THE GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF MASOCHISM IN HEMINGWAY

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway remained faithful to a wide range of traditional masculine values in his life and his fiction. He was a propagator of the normative roles assigned by the patriarchal system on men and women and accordingly distinguished between male and female social and artistic functions; however, the tension in his behavioral patterns is expressed through his subversion of those ascriptions on the sexual level. The themes of homoerotic wishes, suppressed femininity and transvestic impulses have well been established in Hemingway's fiction through years of literary criticism; however, the masochistic undertones of his writings have not received an equal attention so far. The purpose of this paper is to underline the masochistic properties of Hemingway's psychosexuality.

Keywords: Hemingway, Masochism, Gender

Introduction:

Ernest Hemingway remained faithful to a wide range of traditional masculine values in his life and his fiction. He was a propagator of the normative roles assigned by the patriarchal system on men and women and accordingly distinguished between male and female social and artistic functions; however, the tension in his behavioral patterns is expressed through his subversion of those ascriptions on the sexual level. He obviously desired to have it both ways with women. He sought to be masculine and control women on general grounds; yet he longed to submit to them sexually. For him, men and women exist, at best, in a consensual understanding in which men reign in the world and women reign in the bed. He has been an ardent supporter of the male supremacy in societal and artistic planes and this was always at odds with the submissive inferior position he bespoke for himself and his male heroes on sexual terms. As such, "[H]is life and work reflect extremes that alternately reinforce and undermine the prevailing gender values of the era into which he was born" (Fantina, 86).

Methodology:

Masochism has been deemed as subversive to patriarchy due to its political implication of desire and identification. As proposed in Butler's theory of performtivity, alternative modes of sexuality can work against the grain of the existing power structure in order to undermine its shortcomings and instabilities. According to this view, sex and sexuality are discursively-formed concepts and in a similar mode, male and female are self-deviant, unstable modes of beings which must be viewed as the effects, not the causes of the institutions and discourses. To Butler, sex is a political category and gender

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identity is a series of act that are continually in process. These acts are open to resignification and interpretation. In other words, the male and female roles that are presently congealed within our societal and individual gender understanding are arbitrary artifices and can be changed at will. According to performativity theory of Butler, there is no reciprocal relationship between one's body and one's gender, thus, we may readily interpret anew the existing gender inscription and as such, come across a definition of masculine female or a feminine male as sexual sites which are radically independent of sex. A vital notion in this context is the realization of the notion that Butler purports to prove; the fact that gender is not something one is, it is rather something one does; that is a "doing" rather than a "being" (Salih, 62). In this light, gender proves to be performative. If sex and gender are not the causes of heterosexual matrix of the society, and in effect, heterosexuality produces sex and gender in a dyadic frame, then masochism can function here as a redefining, mimetic or even parodic element, in Butlerian terms, in subverting the heteronormative structure of the gender roles. If sex, gender, sexuality, desire and the body are the discursive products of the phallogocentric system of society, then masochism can provide a stable ground where these terms can be subverted and new subjects be constructed as products of their own performativity ideals.

In Butler's view, the identity that is shaped by the heteronormative structure of the society is fabricated and manipulated through the dominant regimes of power and truth which are, in turn, being continually propagated through the compulsory heterosexuality and gender hierarchy. As such, Jagger maintains, masochism can work to demonstrate that the very idea of the fixed construction of identity is a myth, since it is compulsory and possesses such unstable entity which is in constant need of reiteration and re-enactment (32). "This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggest an openness to resignification and re-contextualization" (ibid). In this light, Hemingway's practice of masochism can be interpreted as inherently subversive and deconstructive to the normative structure of the society and the gender roles it desires to levy over individuals.

Body:

During the years of 1930s, Hemingway lived in Key West with his second wife Pauline where he was released from the pressure of the sexual anarchy and the gender bending environment of Paris and the sexual and social anxieties that such new discourses entailed for him. There, he adhered to his masculine pursuits and was hailed by critics as the emblem of male virility and spirit of manhood. The name Papa Hemingway was first used during this period of time, to his utmost satisfaction, when he was barely into his third decade of life.

