

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: The death of the stereotype: Reclaim of self in Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple"

AUTHORS: Mürüvvet Mira Pinar

PAGES: 255-261

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/389600>

The death of the stereotype: Reclaim of self in Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple"

Mürüvvet Mira Pınar¹

Received Date: 08 / 10 / 2015

Accepted Date: 31 / 12 / 2015

Abstract

Women have almost always been depicted stereotypically in literary history. Female characters have been presented acting in accordance with the pre-determined and recursive roles casted for them. In relation to this, female is pictured as either too good or too evil lacking a significant individualism and complexity. Accordingly, literary history has revolved around such stereotypes as "damsel in distress," "angel in the house," or "femme fatale" in the construction of its female characters. Nevertheless, there is a strong and noteworthy contestation against such stereotypical appropriations of women in literature especially within feminist context. Indeed, such female characters negate stereotypical representations, and surpass cliché scenarios envisioned for them in exceedingly subversive texts. "The Loves of Lady Purple" by Angela Carter, for instance, is a story that simultaneously relies on and subverts the female stereotype, femme fatale, which stands for the overtly seductive, abusive, and destructive female. Even though the story enacts a femme fatale, the characterization of the stereotype serves not to promote but to problematize stereotypical representations of female in the overtly male-centered literary canon. The femme fatale depicted in the story inclines to subvert the stereotypical traits imposed upon her by utilizing the very characteristics the stereotype would substantially demand. To this end, this paper specifically analyzes the representation and re-representation of the femme fatale in "The Loves of Lady Purple," and it aims to lay bare how femme fatale dismantles her objectification, suppression, and configuration by the male, and reclaims her own self.

Keywords: Angela Carter; "The Loves of Lady Purple;" Stereotype; Femme Fatale

1. The death of the stereotype: Reclaim of self in Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple"

As Alicia Ostriker (1982) underscores in her renowned article entitled "Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," "[i]t is thanks to myths we believe that women must be either "angel" or "monster" (p. 71). Indeed, women have almost always been depicted stereotypically in literary history. They are presented as either too good or exceedingly too evil in the most celebrated and renowned fairy tales, legends, folk tales as well as mythological stories. Women have been innocent, purely good, physically beautiful, angelic, and morally justified princesses, queens, damsels in distress; or they have been evil, immoral, dangerously powerful, physically distorted witches, stepmothers, and revengeful women. These stereotypical representations, however, have denied individuality from women by expecting them to act in accordance with clear-cut roles casted for them. In accordance with these roles, while the submissive good is always rewarded at the end, the revolting bad and the physically distorted ugly one are stigmatized, excluded, and punished for the safety of the continuation of patriarchal social order. Nevertheless, stereotypical rendition of women has found serious criticism, rejection, and readjustment in literature most specifically through rewritings and revisionist texts. Even if not in rewritings, female

¹ Ankara University, Faculty of Humanities, ANKARA/TURKEY, muruvvetmirapinar@gmail.com

stereotypes are problematized in literature by providing the stereotype with the voice and perspective she has been denied for too long.

Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple" which was published in *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* in 1974, for instance, is a significant example of those transformative texts where the female character transgresses stereotypical appropriations imposed upon her. The story revolves around an exceedingly vicious, monstrous, and evil female character named Lady Purple. Lady Purple proves to be a quintessential exemplar of *femme fatale*, which is an archetypal character of a seductive, sexually attractive, overtly maleficent, and destructive woman. Nevertheless, Lady Purple, as a *femme fatale*, becomes the very vehicle through which the story investigates, problematizes, challenges, and accordingly negates stereotypical representations of women in literature. As such, this paper examines Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple" with a specific emphasis on *femme fatale* as a commonly used female stereotype in overtly male-centered literary canon. By the way of analysis of the story, this paper attempts to show how female characters might destabilize gender stereotypes by a simultaneous reliance on and contestation against them.

