
Research Article

Julia Kristeva's Abjection in Angela Carter's The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

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Abstract: This essay studies Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept abjection. In her theory of subjectivity, Kristeva argues that abjection is put wrongly onto women. Accordingly, this essay is concerned to answer one central question: How does Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* represent Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection? To answer this question, the study is limited only to four episodes of the book: episode 2: "The Mansion of Midnight," episode 3: "The River People," episode 5: "The Erotic Traveller" and episode 7: "Lost in the Nebulous Time." The collected signs of misplaced abjection in the specified episodes will be then discussed in four categories: "Mary Anne," "The Amazonian Women," "The Prostitutes of the House of Anonymity" and "The female Centaurs." These categories are organized around the female character(s) whom Desiderio, the protagonist of the story, encounters along his journey to Hoffman's castle. In each category, the conditions and struggles of the named female character(s) are elucidated according to such keywords as abjection, feminism, patriarchy, subject/object and subjectivity. It is supposed that the present essay would reveal in the end the particular way Carter has represented the concept of misplaced abjection.

Keywords: Abjection, Feminism, Patriarchy, Subject/Object, subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Julia Kristeva (1941-), the Bulgarian-born French feminist, suggests that misplaced abjection partially accounts for women's oppression within patriarchy. In Western culture, she argues, abjection has been misplaced onto all women mainly because the existing discourses on maternity do not allow to abject only the mother's sex without abjecting all women's sex (Oliver 1993: 102). This concept of misplaced abjection, which Kristeva discusses through her theory of subjectivity, has been influential within the framework of gender studies. Her theory is studied broadly in many fictions by postmodern feminist novelists including Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker and Doris Lessing to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social problems which women experience. However, Kristeva's theory of abjection, particularly her concept of misplaced abjection, has not been yet studied extensively in Angela Carter's fictions. Carter (1940-1992) is one of the known British authors of the twentieth-century. In her 1972 novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, she is specifically concerned with gender relations. Such concern motivated us to study this novel of her according to Kristeva's theory of abjection. This study is limited only to four episodes of the book: episode 2: "The Mansion of Midnight," episode 3: "The River People," episode 5: "The Erotic Traveller" and episode 7: "Lost in the Nebulous Time." In each of these episodes, Desiderio, the protagonist of the story, enters into an eccentric society. The theoretical framework of the study is also limited only to Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection, which is part of her

theory of subjectivity. Accordingly, this essay answers one central question: How does Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* represent Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection? To answer this question, the following discussion first presents a brief plot summary of the novel and a critical review of Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection as well. Next, the essay introduces the signs of misplaced abjection found throughout the text. The collected signs in the four specified episodes of the novel are then discussed in four categories. These categories, which are designed around the female character(s) of each selected episode, include "Mary Anne," "The Amazonian Women," "The Prostitutes of the House of Anonymity" and "The female Centaurs." In each category, the conditions and struggles of the female character(s) are elucidated according to such keywords as abjection, feminism, patriarchy, subject/object and subjectivity. This essay presupposes that applying Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection to Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* would reveal the restrictive social norms which frame the dominant representations of women in the eccentric societies Desiderio encounters.

The story revolves around a war broken out in an unnamed city in South America. The war has erupted due to the diabolic experiments of Doctor Hoffman, a scientist who has discovered a unique method to disrupt reality. The Minister of Determination, the city's ruler, commissions Desiderio, his confidential secretary, to locate Hoffman's castle and kill him.

To fulfill his mission, the twenty-four-year-old Desiderio begins a hazardous journey. Along the way, he enters into some eccentric societies and is guided at times by Albertina, Hoffman's daughter who often appears in disguise.

