries between feminine and masculine groups, themes and characters in almost all of her works at different degree despite her arguments that she stated "Notes from the Front Line" Carter states: "I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm feminist in everything else" under Butler's gender theory it can be argued that Carter's attempts have served to neutralize feminine activities by naming (as used in Butler's gender theory) the females hopeful to get out of the masculine domination but they are still under the control and they are treated the same as children and animals as bodies and these bodies have nothing to do with the intellectual domain run by the masculine.

Palmer quotes Angela Carter's definition of culturally constructed gender identity as follows:

There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but, separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioral modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variable translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals. Carter argues that the notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick. At this point it can be argued that Carter's view is quite in line with what Butler's gender theory has emphasized on and that's the need to avoid gender categorization which would consequently act and serve for the benefit of the traditionally held view for the male and devalue females under the body-dominated excuses. She argues that category of sex is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs and whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power and the naming of gender is at once the setting of a boundary and the repeated inculcation of a norm. Carter's short stories are full of such instances. She employs feminine subject as a puppet and keeps asking a simple question who makes the puppet or pulls its strings? The answer in this case is the puppet master and the patriarchal ideology he represents as a surrogate 'God-the-father' who creates a temporary universe of simulation through his "articulating fingers" (24). This repetitive theme is observed in several novels of Carter and this again reminds us of Butler who argues that "The body that is reason dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason...one which requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it [the rational man] will not perform" (*Bodies that Matter* 49).

Carter's first novel was published in 1966 two years before the events of 1968 which have been connected by many with the rise of post-structuralism and postmodernism. When writing about the sixties Carter emphasizes the influence she felt from the social and cultural shifts which characterized that decade, particularly with respect to her feminism Butler prefers those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted contexts that is rather than being a fixed attribute in a person gender should be considered as a fluid variable that shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. In "Notes from the Front Line" Carter confirms such social impact and states that "I can date to that time and to some of those debates and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968, my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a *wonan*. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing.' In the same line of writing in *Love* Carter emphasizes the complexity of her representation of troubled gender relations, and the significance of feminine insanity to her analysis of power relations between genders as she revised her view in her future works. Carter's early novels delineate certain patterns and consistencies that can be detected in the early fiction, notably the emphasis upon the problematic structures of psychoanalytic theory and how they impinge upon the political relations between character, gender, and masculine domination.

In accord with the notions presented in Butler's gender theory Paulina Palmer argues that Carter "treats the relations between puppet-master and puppet as symbolic of the control exerted by a patriarchal culture on women and the roles available to thee.' As mentioned earlier Butler argues that "The body that is reason

dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason...one which requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it the rational man will not perform" (*Bodies that Matter* 49). Carter's dual focus on both the social construction of femininity and on the illusory nature of essential identity can be identified throughout adventures of Eve, as Evelyn now is, is compared with Tristessa that is a semi-mythical film star whose disappearance many years earlier has never been solved, and the meeting of Eve and Tristessa representing the ideal femininity but is in fact a man in drag brings together. Narration is highly problematical in this novel, as

David Punter emphasizes when he writes of his own difficulties in reading the novel: As a male reader, I find myself the victim of illusions. Although I am aware that Carter is a woman I nonetheless find that the first-person narration of Evelyn/Eve appears to me throughout, no matter what the overt sex of the new Messiah at the time, as a masculine narrative. When Evelyn becomes Eve, my experience is of viewing a masquerade; I read Eve still through the male consciousness (Evelyn's) of what he has become. Carter's exploration of the issues of subjectivity and the significance of the body to an understanding of postmodern identity reminds us of Butler's gender theory and several of these elements can be identified throughout the novel.

Carter's *Fevvers* represents what Butler's gender theory describes as societal norms constrict via the re-conception of the binary pair dominator/dominated clearly has significant implications for feminism which reflects the rational and idealized man, while impossible to uphold, perceives the body as negative and rejects it into the realm of the irrational where women and animals also find themselves placed. She argues that naming places individuals or animals in a place of societal order, confining their movements. This notion is reflected in Butler's analysis regarding how societal norms constrict those placed in particular essentialist categories, particularly based on sex and gender. Accordingly it can be argued that each of Carter's novels seeks to reflect constricted feminism along with the coherent subjective position which each of her protagonists seeks and as a result end up in presentations of the sublime constructed through the partial displacements of desire rather than the feminism introduced by Butler's gender theory which requires females to refrain from any sort of classifications or categorization which would act as trap to get them back into the traditionally dominated state by the masculine gender, traditionally announced as the rational gender.

### **Findings and conclusion**

The impact of feminism-based theories can be traced in many books and essays, and within the perspectives of many scholars and theorists yet the notions of Butler's gender theory have rarely been applied to Angela Carter's novels. Scrutinizing the novels for features and notions introduced and supported by Butler's gender theory in the present study lead to the following findings: Regarding the first major finding of this research, the analysis of the works under Butler's gender theory views revealed Carter's characters to a large extent represent what Butler's gender theory describes as societal norms constriction via the re-conception of the binary pair dominator/dominated clearly that has significant implications for feminism. The second major finding is related to the feminism is that it can be argued that each of Carter's novels seeks to reflect constricted feminism along with the coherent subjective position which each of her protagonists seeks and as a result end up in presentations of the sublime constructed through the partial displacements of desire rather than the feminism introduced by Butler who needs to refrain from even naming.

It can be concluded that the present study in reading the Angela Carter's works under Butler's gender theory detected elements of societal norms limitation, gender naming as well as gender identity as highlighted by Butler and that Carter's novels can be argued that represent the quest for feminine identity in terms of a notion of sublimity which structures and displaces the sought for identity in almost all of her works.

### **Suggestions for further studies**

Reading Angela Carter's works under Butler's gender theory and the related notions were carried out Butler's vantage point however there are a lot of other issues to be considered in these works. Other comparative studies can be conducted from other perspectives such as social criticism, psychological trauma of the immigrants, and cultural confusion. The novels having been published at a range of time (and sometimes the interval is significant) which provides a chance to analyze them from socio- psychological perspective and

analyze the significance of social factors and psychological factors on feminism. Thus besides the application of Butler's ideas socio-psychological notions can also be applied to these novels.

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