To begin with, the story tends to adopt a rather surrealist mode in representing the *femme fatale*. Lady Purple is an ambivalent character whose ontological status blurs the conventional distinctions between such dichotomies as fiction-fact, life-death, and history-story. Lady Purple is depicted as a marionette, namely, a constructed inanimate object whose strings are pulled by an unnamed Professor. Even though Lady Purple is a lifeless, wooden puppet, the Professor- the puppeteer- writes a very detailed and historicized biography for her for the sake of the reality-effect the performance aims to create. As a result, the audience of the Professor's show as well as the actual readers of the story are made to believe that Lady Purple actually had lived and led a rather lurid life. Hence, this detailed biography and its effect on the audience and readers contradict Lady Purple's essentially inorganic and non-existent ontology rendering her existence as ontologically problematic.

According to the vivid and convincing biography, Lady Purple, as a young girl, firstly seduces her stepfather and later kills her stepfather and stepmother by setting their house on fire. After killing her stepparents, she becomes a prostitute of her own will, and she gradually turns into an exceedingly beautiful, sexually desirable yet monstrously evil woman who enjoys performing torturous sexual acts on her customers. The biography closes with depicting Lady Purple as transforming into a wooden object. Lady Purple, who was once a living woman, gradually grows into a soulless human being, and she finally transforms into a life-size yet lifeless wooden puppet because of her sins, evilness, and immorality. Now possessed by the puppeteer, her allegedly real history is acted out by the puppeteer before the audience as a course in morals. Consequently, Lady Purple inescapably proves to be an enactment of *femme fatale* not only when she is a human being but also when she is a puppet.

At this juncture, puppetry serves as a symbolic device in "The Loves of Lady Purple" that underscores the constructed nature of gender roles and gender stereotypes. Embodied in the man-made wooden puppet of Lady Purple, *femme fatale* image proves to be an artifact which is constructed and appropriated by the male-dominated society. Even though *femme fatale* is perceived as a potential threat to the patriarchal order, which thus should be excluded and destroyed, the puppet, Lady Purple is quite powerless and unauthorized regarding the existence of her being. In

relation to this, *femme fatale* can be regarded as an end-product of man in terms of both her physicality and aspirations. Lady Purple is indeed not a free-willed character; instead, she is a puppet whose strings are pulled by the male puppeteer.

In her book entitled, *Femmes Fatales*, Mary Ann Doane (1991) similarly draws attention to the *femme fatale* figure as an archetype which is constructed by male, and she maintains that

[*Femme fatale*'s] power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its carrier [...]. Indeed, if the *femme fatale* overrepresents the body it is because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness. In a sense, she has power despite herself. (p. 2)

As Doane emphasizes, the destructiveness of *femme fatale*'s excessive sexuality and seductiveness is not an inherent quality. Instead, *femme fatale* is an embodiment of the intertwined desire and fear the male unconsciously develops towards the female. Hence, *femme fatale* "is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism" (Doane, 1991, 2-3). Accordingly, the annihilation, exclusion, and the punishment of *femme fatale* are merely symbols of controlling the repressed, restoring the order, and the elimination of the threat on the part of male subject.

Likewise, the Professor's biography suggests the restoration of the order in patriarchal society by the destruction of the *femme fatale*. Lady Purple, who conducts monstrous acts on her male victims, clearly constitutes a threat to the patriarchal society. Her physical tortures on men deny the idea of masculinity as both psychologically and physically powerful and sturdy. Nevertheless, Lady Purple gradually loses her soul a result of her viciousness, and she eventually transforms into a wooden doll, which symbolizes her deprivation of humanity and conscience:

[...] she practiced extraordinary necrophilias on the bloated corpses the sea tossed contemptuously at her feet for her dry rapacity had become entirely mechanical and still she repeated her former actions though she herself was utterly other. She abrogated her humanity. She became nothing but wood and hair. She became a marionette herself, herself was her own replica, the dead yet moving image of the shameless Oriental Venus. (Carter, 1989, p. 262)

On the one hand, Lady Purple's transformation into a wooden doll stands for a kind of punishment for the *femme fatale* who conducts immoral acts and disobeys the idealized femininity. On the other hand, her transformation becomes a vehicle in restoring the order and eliminating the threat to the patriarchal power. The elimination of the *femme fatale* secures the continuation of the male hegemony, and it implicates the ultimate and unavoidable exclusion and elimination of the *femme fatale* from the male-dominated society.

