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THE ALIENATING EFFECT OF THE MASK OF FEMININITY

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Abstract: *The grotesque theme of the mask has been traditionally associated with the problem of identity. While the mask of the carnivalesque tradition implies the possibility of positive transformations, of becoming someone else, the mask of the Romantic and post-Romantic grotesque points to the troubling aspects of identity, such as the estrangement of the Self experienced by modern individuals. The paper discusses two novels by British feminist author Angela Carter, Love and The Passion of New Eve, in which the grotesque motif of the mask plays an important role. The discussion shows that Carter draws attention to the problematic position of the female subject in the symbolic order of patriarchal culture, combining images of what Luce Irigaray calls 'feminine masquerade' with more traditional form of the mask motif, the mask of the (post)Romantic tradition.*

Keywords: *the grotesque, mask, feminine masquerade, feminism, Angela Carter.*

1. Introduction

The theme of the mask forms one of the most complex motifs developed in the history of the grotesque genre. In folk (carnival) culture that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, produced a crucial influence on literary versions of the grotesque, 'the mask is connected with the joy and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself' (Bakhtin 39-40). When the grotesque theme appears in its Romantic form, the mask 'loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it' (40). The carnival mask signifies liberation from everyday social roles and identities experienced during the popular festivity: the clown is crowned to be the king, the fool becomes the wise man, '[m]en are transvested as women and vice versa' (411). Being 'related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries' (40), the carnival mask implies the possibility of positive transformations. On the other hand, the mask of the Romantic and post-Romantic grotesque points to the troubling aspects of identity experienced by the modern individual. Especially in the modernist grotesque, the motif of the mask is often used to represent the split of the self. The authors of the *teatro del grotesco*, for example, employ this motif to show 'the contrast between the social appearance of man (his mask)

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and his real Self (his face)' (Kayser 135) or to highlight the 'estrangement of the Self, resulting from the split' by showing the protagonist as 'a prisoner of his mask' (137).[1]

In the following pages I analyze two grotesque images in which British feminist author Angela Carter uses the motif of the mask in a specific form, the mask of femininity or, as Luce Irigaray calls it, 'feminine masquerade'. The 'feminine masquerade' can be understood as a set of conventions relating to appearance, behaviour and roles that women adopt in patriarchal society to comply with the expectations and desires of men. As Irigaray states, 'the masquerade of femininity' is 'what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man's desire, but at the price of renouncing their own' (135). At the same time the term points to the problematic position of the female subject in the symbolic order of patriarchal society, conditioned by the fact that woman can become a 'normal woman' only upon her entry into the masquerade of femininity, i.e. 'into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can "appear" only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men' (136). The main aim of my analyses is to show that Carter in her novels *Love* (1971) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) explores the specific aspects of women's position in the symbolic order by combining the mask of femininity with more traditional forms of the mask motif, the mask of the Romantic and post-Romantic tradition.

One of the important elements that produce the terrifying effect of the grotesque typical of Romanticism is alienation. As Bakhtin states, 'The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man' (38). Wolfgang Kayser, whose definition of the grotesque is derived from his analyses of various Romantic and modernist texts, concludes that 'the grotesque is the estranged world' (184). It is the world in which the things that are 'familiar and natural to us [...] suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous' (*ibid.*). In Carter's images the element of alienation plays an important role, emphasizing the contrast between the mask and the real self. Carter focuses on the conflict that is at the centre of attention of the modernist grotesque, but she approaches it from a new perspective. Presenting the contrast between the mask of femininity (understood as make up and other means of decorative transformations of the female body) and woman's real face/body, Carter's grotesque images focus the reader's attention on the role that the mask of femininity plays in the process of objectification of women trapped in the structures of patriarchal culture.

