OTHERNESS IN THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE

Ana Kechan (PhD)
ORCID #: 0000-0003-4128-361X
International Balkan University
a.kechan@ibu.edu.mk
North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

In her deconstruction and reconstruction of some of the most famous fairytales, Angela Carter not only challenges some of the most enduring concepts and binary oppositions, but she also introduces novel ways of looking at and thinking about cultural phenomena deeply rooted in the Western Culture, in a critique of Western patriarchal society. One of these is the concept of the Other, which she masterfully treats in one of the short stories from *The Bloody Chamber* collection and that is *The Lady of the House of Love*. In it, she subverts our notions of who the Other is, how that Other became seen as such and what actually makes them the Other. Late 19th century ideas on Otherness, including those set by our treatment and perception of those who are culturally different from us, influence this representation heavily. Not only culturally, but Angela Carter touches upon ideas of the Other from a philosophical and psychological standpoint as well, and this essay will present these ideas through examples from the story.

Keywords: Angela Carter, Otherness, the Other, vampire, *The Bloody Chamber*.

1. Otherness and the Other

Otherness and the Other are concepts of great popularity in today's world and even though the idea of the Other is as old as humankind, the theoretical postulates into the theory of Otherness are recent. Otherness can arguably be defined in all spheres of humankind's existence but for the purposes of this text, we are going to look at it in the context of culture, philosophy and psychology. Each of these areas of research adds a much-needed layer that contributes to the understanding of this, on the one hand, very complex, yet surprisingly simple, concept.

Throughout history, the concept of the Other can be found in texts of travellers and voyagers who discovered unknown lands and met with new races and new cultures. For them, those belonging to a different culture became the Other – ones who are unlike them, very often causing fear and distrust due to their differences and the inability to understand them. In order for the Other to be accepted, they had to be assimilated and turned into something recognizable. The greatest threat for the Other was the tendency to view them as culturally, morally and even intellectually inferior subjects who needed to be civilized and turned in accordance to the values of the time and the culture of the dominant social or political subjects. If, at some points in the past, the Other was the native, the member of a different race, the primitive pagan, in recent history the Other belongs to the other gender(s), a certain ethnic, religious, or caste group to be found at the margins of one society. Regardless of history, whatever was not in accordance with and defied the established social norms and

values, whatever required to surrender or revise certain beliefs and convictions, has always caused fear and distrust and, in some cases, even paranoid obsessions of entire societies.

Quite interestingly, Valery Stefanov in his text The Challenges of the Other (2000) emphasizes two aspects of the Other – the first as a stranger/foreigner, ethnically different and geographically opposite, the relationship to which is built through prejudice; this Other is dangerous, strange, a desired object of ridicule, a destructive and lethal force. The second aspect represents the Other as necessary and particularly significant for the construction of the identity of each group, supporting the wholeness of the group, maintaining its cohesion, thus making it "a constructive factor, a force which unites" (58). This aspect of the Other unites the group usually before a common enemy therefore creating a need for the group to unite, placing "the image of the Other in the zones of conflict" (61). For Michel Foucault, as cited in Schwab (1996, 29), Otherness is always determined by culture or, rather, Otherness is a force generated in cultures, aiding their self-determination. What generates Otherness are the exceptions to the culturally defines norms or the transgressions to the boundaries each culture sets to define what it wants to include in its frames and what it does not (madness, criminality, sexual deviations, poverty). Although each culture sets apart a place for Otherness, it generally aims for an absolute exclusion and excommunication of any form of Otherness, allowing only for it to be included through its assimilation according to the laws and rules of that culture.

In the context of philosophy, many famous philosophers have dealt with the idea of Otherness and, unlike the idea of the Other in culture, in philosophy the Other is anyone who is not I. The major proponent of existential philosophy, Jean Paul Sartre defines the Other as the one who causes our relationship with the world to disintegrate by taking our space for

> "others are *the Other*, that is the self which *is not* myself…the Other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This *not* indicates a nothingness as a *given* element of separation between the Other and myself. Between the Other and myself *there is* a nothingness of separation." (1992, 312-313)

Importantly, Sartre (as cited in Nye 2013, 81) says that the Other can invoke several reactions in us, as the sense of my own subjectivity being endangered, the sense of false indifference, the desire for owning and enslaving the free subjectivity of the Other, the sense of hatred or desire for there to be no one else in the world, the sense of fear, for the Other is always watching. But, also, for Sartre the Others are important because "only through their image of myself do I know who I am; only through them can I get an objective image of myself" (ibid.). Similarly, Tsvetan Todorov quotes Bakhtin who says that "I cannot become myself without the other. I must find myself in the other, finding the other in myself" (1984, 96).