Quite ironically, however, *femme fatale* becomes the center of an exceeding sexual desire and attraction. Although she is perceived as the other, and most significantly a figure of threat, she simultaneously mesmerizes, hypnotizes, and captures the male with her overt and explicit sexuality and seductiveness. As a *femme fatale* figure, Lady Purple, for instance, becomes the object of sexual desire and appetite in every phase of her being.

At the very outset of the Professor's biography, for example, she is depicted as a "flower which, although perfumed, was carnivorous" (Carter, 1989, p. 259). She is presented as attractive

as to seduce her stepfather and as evil as to kill both of her stepparents pitilessly, she also becomes an irresistible woman after starting prostitution. Although she is known to be a dangerous woman who conducts sadistic sexual acts on her lovers, men find themselves helplessly at her door begging for her sexual tricks, plays, and talents: "She was no malleable, since frigid, substance upon which desires might be executed; she was not a true prostitute for she was the object on which men prostituted themselves" (Carter, 1989, p. 260).

Lady Purple continues to fascinate people, especially men, even when she is a marionette. The mystery, exoticism, the unfamiliarity in her constructed story and her seductively realistic appearance accompanied by the voice of the Professor in the character of Lady Purple mesmerize the audience evoking fright and amazement at the same time:

Everything in the play was entirely exotic. The incantatory ritual of the drama instantly annihilated the rational and imposed upon the audience a magic alternative in which nothing was in the least familiar. [...] his voice modulated to a thick, lascivious murmur like fur soaked in honey which sent unwilling shudders of pleasure down the spines of the watchers. In the iconography of the melodrama, Lady Purple stood for passion and all her movements were calculations in an angular geometry of sexuality (Carter, 1989, p. 257-8).

Most significantly, however, the Professor develops an intense attachment to the marionette. His not letting anyone to touch her, his managing her clothes, make-up, hair, and most importantly his voluptuous kisses are indicative of his excessive desire of the *femme fatale*. That the men are simultaneously attracted by and afraid of Lady Purple in different phases of her being demonstrates how *femme fatale* continues to be the object of desire even in different contexts and forms. As a result, *femme fatale* becomes almost always a *desiderata* and a promisingly mysterious and erotic figure as a puppet and a fictional character.

One way to come to terms with the male desire for the *femme fatale* might be to relate her constitution to Carl Jung's conceptualization of the *anima*. In *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung conceptualizes *anima* and *animus* as part of the theory of collective unconscious. Jung designates both of the concepts as archetypes of the unconscious mind. The theory of *anima* and *animus* is based on the assumption that human is psychologically an androgynous being whose psyche is restored by the intercommunion between the masculine and the feminine principles. Accordingly, Jung (1964) defines *anima* as "a personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man's psyche, such as vague feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love, feeling for nature and – last but not least – his relation to the unconscious" (p. 178). He also describes *animus* as "[t]he male personification of the unconscious in woman [which] exhibits both good and bad aspects, as the does the *anima* in man" (Jung, 1964, p. 189). Jung asserts that the *anima* is developed in relation to the male subject's relationship with his mother, and it manifests itself variably in dreams, myths, archetypes, and the social relationships. Thus, if the mother has a negative influence on his son, "the anima will often express itself in irritable, depressed moods, uncertainty, insecurity, and touchiness." (Jung, 1964, p. 178). In relation to this, the archetypal *femme fatale* image that prevails in the folk tales, legends, and mythology becomes a manifestation of the negative *anima* in men:

Another way in which the negative *anima* in a man's personality can be revealed is in waspish, poisonous, effeminate remarks by which he devaluates everything. Remarks of this sort always contain a cheap twisting of the truth and are in subtle way destructive. There are legends throughout the world in which "a poison damsel" (as they call her in the Orient) appears. She is a beautiful creature who has weapons hidden in her body or a secret poison with which she kills her lovers during their first night together. In this guise, the *anima* is as cold and reckless as certain uncanny aspects of nature itself, and in Europe is often expressed to this day by the belief in witches. (Jung, 1964, p. 179).