The first of the two analyzed texts *Love* puts at the centre Carter's own version of the 'Gothic triangle' in which the 'villain' and the 'hero' participate in the tragic destruction of the haunted 'heroine'. Set in a modern town at the end of the 1960s, the novel presents a story of Lee (an ironic version of the sentimental hero of Romantic narratives), Buzz (his malign, perverse half brother) and Lee's mentally unstable wife Annabel, who become entangled in a love-hate relationship that culminates in Annabel's suicide. The motif of the mask appears in the narrative at the moment when Lee has a problem to recognize his wife because she 'transformed herself so that nothing remained familiar about her except for certain spiky gestures of her hands' (Carter 1988, 104). The change is the result of the

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fact that, shortly before her suicide, Annabel has her hair dyed and face painted to adjust to an aesthetic ideal:

He was so struck by the newly adamantine brilliance of her eyes he did not see they no longer reflected anything. With her glittering hair and unfathomable face, streaked with synthetic red, white and black, she looked like nothing so much as one of those strange and splendid figures with which the connoisseurs of the baroque period loved to decorate their artificial caves, those *atlantes composés* fabricated from rare marbles and semiprecious stones. She had become a marvellous crystallization retaining nothing of the remembered woman but her form, for all the elements of which this new structure were composed had suffered a change, the eyes put out by zircons or spinels, the hair respun from threads of gold and the mouth enamelled scarlet. No longer vulnerable flesh and blood, she was altered to inflexible material. (104)

As a critic notices, Carter presents 'the fabrication of the masquerade of femininity [. . .] as an aesthetic process which *exchanges* the organic for the inorganic', resulting in 'the transformation of woman into *objet d'art*' (Britzolakis 46). This image of the woman's metamorphosis into an art object includes an important element of exaggeration that borders on the grotesque. The make up is so excessive that Annabel's face is completely hidden behind this 'disguise', which points to the complex relation between the mask and the self experienced by women on daily basis.

Sandra Bartky argues that despite the popular perception of make-up as an aesthetic activity allowing a woman's self-expression, making up of the face is in fact a 'highly stylized activity' that actually functions as the suppression of her individuality (109). From this perspective, Annabel's use of the excessive make up works as an ample symbol of women's everyday voluntary suppression of their individuality in their attempts to turn their faces into artistic objects through putting on the masks of feminine beauty. Such a process, however, involves the danger of alienation from one's body, which is realized both by Annabel, 'surprised to see how cold, hard and impersonal this new face was' (Carter 1988, 103), as well as by Lee to whom she becomes a 'composite figure', reminding him of three different women neither of which is Annabel herself (103-104). Thus, the result of the mask of femininity is the de-familiarization of an individual appearance through its adjusting to an aesthetic ideal.

While the fictitious observer perceives the de-familiarization as the process that moves Annabel's body out of the sphere of the grotesque (she is previously described as 'grotesquely elegant', 27) into the sphere of the beautiful (Lee suddenly sees her as an 'extraordinarily beautiful' woman, 104), from the reader's perspective, Annabel's change, on the contrary, links her quite firmly with the grotesque. Unlike Lee who sees his wife as 'shocking[ly] transform[ed]' into a 'painted doll' (112) only after her death, the reader can detect such a transformation already in the above picture of the beautiful woman whose 'eyes no longer reflected anything' (104). In this respect Carter's image reminds one of the perfect female body that produces the illusion of being alive, created by E.T. A. Hoffmann in his tale 'The Sandman'. Discussing the famous figure of Hoffmann's mechanical, life-like doll Olympia as an example of the Romantic grotesque, Kayser highlights the function of eyes in the creation of the alienating effect that underlies the doll's grotesque character. The eyes that are

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normally seen as 'an expression of the soul, as a link with the world [...] as the actual seat of life' are in the case of the automata presented as dead, 'her glance lacks the "ray of life"' (73). The same alienating effect is central to Carter's description of Annabel since the combination of her mask of artificial beauty with the internal vacuum, suggested by the empty look of her eyes, gives her the quality of a Hoffmannesque doll.

While in Hoffmann's tale the life-like doll contributes to the uncanny atmosphere of the narrative that focuses on the deterioration of the protagonist's sanity, in Carter's text the doll image suggests the 'control exerted by a patriarchal culture on women and the roles available to them' (Palmer 184). Annabel is trapped in patriarchal structures both through the relation to her conventional middle class family who force her into the marriage with Lee as well as through the relation with her husband and his brother who mistreat her, each in his own way. Throughout the novel she is primarily an object, the object of parental protection, of male desire, abuse, even fear. From this perspective, the doll-like effect of Annabel's feminine masquerade functions as an effective visualization of the puppet-like position that she experiences within the system of patriarchal values.