Desiderio's journey starts from a coastal town where he is accused of murdering the mayor's somnambulist daughter, Mary Anne. To hide from the policemen, he seeks refuge with an Amazonian clan, where he is supposed to marry the chieftain's nine-year-old daughter, Aoi. As soon as the clan's cannibalism is revealed to Desiderio, he escapes and joins a travelling circus. This phase of Desiderio's journey ends with the arrival of the nine male acrobats who rape him one by one. Shortly after he leaves the circus, Desiderio meets a lewd Count. He accompanies the Count to a brothel where some bestial whores are kept in cages for display. While sailing to Europe, the Count is captured by an African tribe; however, Desiderio continues his journey and this time comes across a bizarre race of centaurs and just afterwards arrives in Hoffman's castle. He finally kills Hoffman and destroys his infernal machines.

The concept of misplaced abjection emerged by the publication of Kristeva's 1980 book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, in which she draws her theory of abjection based on Jacques Lacan's tripartite scheme of the real, imaginary and symbolic. Through her psychoanalytic account of abjection, she attempts to correct Lacan's psychosexual model by forcing attention onto the role of the mother in the development of subjectivity. Jennifer Rich clarifies that Kristeva finds Lacan's mirror stage unconvincing mainly because it neglects the role of the mother in the formation of the child's subjectivity (2007: 52). Kristeva presents instead, as Dino Felluga indicates, "a more central place for the maternal and the feminine in the subject's psychosexual development" (2011: n. pag.). To introduce the mother as a powerful determinant factor in the development of subjectivity, she rewrites Lacan's mirror stage by suggesting the term abject. According to Lacan, the borders between subject and object are formed when the child at some point between six and eighteen months of age catches a glimpse of itself in mirror and takes the image to be itself. This identification of oneself with the mirror image is erroneous because the subject and the image are not one and the same. However, the identification helps the child to develop a sense of unity in itself and recognize that it is a separate subject from others. Kristeva argues that although the mirror stage may lead to a sense of unity, the child develops the fundamental borders between subject and object even earlier than the mirror stage as the result of a process she calls abjection (McAfee 2004: 45).

Kristeva claims that, as McAfee defines, abjection originally appears when the child has not yet recognized its image in mirror and still thinks of itself as indistinct from its mother's body (ibid.: 47-8). "[The child] is not quite yet," McAfee renders, "on the borderline of subjectivity. Abjection will help it get there" (ibid.). The child must abject the mother's body in

order to become an autonomous subject. Therefore, the first thing the child expels from itself as object is the mother's body (ibid.). The child abjects its mother in the process of weaning; that is when the mother introduces the child for the first time to other foods than breast milk. Through the process of weaning, the mother is made abject (Oliver 1995: 135).

Kristeva describes the child's relation to its mother as an abject relation which finally facilitates the child's separation from its mother. Oliver elaborates on what Kristeva thinks of this abject relation:

The child does not see the mother's sex as threatening, as scar, because she 'does not have one.' Rather, on Kristeva's analysis, the child sees the mother's sex as threatening because it is the canal out of which it came. For the child at this stage, its mother's sex represents its birth canal. And, insofar as the child was once on the other side of that canal, its autonomy is threatened. (ibid.)

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva sets forth the idea that the mother is "alone of her sex" (1989: 253). As Oliver has noted, "to say that the mother's sex is reduced to the birth canal for the child is not to say that women's sex is reduced to the birth canal" (1993: 55). Oliver further simplifies that "mothers are women apart from being mothers; and not all women are mothers. Therefore, mothers and women are not identical" (ibid. 160). "The abject mother's sex," she adds, "threatens the child in a way that women's sex should not" (ibid.). In Kristeva's view, it is exactly this confusion which ultimately leads to the abjection of all women, rather than the mother whose abjection is necessary for the development of subjectivity (ibid.). Accordingly, she concludes that abjection is put wrongly onto women.

2. Discussion

The following discussion studies four episodes of Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* in terms of Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection. These four episodes include episode 2: "The Mansion of Midnight," episode 3: "The River People," episode 5: "The Erotic Traveller" and episode 7: "Lost in the Nebulous Time." The collected signs of misplaced abjection throughout the specified episodes are categorized around the female character(s) of each selected episode: "Mary Anne," "The Amazonian Women," "The Prostitutes of the House of Anonymity" and "The female Centaurs." Such keywords as abjection, feminism, patriarchy, subject/object and subjectivity are pivotal to the following discussion.