As such, the negative *anima* "(the female element in the male psyche) is often personified as a witch or a priestess – women who have links with forces of darkness and the spirit world" in literature or visual arts (Jung, 1964, p. 177). As a result, on the one hand, *femme fatale* can be considered as the embodiment of the unconscious *anima*, namely, female element of the male subject. On the other hand, she can be evaluated as the enactment of the patriarchal society's simultaneous fear and desire of femininity.

In addition, Carter herself makes a rather profound elaboration on the *femme fatale*. She underlines the *femme fatale* as a site where the male manifests her repressed aspiration for sexuality. Regarding the *femme fatale* as a desirable and fearful object, Carter (1997) states that

[*femme fatale* expresses] an unrepressed sexuality in a society which distorts sexuality [...] This is the true source of the fatality of the *femme fatale*; that she lives her life in such a way her freedom reveals to others their of liberty. So her sexuality is indeed destructive, not in itself but in its effects. (p. 353)

The common aspect in all of the explanations is that *femme fatale* is a constructed image which patriarchal society simultaneously envisions, appropriates, and exploits. "The Loves of Lady Purple" similarly underscores the constructed nature of the stereotype. Lady Purple is not only made but she is also acted out by a male character, the Professor. In this sense, *femme fatale* becomes the product and the object of the masculine authority at the same time. Indeed, Lady Purple's existence is presented as reliant upon the Professor. He himself carves, polishes, dyes, dresses her; moreover, he ornaments her with jewels, and he puts her make-up on to make her look quite attractive and desirable. Moreover, not only does he create, but he also directs her actions and gives her the erotic and seductive voice. Apart from giving her a physicality, the Professor is also intent upon writing a personal history for Lady Purple in which she is involved in monstrous and viciously sexual acts towards men. In this respect, the Professor symbolizes the Eurocentric patriarchal society which attempts to fix both the physicality and identity of the *femme fatale*. On a similar note, the story puts an emphasis on the constructed nature of Lady Purple:

She must have been the masterpiece of a long-dead, anonymous artisan and yet she was nothing but a curious structure until the Professor touched her strings, for it was he who filled her with necromantic vigour. He transmitted to her an abundance of the life he himself seemed to possess so tenuously and, when she moved, she did not seem so much a cunningly simulated woman as a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent, who transcended the notion she was dependent on his hands and appeared wholly real and yet entirely other. Her actions were not so much an imitation as a distillation and intensification of those of a born woman and so she

could become the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive (Carter, 1989, p. 257).

As the quotation indicates, without the Professor, Lady Purple is nothing but an inanimate being deprived of any configuration and characteristics. Hence, her monstrosity and evilness are essentially reliant on the puppeteer. It is only after the Professor starts to pull her strings that Lady Purple, as a *femme fatale*, becomes real. As such, a *femme fatale* can be claimed to be a commodity which is continuously defined, undefined, and redefined by the male. She also proves to be an ambivalent object which is simultaneously admired and disgusted; desired and abstained from; emancipated and enslaved.

Even though Lady Purple is an artifact that is stereotypically molded by the male, she exploits these stereotypical traits so as to subvert and discard male authority. In fact, Lady Purple does not negate the stereotypical appropriation of female by means of an active transformation. On the contrary, Carter's protagonist takes her revenge from her constructor by means of the monstrosity and evilness he himself casts for her. Lady Purple comes to life as a vampire woman, and this time she acts out her role on his creator as a living being. Lady Purple attempts for a role reversal with the Professor by draining all of his blood into her own being. She used to be vitalized by the Professor through her strings; however, now, she – quite ironically – soaks all of his life into her own being. In this respect, she transforms herself from a life-given being into a life-taker one, and she declines the object position she has been situated in for too long. Gina Wisker (2006) similarly emphasizes that Lady Purple takes advantage of the stereotype for her emancipation from the male suppression:

Lady Purple's eternal life is assured when she capitalizes on the professor's undying love and drains him with a single, long bite while he hangs her up for the night. Object of male sexual admiration and terror, a deadly woman, Lady Purple [...] is an agent. Carter's vampire marionette wreaks vengeance for being cast in the mould of *femme fatale* and manipulated by the strings of male pornographic adulation, dramatized in her every move. But, Lady Purple, the embodiment and repository of the punters' horror, cannot be packed away. In the end, this monster of their own making will neither lie down nor be hung up (p. 185).