Yet, the controversy over his sexual practice preferences continues to fascinate critics from multiple disciplines even today. Despite his apparent negation of phallic authority and the alternative forms of sexualities he incorporates in his fiction, the ascription of a marked homosexuality has never been convincingly appropriated to him.

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In the same regard, the homosexual readings of Debra Moddelmog have been justly refuted by Bersani in that he asserts that for the homosexual "it is not a woman's soul in a man's body that matters but rather the incorporation of woman's otherness" (1995, 60) and in a similar mode by Fantina in claiming that Hemingway's "incorporation of women's otherness into his sexuality does not decrease his masculine identification" (75). In the early enigmatic presentation of the character of Jake Barnes, for one thing, Hemingway has presented a male hero whose sexual tendency has been, and continues to be today, the subject of controversy among critics. A number of critics, among them Wolfgang E.H., have viewed the wound to Jake's male genitals as providing a site for his engaging in homosexual relationships. However, these critics have failed to consider heterosexual relation with a woman with the man at the passive position an option in discussing Jake's sexual mode in which case, the masochistic scenario would be logically justified. The haziness in Hemingway's description of Jake's sexual catharsis reveals more about Hemingway than it does for Jake. We know today that Hemingway shrank away from clear crystalized description of the scenes which describe a sexual intercourse, mainly not because he was trying to observe an internal moral code, rather because he did not wish to make the nature of his sexuality undisclosed to the public. Moreover, the more modern, less traditional sexual solutions, recently put forth by the critics, may not have been historically fitting for Hemingway, since he was writing *Sun Also Rises* at the early onset of his career at a critical moment when he, most likely, was not ready to acknowledge highly radical forms of sexual solutions yet. Instead, he would have resorted to the implied rhetoric of language where, for instance, Jake as the narrator informs us that "I was lying with my face away from her" (55); a condition which implies an act of sodomy. As such, the heterosexual masochistic relationship with Brett as the dominant female figure and with Jake at the passive position can best define the framework of their relationship. Jake's traditional understanding of masculine gender renders a female object as his choice and removes the possibility of any homosexual performance on his side, considering the degree of devotion he demonstrated toward Brett over the course of the novel; however, his inability to perform as a male heterosexual compels him toward the passive position in such a bond with a woman. In a similar, but uncharacteristically explicit description in *Garden*, Hemingway provides the details of David's and Catherine heterosexual, transgressive, role-reversing relationship in which David repeatedly succumbs to Catherine's will to be "her girl" and is penetrated by her. The role assigned to David is by any means the typical role of a submissive wifely woman serving her husband; however, Hemingway reverses the gender ascribes of the dominant discourse and creates a feminine male hero who is willingly, though not at first, participating in a gender bending, transgressing marriage without imposing a marked homosexuality on his sexual identity. The case is made here again for a masochistic bond between an aggressive, transgressive woman and a passive and submissive male figure in order to refute the possibility of any homosexual identification on the side of David. This becomes evident in the line early in the novel when David refuses to be kissed by Catherine if she, in their

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assumed role play, is posing as a boy and says: "Not if you're a boy and I'm a boy" (67).

The homosexual interpretations thus fail to account for the intricacies of Hemingway's convoluted psychosexuality; particularly because virtually all of Hemingway's erotic agent are female. At any rate, the range of alternative sexual practices proposed by Hemingway throughout his fiction is so diverse that labeling them as strictly heterosexual or homosexual would result in a reductive reading. Therefore, in order to comply his psychic quench for the practice of alternative sexuality in nontraditional, more mystic formats, he evinces a masochistic setting in which his emasculated male figures are required to submit sexually to a powerful female figure.

As cited earlier, with the advent of new wave of feminism and the emerging discourse of gender studies along with the revisitation of both the early and posthumously-published material by Hemingway, the focus of the literary circles turned away from the traditionally upheld flag of Hemingway as the emblem of male virility and masculine codes to the interest of another central theme abundant in Hemingway's writing: the questions of male and female identity, of sexual irregularity and of crossing the borders of gender boundaries. The themes of homoerotic wishes, suppressed femininity and his transvestic impulses have well been established through years of literary criticism; however, the masochistic undertones of his writings have not received an equal attention so far. The masochism as applied here does not necessarily connote a male disposition for suffering and pain per se; it is, rather, a desire for dropping off of the traditional masculine mask which has exerted century long psychic and sexual pressure upon their super ego in the presence of a woman and for retaining that pleasure through dismantling the tension. Mansfield points to masochism's fluid concept of gender and finds that "[m]anipulating gender categories is one of its most important types of play" (2010, 38).