2. 1. Mary Ann

In episode 2 entitled "The Mansion of Midnight," Carter pictures Mary Ann, who experiences misplaced abjection through forced sexual intercourse. In this episode, Desiderio comes to "a bright, pleasant, pastel-tinted town" (ibid.: 126) named S., where he encounters the fifteen-year-old Mary Ann, the daughter of the town's disappeared mayor. Desiderio makes love to this "beautiful somnambulist" (ibid.: 145) while

she is asleep, treating her as a passive sex object. The rape scene reflects Mary's misplaced abjection. Before discussing the significance of this scene, it is helpful to focus briefly on the passivity which Mary's image provides.

According to Eliza Filimon, Mary's image is similar to the stereotypical Victorian heroin whose pale complexion exemplifies passivity (2014: 121). Carter underlines Mary's passivity by making her a sleeping beauty figure. In Charles Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods," the princess pricks her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and falls into an enchanted sleep for hundreds of years, until the loving kiss of a king's son awakens her. Mary shares similarity with this fairy tale figure in the sense that she too has been long waiting for a prince to redeem her from her sleepwalks. In her sleepwalks, Mary is always "dreaming of passion" (Carter 2011: 171). Her passionate dreams imply that she desires love and is suffering for the absence of it. Jennifer Waelti-Walters argues that such dependence upon a male protector emphasizes female passivity (1982: 73); that is to say, Mary's entire identity mostly depends on her relationship with a man whom she can love. As Kai Mikkonen remarks, Mary, the sleeping beauty of the story, "is a victim and a metaphor for an ultimate state of passivity; she depends on a man to rescue her, and her whole psycho-sexual identity is a mere reflection of his desires" (1998: 176).

If we take Mary as the sleeping beauty, then, Desiderio would be the prince. He makes love to Mary shortly after his arrival; however, his act of making love does not awaken the somnambulist Mary from her slumber. While dreaming of love, Mary walks to Desiderio; he directs "her to the bed and, in the variegated shadows, penetrate[s] her sighing flesh, which [is] as chill as that of a mermaid or of the marmoreal water-maiden in her own garden" (Carter 2011: 170). In making love to her, Desiderio allows Mary's desire for a lover to dominate him and he consequently plays passively to her dream. The very fact that Mary's desire activates the love-script points out Desiderio's passivity too. "In his passive posture," Fillimon suggests, "[Desiderio] does not lose his sexual subjectivity even though he may have lost his social or racial identity; socially anonymous, he still keeps his phallic power intact" (2014: 162). Desiderio's act of rape reconfirms his masculine supremacy and, as a result, unjustifiably puts abjection on Mary. He calls Mary "slender" (Carter 2011: 159), "forlorn" (ibid.: 162), "desperate" (ibid.) and "pathetic" (ibid.: 163). Other than raping her "perfectly aware she was asleep" (ibid.: 171), his expression of love is deprived of any romantic sensations. Desiderio's emotional insensibility accentuates Mary's passivity and is also responsible for her suicide. She suicides by drowning, bringing to mind Ophelia's death in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Therefore, Mary is, as Filimon suggests, a composite of "two classic types of passive femininity, the sleeping beauty and the tragic Ophelia" (2014: 162). Such composition features "the destructiveness of the passive form of female desire" (ibid.).

So Mary, as the rape victim, experiences misplaced abjection

through forced sexual intercourse. In Kristeva's view, "the crime of rape is [...] a quintessential example of abjection" (Martin 2015: n. pag.) and the victim of rape stands for one of the most exemplary cases of abjection. In her theory of abjection, Kristeva links the term abject to the notion of pollution. Bülent Diken and Carsten Laustsen explain that in Kristeva's view, "rape can certainly be understood as primary pollution, that is, as pollution from without; an enemy penetrates the body of the victim" (2005: 106). Thus, rape and abjection are linked together in the sense that they both signify impurity. Diken and Laustsen maintain that "the rape victim often perceives herself as an abject, as a 'dirty', morally inferior person. The penetration inflicts on her body and her self a mark, a stigma, which cannot be effaced" (ibid.: 104). Along the same lines, Kristin Bumiller refers to rape pollution as "an extreme manifestation of culturally accepted patterns of male aggression" (2009: 171). Under this logic, one might conclude that Desiderio's rape of the sleeping Mary strengthens the patriarchal social order by devaluing Mary as a woman and misplacing abjection onto her.