Psychology and psychoanalysis in particular have also given their contribution to the theory of the Other, allowing us to reach the very essence not only of our idea of the Other but also of our reactions and our need for someone to always be the Other. In Jacques Lacan's theory, the concept of Otherness is key (in Bailly 2009, 65) and he makes the distinction between le petit autre (the little other) and le grand Autre (the Other with a capital O). Le petit autre comes from the so-called 'mirror stage', one of the formative stages in the Self function. In this pre-verbal phase which is part of the imaginary order, a connection is created between the inner and outer worlds, through which the child gets the first sense of identity, but also of the other in the mirror, with which the child identifies (in Verhaeghe 1999, 81-82). If the image and awareness of the body come from the outside, self-awareness comes from the other, but this is the other with a lower-case o because this is a reflection and a projection of the ego in its formation. This takes place in the imaginary, pre-verbal phase, when the child does not see itself as separate from the mother and the world, thus fostering a sense of inseparability, a belonging and the child sees all others as petit others, i.e. suitable objects for projection and identification.

By entering the symbolic order or the verbal phase in which there is rule of the language and the law, it receives the name of the father and le grand Autre enters, or the Other with a capital O. In the symbolic phase or order, there is always a sense of separation, lack or parting, the Otherness is radical and the child cannot handle it through identification. For Lacan, "the fundamental alienation which makes us always construct our discourse for another or like another's and so always leaves us ready to be exposed by another, is not a function of a confrontation with any other person but with the otherness in ourselves" (in Nye 2013, 138). By entering the symbolic order, what was in the imaginary phase recedes in the back and with the Other being suppressed in the unconscious, beyond Ego's reach, Lacan concludes that the Other is actually *the* unconscious.

A lot of what constitutes the unconscious are our repressed fears and desires – so, what is fear and, more importantly, what happens when we repress our fears? Sigmund Freud, in his *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (2023, 333-345) distinguishes between two types of fear: real and neurotic. Real fear is a reaction to an external danger, a foreseen injury, and is related to the flight reflex or, rather, it is an expression of the self-preservation instinct. Neurotic fear is an anticipatory fear or sometimes a general, floating fear that waits to be tied to a particular notion and when it does, then it becomes a phobia – a fear connected to a certain situation or object in particular. Fear is also manifested sometimes as a replacement of an adequate psychological reaction to a situation and by repressing the reaction to that situation, we replace affect with fear. This leads us to the conclusion that fear arises whenever there are repressed reactions. However, what we mostly repress are our desires, especially those forbidden ones and Lacan himself has said that "the human desire is a desire for the Other". Freud says that the unconscious desire had the tendency to become realized by reevaluation the first experiences of pleasure by which desire becomes a primeval element in the human mind that perpetually strives for satisfaction, which is why Freud advocated for a complete rejection of the Other (not surprising, considering the time he lived in), but this rejection can only lead to a sense of depersonalization. Depersonalization, in return, leads us back to our infantile desires and fears of Otherness, be it the Otherness of death, of the woman, of insatiable instincts. However, what is important in the representation of the Other in psychoanalysis is that it creates the concept of the 'internal Otherness' as an effect of unconscious activities, resulting in all that is repressed to be seen as Other, foreign, despicable or taboo.

2. The Stories of Angela Carter

The Lady of the House of Love is a short story from a collection entitled *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) by Angela Carter, whose writing career spanned from the 1960s to her death in 1992. In her stories, she intertwines the world of reality and the world of shadow, of the Gothic, which is reflective of her belief that "the fantastic and the real can exist on the same plane" (Sage 1994, 12) in a world of humans, animals, toys, monsters and grotesques.

According to Peach (1998, 8) what is characteristic of Carter's writing after the 1960s is the interest in the cultural myths and the role they have played, are playing and will probably continue to play in transforming and breaking conventional social structures. *The Bloody Chamber* is her iconic collection of stories based primarily on the famous fairy tales of Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm (*Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Little Red Riding Hood, Thumbling, Puss in Boots*). Her reimagined fairy tales are "materialist, rationalist 'fables of the politics of experience'…specifically…it is the gender politics and the intimately related class politics of experience that they are preoccupied with" (Day 1998, 134).

This makes her short stories more than just rewritings of the famous fairy tales, more than just fairy tales for adults and definitely more than just different versions of familiar stories. In her words, Carter wanted to "…extract the latent content of the traditional fairy tales and use it as the start of new stories" (Carter1979, vii) the result of which are stories extending their meaning beyond what is generally considered to be a very restrictive framework of the fairy-tale formula.