In addition, Carter repeatedly associates the heroine with various images of sexual passivity, which make her appear as a 'doll figure' that is 'in a state of sexual paralysis' (Roe 97). It is only at the end of the novel, when she acts out her sexual desire, that, as Sue Roe says, 'Annabel finds herself as *Annabel* in the real world' (95). However, the heroine's attempt at becoming the subject of desire leads to the 'bitterest of disappointments' (Carter 1988, 95). The open expression of her sexuality is met with the negative reaction on the male side and both lovers (her husband and his brother) continue treating her as an object. Thus, during the sexual encounter with Buzz, who has 'many fears about the physicality of women', she 'felt herself handled unceremoniously as a fish on a slab, reduced only to anonymous flesh' (94). Her husband Lee treats her in a similar way during their lovemaking, seeing her as an object of fear. He even comes to think about 'female demons' who are endowed with 'gross, morbid passion', as he reacts with apprehension to her desire: 'He had never been superstitious in his life before but, after it was over, he turned on the light to look at her, for her behaviour had no place in the order of things' (97).

When in a reaction to this mistreatment Annabel gives up her single attempt at acquiring the status of a subject and reduces herself to the form of an ideal woman, a beautiful mask of a doll figure, she draws attention to the fact that putting on the mask of femininity may involve the negative process of alienation from the 'self', understood not only as woman's natural physical appearance, but also as her body's desire.

The grotesque image of the mask of femininity that in the novel *Love* primarily functions as a sign of sexual passivity of a doll-woman seems to be in contrast with the image of the mask of femininity signifying the active role of a temptress adopted by the character Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve*. However, the apparently contrasting images share some important similarities, showing that in patriarchal society the mask of femininity plays a crucial role in the process of objectification of women.

Leilah, the black lover with whom the central character Evelyn spends some time at the beginning of his trip in America (and for whose mistreatment he is later

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punished by being turned into a woman), transforms herself every evening into a sexually attractive beauty to work as a naked dancer in nightclubs. Like in *Love*, the description of the female character's transformation concentrates on the artificial character of the mask of femininity (reflected in the excessive make up that includes 'the purple, or peony or scarlet grease' on the lips, 'false eyelashes' and 'glitting bronze powder' covering the hair (Carter 1982, 29). The narrative voice emphasizes that Leilah's beauty is achieved through a process of alienation:

> Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to me [Evelyn] to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah. Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection.
>
> These preparations extended over some hours. To decorate the other was her sole preoccupation at these times; she did not hear me if I spoke to her. When at last she assumed the darkly luminous appearance of Lily-in-the mirror, she became her; everyday Leilah disappeared immediately. My Leilah was now wholly the other one. (28-29)

Presented through the eyes of the male observer, Leilah's decoration of her body, on the one hand, plays the same role as Annabel's. While the not very attractive girl Annabel is changed into an 'extraordinarily beautiful' woman (Carter 1988, 104), Leilah, 'the grubby little bud who slumbered all day in her filth', is transformed into 'a night-blooming flower' (Carter 1982, 28). On the other hand, instead of functioning as a sign of feminine passivity, Leilah's mask seems to help her to adopt an active role of an irresistible temptress.

From the feminist perspective, however, both functions of Leilah's feminine masquerade reveal that, due to the possession of the female body, the female subject occupies a problematic position in the symbolic order of patriarchal culture. Significantly, Evelyn's perception of the 'mask' of beauty as a 'disguise' of the real 'filthy' Leilah may be related to the fact that in patriarchal culture the female body has been traditionally perceived as less clean than the male one. Unlike the male body that complies more easily with the classical ideal of 'a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world' (Bakhtin 320), the natural functions of the female body link it more powerfully to the grotesque: 'The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against the force of reason (Shildrick, Price 3). As a result, there is a tendency to perceive the male body as 'sealed and self-sufficient', while women 'are marked by the capacity of that which leaks from the body - menstrual blood is the best exemplar – to defile and contaminate' (7). Thus, Carter's image of Leilah, who often spends days tied to bed, which she fouls in revenge for this punishment, and then in the evenings transforms herself into a symbol of erotic attractiveness, underscores the patriarchal perception of the contrast between the real 'dirty',

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grotesque nature of the female body and the mask of femininity that helps to associate the body with the beautiful.