2. The Amazonian Women

In episode 3 entitled "The River People," Carter pictures an Amazonian tribe. In this episode, Desiderio hides away among an illiterate Amazonian tribe, whose female inhabitants have commonly a low social position and experience misplaced abjection through social confinement and also such cultural practices as wearing unrealistic makeups and grotesque costumes.

While living among the tribe, Desiderio observes that pregnant women are rigidly excluded from any social activity. According to Kristeva's theory of abjection, pregnancy pushes the subject into the realm of the abject. "Pregnancy," she remarks, "is a dramatic ordeal: a splitting of the body, the division and the coexistence of self and other" (2010: 297). In other words, the pregnant body, as Sarah Adams has noted, is unified and separated all at once:

As her bodily integrity is undermined by the fetus, this challenges the mother's personal sense of unity. She is no longer alone in her body, since there is another present within it. In the pregnant body, self and other (mother and fetus) coexist, sharing a split self (2010: 983).

Kristeva argues that pregnant women are not the abject in essence; rather, they have been socially associated with the abject throughout history. This association results from confusing the mothers' sex with the women's sex. Kristeva maintains, as Oliver puts forward, "we need to be able to consider the *maternal function* [emphasis in original] apart from women and individual mothers" (1993: 162). Therefore, one might conclude that the patriarchal social order of the Amazonian tribe Desiderio comes to sees women only in terms of female reproductive function. Since women's reproductive function is related to menstrual blood, this particular function of women threatens the fundamental borders defining subjectivity. To preserve the existing patriarchal

social order, the chiefs of the tribe mark women as the abject as a strategy to reinforce their masculine authority.

The women of this Amazonian tribe are also pushed into the realm of the abject through unrealistic makeups and grotesque costumes. Culturally, they have learned to wear thick face-paint, which causes them to look bizarre and unfamiliar. Desiderio describes the stylized manner Nao-Kurai's mother had put paint on her face:

A coat of matt white covered her nose, cheeks and forehead but left her neck and ears as brown as nature made them. On top of this white crust she put a spherical scarlet dot in the middle of each cheek and over the mouth a precisely delineated scarlet heart [...]. Thick black lines surrounded her eyes, from which radiated a regular series of short spokes all round the circumference. The eyebrows were painted out and painted in again some three inches above the natural position [...]. (Carter 2011: 220-1)

Unrealistic makeups are not specific to the chieftain's mother, but are also practiced among the other women too. Such heavy makeups give women an unfamiliar appearance which conceals their femininity. The aim of this practice is to dehumanizing women; that is to say, the mannered and nonrealistic styles of the Amazonian women are designed to deprive them of natural human qualities. Desiderio comments that these women's makeups "repelled [the landsmen] completely, if ever one chanced to see it" (*ibid.*). This repulsiveness of the women's makeups is the most prominent feature of the abject.

The same intense or disgust is aroused by the grotesque costumes of the Amazonian women. The peculiar costumes of these women, just like their stylized makeups, are meant to passivate them. "It gave them," Desiderio describes, "a top-heavy appearance, as if they would not fall down if you pushed but only rock to and fro" (*ibid.*: 222). This manner of dressing along with "a limited repertoire of stiff, exact gestures" (*ibid.*: 224) turns the Amazonian women into what Desiderio calls "benign automata" (*ibid.*). He adds that "it was quite possible to feel they were not fully human" (*ibid.*). On the contrary, Desiderio reveals that "the appearance and manners of men were by no means so outlandish" (*ibid.*). So the unrealistic makeups and the grotesques costumes of the women are meant to abject them for the reason that women's degradation strengthens masculine superiority and maintains patriarchy. One might conclude that these women does not possess the disturbing quality of the abject inherently; however, they are perceived as such abject by cultural practices forced to them by the existing patriarchal social order.