Carter heavily relies on two mechanisms or processes when dealing with the fairy tales, and these are defamiliarization and deconstruction. Defamiliarization is one of the key concept of postmodernism, first introduced by Victor Shklovsky in 1917 in his essay "Art as Technique" and it involves the estrangement of the literary and the familiar or, as Shklovsky says, it makes "the familiar seem strange...[a] method of seeing things out of their normal context" for "the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase thedifficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (in Lemon & Reis 1965, 12). This is something Carter does with brilliance.

The second mechanism, deconstruction, is a critical view of what we take for granted, binary opposites in particular. In Carter's work what is most often deconstructed are the opposites of male/female and real/imaginary. Both of these mechanisms are characteristic of Magic Realism, the style of writing we associate with some of Carter's writing, as a "disruptive, foreign, fantastic narrative style that fractures the flow of an otherwise seamlessly realist text" (Armitt 2000, 306).

3. The Lady of the House of Love

Most of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* have a clear source in one of the famous fairy tales previously mentioned, except for *The Lady of the House of Love*. At first glance, it is difficult to pinpoint one origin fairy tale although several influences can be seen upon closer inspection. In this story, Carter takes the fairytale elements of a beautiful woman doomed to a cursed existence and a brave hero who is supposed to save her and break the curse. However, the familiar ends there and the remaining elements defamiliarize the known story. The beautiful woman is a vampire living in a ruined castle, doomed to repeat the same actions night in and night out, cursed by a family infliction of unnatural prolonged existence.

The next defamiliarizing element is the fact that her saving is done through and in death, by which she and the hero prince do not live happily ever after. Yet another defamiliarizing element is placing the story within a specific time and place, unlike any fairy tale ever before. While the standard setting for fairy tales is 'once upon a time/ in a place far away/ beyond seven seas and seven mountains', Carter sets her fairy tale in "the pubescent years of the present century" (Carter 1993, 97) in "the little-known uplands in Romania "(97). Thus, the fairy tale is no longer a fairy tale as it is given a dimension of reality. Finally, gender roles are inverted and the woman is "constructed as an aggressor, with a man as the virgin victim" (Makinen in Day 1998, 150).

The heroine herself is a queen and she is beautiful, even "so beautiful, she is unnatural" but, as Carter tells us "her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity…her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness" (94) for she is a vampire. She is doomed to a loathsome existence: "wearing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestor, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence" (93).

As Wisker writes (in Bristow & Broughton, 1997), "vampires traditionally invade the space of the home and the body, and so they represent our fears of invasion by Otherness" (126). The Countess embodies many of the characteristics of the Other as perceived in the 19th and early 20th centuries, first of all, with the sheer strangeness of her looks and predicament, but also, she is foreign, dangerous, primitive and awaiting to be saved by the Hero coming from the civilized world. That Hero is British, i.e. Western-European, coming to the rescue of the savage Easter-European with his rationality, spreading the dominance of the Western enlightened mind.

The Countess is portrayed as primitive in her urges, beyond her control, as she has ravaged her surroundings with her hunger until no humans or animals remain nearby. She is, however, most destructive to herself, as she refuses to accept her own Otherness. She "loathes the food she eats; she would have liked to take the rabbits home with her, feed them on lettuce, pet them and make them a nest…but hunger always overcomes her" (96).

Her Otherness is not a choice, but is imposed on her by her ancestors, who were also vampires, Others in relation to human beings. She cannot change her predicament, at least not by herself. This fatality and predestination are further emphasized by her relentless turning of the Tarot cards, which perpetually show the same combination: "La Papesse, La Mort, La Tour Abolie, wisdom, death, dissolution" (95) except when she has to feed and then the Grim Reaper card shows (96). Finally, for one and only time, before the young Hero arrives, she turns the Les Amoureux card, the card of the lovers (97).

The vicious circle is interrupted with the coming of the young man, the embodiment of the stereotypical brave Hero from the fairy tales "blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled" (97) whose quality include those of virginity, ignorance but also rationality. He is "like the boy in the fairy tale, who does not know how to shudder, and not spooks, ghouls, beasties, the Devil himself and all his retinue could do the trick" (104).

The curse the Countess suffers from is broken through her sexual liberation, for when the young man drinks her blood, the differences between them dissipate, she becomes human as him and can then die. What is essential for Carter is that "the biological differences between men and women are not as important in the construction of gender identities as their elaboration in complex cultural codes which lay down the appropriate or inappropriate behaviour and physical appearance for each gender" (Peach 1998, 126). And accepting one's Otherness in relation to one's appearance is the first step towards the constructiveness of difference. In relation, however, to the sexes, Carter frees the Countess not only of her curse but of the inevitable masculine domination as the young man plans to:

> take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl that she is. (107)

The Countess as Otherness portrays an image of society and not only through the eyes of the young Hero, but by embodying what Western culture identifies as female, according to Anne Williams (2003, 10), simultaneously emphasizing it by her vampiric nature: blood (keeps her 'alive'), madness (inherited from her ancestors), darkness (in which she perpetually lives), wild beasts (over which she has control), the full Moon, nature (her victims nourish the wild roses that "incarcerate her in the castle") and sexuality (she lures her victims into her room which very much resembles a brothel).