Lady Purple's immediate impulse to find a brothel "out of logical necessity" (Carter, 1989, p. 266) is considerably perplexing on the side of the feminist reader who seeks ways of emancipating the *femme fatale* from male configurations. Such a momentous attempt indeed might implicate Lady Purple's lack of any alternative since it is the only role casted for her. Likewise, Wisker (2006) also indicates that Lady Purple "remains somehow trapped in the professor's script as a deadly whore" (p. 185) even after she is physically freed.

Nevertheless, Carter seems to be more concerned with Lady Purple's liberation from the Professor's enslavement than negating the *femme fatale* archetype. Even though Lady Purple remains a *femme fatale*, she eventually escapes the confining strings of the Professor. At this juncture, vampire imagery serves as a liberating device for Lady Purple. Her transformation from a puppet into a vampire woman might reinforce her evilness as a *femme fatale*, however, it simultaneously contributes to her emancipation from the male bondage. In a similar vein, Fernanda Sousa Carvalho (2012) interprets vampirism as an emancipating vehicle for the *femme fatale*:

Pinar, M.M. (2016). The death of the stereotype: Reclaim of self in Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple". *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, 2 (1), 255-261.

Vampirism appears only at the end of the story as a newelement in the transformations that Lady Purple experiences throughout it, in a way that suggests new possibilities to that new being. It is through the violent act of the vampire feeding on her master that she is able to break free from the strings that keep her under the ventriloquist's control. The importance of the vampire figure in "The loves of Lady Purple" is that, through it, Carter demonstrates an alternative way to represent women's sexuality. The vampire feeding on her master symbolizes the possibility of women's acting upon her own desires as an alternative to simple repetitions of the performances that are rendered sexually transgressive by the male desires and fantasies that inform patriarchal discourses (p. 4-5).

2. Conclusion

To conclude, Lady Purple does not negate the stereotypical aspirations of the *femme fatale*. The evilness imposed on the *femme fatale* becomes her weapon against male. Lady Purple takes her revenge on the male by means of the monstrosity, evilness, and viciousness the masculine subject once inscribed upon her. By transforming into a vampire, killing the puppeteer, and finally heading to a brothel, Lady Purple ensures her freedom, and she is no longer acted out and managed by a male. Discarding the male dominance, she rejects the role casted for her, and she inclines to write another master plot for her where she can find and raise her own voice. As such, Carter simultaneously implements and problematizes the archetypal *femme fatale* possibly in the most explicit way in "The Loves of Lady Purple." Even though she does not annihilate the archetype and prolongs her conventional attributes, she notably contests the subordination of the *femme fatale* to the male.

References

- Carter, A. (1989). The loves of lady purple. In *Wayward girls & wicked women: An anthology of stories* (pp. 254-66). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Carter, A., & Uglow, J. (1997). *Femme fatales*. In *Shaking a leg: Journalism and writings* (pp. 350-4). London: Chatto & Windus.
- Carvalho, F. S. (2012). Breaking codes of sexuality: Angela Carter's vampire women. *UFMG*. Retrieved from <http://www.periodicos.letras.ufmg.br/index.php/emtese/article/view/3530>
- Doane, M. (1991). *Femmes fatales: feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Jung, C. (1964). *Man and his symbols*. New York: Anchor.
- Ostriker, A. (1982). The thieves of language: women poets and revisionist mythmaking. *Signs: journal of women in culture and society signs*, 8(1), 68-90.
- Wisker, G. (2006). Behind locked doors: Angela Carter, horror and the influence of Edgar Allan Poe. In *Revisiting Angela Carter* (pp. 178-99). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.