2.3 The Prostitutes of the House of Anonymity

In episode 5 entitled "The Erotic Traveller," Desiderio visits a brothel named the House of Anonymity, where the prostitutes resemble animals. These prostitutes experience misplaced abjection through the supremely inhuman representation imposed on them. They are displayed in cages so that the male

guests can attentively gaze at them for pervert pleasure. As Jennifer Gustar has noted, "the objects of purchase, the women, are represented as a complex conflation of animal and machine who are totally confined by their construction in gender" (1997: 55). Thus, the abject condition of these prostitutes is related to their representation as bestial creatures. They are staged in the most degraded poses in cages whose doors "were secured by very large padlocks" (Carter 2011: 406). As Desiderio observes, "the prostitutes, the wax mannequins of love, hardly seemed to be alive for they stood as still as statues" (*ibid.*: 405). This is an outlandish picture of femininity. Mariaconcetta Costantini claims that such disgraceful treatments "form a kaleidoscopic image that amplifies the faults of misogynist systems by projecting them into a 'paraxial', unfamiliar area" (qtd. in Gruss 2009: 170-1). To exaggerate the abject condition of the prostitutes, Carter has also utilized explicit descriptions of sexual activity. The erotic, pornographic material of the "The Erotic Traveller," according to Carter, "is a universal pictorial language of lust" (1979: 4), reflecting the objectification of female sexuality and highlighting their abject position. Watz claims that the exaggerated pornographic scenes of this episode call attention to "the artificiality and constructedness of the notions of femininity that the prostitutes represent" (2013: n. pag.).

The inhuman representation of the prostitutes of the House of Anonymity is related to Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection through the social function of prostitution. In Kristeva's view, the prostitute, a stereotypical sex object, is utterly ignoble, having the unclean and improper qualities of the abject. The bestiality of the prostitutes of the House of Anonymity is in fact an exaggerated representation of their uncleanliness and impropriety as an abject being. Jane Scouler, explaining Kristeva's definition of the abject, restates that prostitution is morally polluting; hence, the society is encouraged to avoid the prostitutes (2015: 30). Following Kristeva's line of thinking, Elina Penttilen as well reminds that the abject position of the prostitute is unlivable mainly because, as a woman selling sex, she trades something which cannot be respectfully traded; thereby, she is positioned by the society outside the symbolic order (2008: 56). To put it differently, since the prostitute has the disruptive quality of the abject and threatens stability and order, the society jettisons her from any position within legality. Similarly, Maggie O'Neil and Lizzie Seal speak of the abject condition of prostitutes through the following words: "[the] dominant representations of the prostitute in cultural texts include a focus upon the prostitute as body-object and as abject-body operating in liminal spaces and places at the margins of legality" (2012: 6). They continue that "the prostitute is the salesperson and commodity in one: she is both an organic body (a subject) and a commodity (an object)" (*ibid.*). Such liminality causes the prostitute to symbolize dirt, decay and corruption. Since being socially remarked as the polluted abject, the prostitutes of the House of Anonymity cannot attain culture. More pointedly, their human self remains

undifferentiated from their represented animal body. Consequently, instead of being involved in civilization, the prostitutes, marked as the abject, are held back in the realm of primitiveness.

2. 4. The Female Centaurs

In episode 7 entitled "Lost in Nebulous Time," Desiderio enters into a strange society of centaurs whose women's misplaced abjection is caused by an old myth. In this episode, Desiderio has Albertina, Hoffman's daughter, in his companion. The cultural beliefs and practices of this eccentric community are deliberately designed to misplace abjection onto the female centaurs. At the heart of their culture, there is the myth of the Sacred Stallion:

the Bridal Mare marries the Sacred Stallion [the sun horse], who instantly impregnates her but, while in foal, she deceives him with a former suitor, the Dark Archer. Spurred by jealousy, the Dark Archer shoots the Sacred Stallion in the eye with an arrow. As he dies, the sacred Stallion tells the Dark Archer his children will be born in degenerate forms. (ibid.: 575-6)

The centaurs are exactly that degenerate children the Sacred Stallion had predicted. They have lost the full quality of a horse as retribution for the wrong the Bridal Mare committed. This myth, as Darlene Juschka mentions, "shaped every movement, action, and aspect of their lives. The female in any manifestation must be ritually, socially, daily denigrated, while she must labor excessively and submit to any and every male" (2009: 60). Respectively, this myth has encouraged the male centaurs to punish any female with unjust contempt.