The young man, on the other hand, embodies the masculine societal principles of: science (coming to the remote area on a bicycle), ignorance (failing to comprehend the Countess's condition), rationality (mistaking

her condition for hysteria and her aversion to light for photophobia) and domination (desiring to turn her into something she is not).

The Other, more often than not, is the embodiment of repressed fears and desires and we can look at this from the aspect of the Countess and the group. The Countess allows to be saved by the young man or, rather, uses him as an instrument of fulfilling her desire to be free, well aware that, in her case, this would imply death. But, death does not only save her from her destiny imposed by her ancestors. It also saves her from the future which would be imposed upon her by the young man. She, thus, breaks the vicious circle of damnation by refusing to sacrifice herself to the masculine symbol.

This also reflects the fear of the group (society) of the liberation of female sexuality and the "female vampires often represent male anxieties of sexually voracious women" (Wisker 1997, 126). The liberation of desires and fears most frequently happens in dreams and, in Gothic literature, the castle serves as an inner space representing the dream. This would suggest that the Countess is a prisoner of her fears and desires, as she never leaves the castle, except to feed, when she allows for her true nature to show. Carter goes so far as to say that the lady is herself 'a haunted house' (1993, 103) and her untouched sexuality is represented by the young man's surprise "to find how ruinous the interior of the house was – cobwebs, worm-eaten beams, crumbling plaster...endless corridors...[evoking] a quite memorable beastliness" (100).

Carter's treatment of the fictional vampire continues a long literary tradition of the vampire embodying our ideas of the Other, as a representation of individual and collective fears, desires, or who or what society perceives as dangerous, an impostor. In the treatment of the vampire as Otherness in both the 19th and the 20th centuries, the vampire remains a foreigner or, in cases when he or she is not a foreigner, they owe their turning to a foreigner. Thus, the vampire, like the Other, remains foreign and incomprehensible. A vampire character from another literary work, Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* trilogy, Geneviève Dieudonné, sums up this issue very succinctly:

> the problem isn't in not understanding how vampires live. We don't understand how humans live. We can give an estimate formula. We can create life in glass jars. We can reanimate dead tissue. We can try and sell our souls to Satan, if that does us any good. We can have it all, except an answer that makes sense. (1998: 208)

This would mean that the Other is destined to never be understood and always be judged by people, not so much because of their own nature, but because of the human inability to understand themselves, making them unable to, as St. Matthew said, "first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matthew, 7:5) – the idea behind this quote being the very essence of the idea of Otherness. This also contains the idea that the Other is a projection of ourselves and the group we belong to and why "vampirism…is an intensification of the devouring social norm" (Auerbach 1995, 170) which Carter so masterfully reflects in her writing.

In the short story in question, the main characteristic of the vampire is its destructiveness which cannot ever stop being physical and directed towards the surrounding world, but also grows into inner destructiveness or, rather, a struggle of the vampire against her own Otherness and all that it entails. Another element of the vampire characters in general in the 20th century is to show the constructiveness of Otherness or the liberation which comes with the complete acceptance of that Otherness. The vampire has been and will continue to be a threat to established norms, rules and stereotypes but Carter uses her vampire to fight against the imposition of

these chains of fatalism which also follow the notion of the Other, in order to show that even though the breaking of the cursed cycle of imposed Otherness is dangerous, it can also bring liberation.

Additionally, even though fears and desires change over time, both on an individual and global level, some appear to remain as eternal attributes of the vampire as Otherness, namely: the fear of death and the desire for immortality, the desire for a return to one's roots and instincts, freedom from the impositions of civilization and the routine of modern life, the succumbing to sexuality and physical pleasures. We might add here, the fear of the foreigner or the one belonging to a different race, ethnic group or religion, a fear which obstinately persists through the centuries.

4. Conclusion

This brings us to a conclusion as to the impermanence of the idea of the Other depending on the different historical, social, political and other contexts which corresponds perfectly to the ever transforming and ever adapting idea of the vampire and how the vampire becomes the perfect match for the embodiment of the idea of the Other. The vampire is able to accept a very wide spectrum of symbols upon itself without drastically changing its essence and allows us, readers, to follow the changing faces of the idea of the Other.

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