While reading a Hemingway's text, the reader may find no explicit or ritualized masochistic scenarios. For one thing, a woman with a whip or the presentation of dominatrix which is a typical exercise in masochistic settings are completely missing in Hemingway's texts. Yet the characterization of male masochism in Hemingway's texts assumes more prominence as it exists against a backdrop of conflicting themes and emotions, and for this reason, it has probably remained so lightly touched upon in evaluations of his work. Hemingway's masochism focuses on sexual desires and practices rather than on ideological orientation.

Throughout his fiction, Hemingway has tried to push the boundaries of our definition of gender role and the means it provides to pleasure; thus, whereas the patriarchal structure of the society is trying to insinuate the belief that pleasure can only be redeemed at the hand of a superior, powerful male figure, Hemingway readily opposes and rejects it through proposing alternative modes of retaining pleasure such as homoeroticism, homosexuality, masochism and other modes of gender reconstruction which traditional male definition preclude.

Hemingway displays the suffering and humbling of his male characters. The

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depictions of passivity in characters like Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, and David Bourne in *The Garden of Eden,* suggestive of masochism, introduces male figures who are invariably abdicated to female domination. The prototype of the powerful woman is originated from the inherent nature of masochism; since masochism in nature implies the disavowal of the father, the patriarchal law and the super ego maturation and instead, seeks a bond with the pre-oedipal mother who is, in turn, characterized as cold, ruling, relentless, maternal and severe. In the same mode, Hemingway's major characters are alienated being devoid of any form of family ties. Hemingway's characters grow increasingly disturbed in the presentation of and participation in family setting. Given the family background he himself came from, that is, the aversion he bore toward his mother, and the estrangement toward his father and other family member, it is by no means a surprise that the biological family is essentially absent in his fiction. In case the extrinsic structure of the family does exist, it is in all cases an alternative form of family, described as queer, homoerotic or homosexual circles within which the Victorian laws are dismantled and the gender roles are deconstructed and reversed. These are all different means through which Hemingway condemns the contemporary standards of sexuality of his time as it concerns manhood and proposes new forms of male subjectivity in which male heroes are not necessarily concerned with the sexual exercise of their phallic power. Instead, they value the identification with and the protection from such powerful women to whom they find themselves attached sexually, physically and at times, economically. The paramount example of Hemingway's portrayal of such strong feminine image can ironically be found in a book which does not include any female character: *The Old Man and the Sea*; The book in which through the archetypal presentation of the nature as female, Hemingway has announced his total succumbing to the ever-returning image of the feminine sea. "Sometimes those who love her [the sea] say bad things of her but they are always said as though she were a woman" (*OMTS*, 29), Santiago says.

Critics have debated over the possible justification for Hemingway's decision not to finish and publish *TheGarden* in his life time. The character of Catherine as a conflation of complex, progressive and subversive androgynous disposition and the overt passive character of David compelled Hemingway to withhold from publishing it while he was still alive; since the transgressive sexuality and the gender bending backdrop of the novel stood in stark contrast to the macho traits he had long developed in public spheres. Yet his impulse to be sexually dominated by women and his desire for occupying a passive submissive position within a heterosexual matrix was so strong and crucial to his psychosexuality on personal level, and also to his art as an author who stood for the spirit of American male virility on the public sphere that it urged him to create his identical effeminate counterpart in the character of David and his aggressive, risk-taking, and transgressive traits in the character of Catherine, thereby creating a syncretic mold, a conflation of his long sought-after symbiotic bond between the sexes. The character of Catherine is the accumulation of predecessor women who appeared in Hemingway's

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early, mid and late fictions. Catherine's most prominent character trait which features both physically and psychologically is androgyny. A strong-willed, transgressive and initiating Catherine is foregrounded only to underscore the passivity, timidity and sexual indeterminacies of David as the male figure in the novel, a pattern which can be extended and applied to Hemingway's overall sexual and gender ideology.

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