The conviction of community to the infidelity of the Bridal Mare is so rigid that all the males process to ritually punish Albertina only because she is of the feminine sex. Her punishment is processed in the form of a gang rape. Juschka, a professor of Women's and Gender's studies, calls attention to one significant point: "In the novel, the rape of Albertina was not motivated by a desire for pleasure; rather it was motivated by a grim desire to punish the female/feminine" (2009: 60). "Though Albertina was the object of rape," Desiderio says, "the males clearly did not know it was a rape. They showed neither enthusiasm nor gratification. It was only some form of ritual, another invocation of the Sacred Stallion" (Carter 2011: 560). Desiderio, watching the ritual, reveal that even the rape had had elements of the kind of punishment said to hurt the giver more than the receiver though I do not know what they were punishing her for, unless it was for being female to a degree unprecedented among them. (ibid.: 563)

So the "prolonged and terrible assault upon Albertina" (ibid.: 558) is meant above all to make her suffer "for they [the centaurs] believed women were born only to suffer" (ibid.: 534).

Surprisingly, Desiderio is not left out of the savage ritual; that is to say, he is raped respectively by the females of the community. In the case of Albertina, she has been the object

of rape; in the case of Desiderio, however, he himself, though being raped, unknowingly plays the role of the subject. The female centaurs are organized into a line to rape Desiderio not for punishing him, but for themselves being punished. Desiderio gives an account of his rape as follows:

But me they treated with far less severity because they respected the virile principle and reviled the female one. So my torment was intended only to humiliate their own womenfolk who one by one caressed me, as they were ordered, but only with the gentlest of fingers. (ibid.: 559)

Therefore, Desiderio's rape by the female centaurs reaffirms the superior power of masculinity. Richard Schmidt states that this image "reflects a patriarchal misogynist culture which constructs femininity as passive" (1989: 55). Such imposed passivity emphasizes the constructedness of femininity. The female centaurs experience punishment through tattooing as well. The female centaurs are tattooed all over their bodies. In centaurs's culture, all the community, male or female, are tattooed; however, the females are tattooed all over their bodies while the males receive only a few ones. In other words, the female centaurs are much more densely tattooed because the patriarchal culture surrounding them aims to subject the feminine sex to greater pain, both literally and figuratively. In "Notes from the Front Line," Carter herself claims that through depicting suffering images of women, she aims to investigate "the social fictions that regulate our lives" (1997: 37). The social fiction of the centaurs' community is in fact the traditional story of femininity in which all men are oppressive, tyrannous and the women degraded and martyred.

3. Conclusion

This essay studied Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* according to Kristeva's concept of misplaced abjection. The study investigated signs of female misplaced abjection in each strange society Desiderio encountered. The collected signs were then analyzed in four categories, which were organized around the abject characters of the story: "Mary Anne," "The Amazonian Women," "The Prostitutes of the House of Anonymity" and "The Female Centaurs." The major keywords used throughout the discussion included abject, abjection, feminism, patriarchy, subject/object and subjectivity.

It is clear that feminism informs Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. The misplaced abjection of the female characters studied in this essay reveals that they are all objects of desire within patriarchy and cannot be what Kristeva calls the speaking subject. In other words, the women of the male-centered societies which Carter pictures inhabit an abject position; however their abjection is an imposition of the existing patriarchal social order and has nothing to do with their feminine essence. Therefore, the abject condition of these women is a production of the male tyranny or, better to say, a patriarchal construction, which serves in the end to dominant social structure.

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