Just like in Annabel's case, the mask of femininity associates Leilah with the sphere of the beautiful, but at the same time reaffirms her position in the sphere of the grotesque. When Evelyn meets Leilah for the first time, he cannot resist following her through the streets of a dark city to consummate his desire for her, associating her with a 'siren' (20), 'a mermaid, an isolated creature that lives in fulfilment of its own senses' (22), 'the lorelei of the gleaming river of traffic' (*ibid*.). In this way, the female character becomes an example of 'the collusion of femininity and monstrosity' (Cavallaro 94), typical not only of ancient mythology, but often appearing in the works of various male authors.[2] As Cavallaro says, sirens and mermaids, the grotesque 'hybrids with the torsos of women and the lower halves of birds or fish, [...] have symbolized for millennia the fatal attraction of dark femininity' (194-195). When Evelyn describes Leilah as 'a strange, bird-like creature, plumed with furs, not a flying thing, nor a running thing, nor a creeping thing, not flesh nor fowl, some in-between thing' (Carter 1982, 20-21), he echoes one whole tradition in the representation of the feminine, making it possible to read this female character as Carter's 'parody of stereotypical male fantasies about women' (Gasiorek 132).

Carter's parody of the male conceptualizations of femininity as dark and dangerous force that disempowers men has, however, its tragic aspect, revealing that the mask of the irresistible seducer that Leilah puts on every night gives her only illusory power over men. Instead of being 'the creature that lives in fulfilment of its own senses', she, in fact, functions as a means of the satisfaction of male desire. As soon as Leilah makes an attempt to adopt an active role in their sexual relationship, she is immediately punished for scaring Evelyn, who associates her (just like Lee associates Annabel) with evil forces, 'the succubus, the devils in the female form who come by night to seduce the saint' (Carter 1982, 27). Evelyn's mistreatment of Leilah (she is regularly tied to bed and beaten, and later, when pregnant with his child, forced to have an abortion that results in the loss of the womb) shows that despite the apparently active role of a temptress pursuing the fulfilment of her own desire, she is constantly in the position of an object of male attitudes towards her that vary from yearning, to fear, then violence, and finally contempt.

To conclude, the two types of the mask of femininity, Annabel's and Leilah's, present the reader with the two traditional subject positions that patriarchal society has created for women in the form of the doll-woman/vamp binary.[3] While the doll-woman image signifies the feminine passivity that complies with the patriarchal ideal of female (a)sexual behaviour, the strong erotic look of the vamp has the negative connotations produced by the active role of the woman who uses her sensuality to exploit men. Using the element of grotesque exaggeration (excessive make up) Carter in both cases emphasizes the negative, alienating effect of the mask of femininity that, besides bringing an apparently positive change (both women become beautiful), also threatens women with the loss of the self (Annabel's face becomes cold, impersonal, Leilah turns into the 'Lily-in-the mirror'). At the same time, as it is clear from Leilah's situation, Carter challenges the passive/active dichotomy implied by the doll-woman/vamp distinction by showing that the seemingly active role of the latter

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is an illusion because Leilah not only adopts the appearance and role created for her by men (the image of dark eroticism produced by patriarchal culture), but, despite her putting on the mask of a temptress, she is also denied (just like Annabel) the possibility to act as the subject of desire.

[1] Kayser's references are the works of two representatives of the group of Italian playwrights active between 1916 and 1925, Luigi Chiarelli's *Mask and Face* and Luigi Pirandello's *Henry the Fourth*, respectively.

[2] 'Homer's account of the sirens luring Ulysses towards death by means of their irresistible song has resonated over the centuries in the writings of William Shakespeare, Friedrich de la Motte-Fouque, Hans Christian Andersen, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and Oscar Wilde; in the paintings of Hieronimus Bosch, Peter Paul Rubens, David Delamare, Arnold Bocklin, J. W. Waterhouse, Lord Leighton, Aubrey Beardsley, Edward Munch and René Magritte', as well as in Hollywood films and advertisements (Cavallaro 95).

[3] These images present a version of the traditional Madonna/whore binary reflecting 'society's age-old custom of putting women into two categories, one legitimate and honoured, the other marginal and debased' (Tishkoff 1).

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