

## A STUDY OF SEXUAL PERVERSIONS IN ANGELA CARTER'S "THE STORY OF O" AND PAULINE REAGE'S "THE BLOODY CHAMBER"

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, a comparison has been made and analyzed between *The Story of O* (1954) by Pauline Reage and *The Bloody Chamber* (1969) by Angela Carter. Both stories have been studied by keeping in mind the idea of sexual perversions such as sadism and masochism. Both of the terms were coined by a German psychiatrist named Krafft Ebing. The main idea deployed in this essay is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze's elaboration of sadism and masochism in his book called *Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs* written in collaboration with Leopold von Sacher-Masoch in 1967. Sadism means deriving pleasure by inflicting pain on others while masochism is about giving pain to the self and seeking pleasure. Both stories are infused with various examples of such perverse natures of sexuality. Also, biblical allusions have been discussed briefly here, besides the similarities and dissimilarities between the stories. In order to describe the binary of domination and submission involved in a sexual relationship, the thought-provoking quotes have been borrowed from *The History of Sexuality* written by Michel Foucault.

**KEYWORDS:** *Perversions, Sexuality, Comparison, Domination, Submission*

### INTRODUCTION

"Where there is desire, the power relation is already present"

Michel Foucault

In the light of the above -mentioned statement, one can see how sexual perversions take place in stories like *The Story of O* and *the Bloody Chamber*. In both stories, Carter and Reage, respectively, deal with the extent of a monstrosity that sadism in a sexual relationship reaches. Sadism, i.e., deriving pleasure by giving pain to others, was named so by Krafft Ebing in *New Research in the area of Psychopathy of Sex* (1890). Not to mention, the term was originally derived from the name of Marquis de Sade. In other words, Carter and Reage have deployed such sexual perversions in an explicit fashion which otherwise remain unquestioned in the garb of a usual sexual interaction between two persons. They show how sadism paves way for the exercising of "an unlimited right of all- powerful monstrosity" in an "abnormal" yet insightful manner.

"Desire does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary, desire desires desire."

-Michel Foucault

When read in the light of sadistic approach, one witness how the heroine of *The Bloody Chamber* and the photographer, O, of *The Story of O* react to their respective male partners. Both the Marquis's wife and O feel bewildered due to the male bestial nature. While the former manages her escape from the dark maze of her husband's frightful nature, the latter is completely colligated by Rene's circle of unusual prostitution at Roissy. Initially, both heroines lie at the level of a victim, but later the trajectories followed yield different results. Carter's heroine manages to break the shackles of her husband's vicious circle of perpetual sadism and starts a new life altogether. Whereas O is entirely engulfed by her boyfriend's orbit of sexual pain which he and others inflict on her.

*The Story of O* is a story of a girl named O who deliberately indulges in the act of prostitution when her lover takes her to Roissy. The spectacle of sexual activity gives pleasure to Rene and makes O feel that she belongs to him, mumbling "I love you" very often. The story is leashed with the ill treatment of O in the name of giving her an identity and eking out pleasure. Stephen, Rene's friend, comes in the picture, who also uses O for his carnal desires. Eventually, it is seen that O is marred with so grotesque conduct and how Rene and Stephen abandon her. As a result, she decides to kill herself and that too with Stephen's consent. In other words, it deals with a dark labyrinth of perverse sexual practices within a clandestine amoral society.

Inspired from Perrault's version of *Bluebeard*, *The Bloody Chamber*'s story is about a young girl who marries a rich man in possession of a huge mansion. He takes her away to a grandiose castle. When they arrive, the husband contrives to leave for a period of time and gives her all the keys to the rooms of the castle. However, the marquis forbids her entry into one room. Consequently, the curiosity breeds in her mind and like it is already known that curiosity killed the cat. She smells a rat and eventually attempts to unfold the secret of the forbidden room. The Marquis comes to know that she had opened it and before he could kill her, the girl's mother shoots him right in the middle of his forehead. Such a dramatic end manages to perplex the readers for a moment.

From the above written brief description of the stories, one concludes that both are imbued with the sense of evoking awe and fear in the minds of its readers.

As the title suggests, *The Bloody Chamber* shows how blood becomes quite significant in a sexual relationship, both literally and symbolically. Sade too gave importance to the flow of blood that "flowed through the whole dimension of pleasure". In Sade, sex does not include any intrinsic rule formulated from its own nature; but it is subject to the unrestricted law of a power which itself knows no other law but its own. A similar scenario is present in *The Story of O* where O is whipped, stripped and her labium is pierced. Her screams give pleasure to the onlookers. One thing that is worth noticing is that both heroines are bereft of an identity of their own. The girl in Carter's story is identified as the Marquis's wife while O is "branded" on her buttocks and marked iron pieces are also attached to her labium so as to impart her sense of belonging which she otherwise did not possess beforehand.

Rene says to O, "You are merely the girl I'm furnishing."

This statement makes it quite evident that she has no identity of her own. It is a mechanical way of treating human, especially women in such an inhumane society.

The narrator further says, "The fact that he gave her was to him a proof, and ought to be one for her as well that she belonged to him; one can only give what belongs to you." This statement proves that O remains submissive and thus,

is entirely stripped of her identity. This powerlessness on the part of O gets laced with the notion of possession and domination by her boyfriend, Rene. He at once remarks, "You are here to serve your masters." This serves as the incident where noticing the relation between power and sex is unavoidable. This brings in the concept of BDSM, i.e., bondage, domination sadism and masochism. BDSM points towards how one remains at the bottom (powerless) and the other at the top (powerful). Here, one can refer to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. In a particular essay from the book entitled as "The Deployment of Sexuality", Foucault describes the notion of repression including prohibition and censorship. According to him, the relation between power and sex is about negativity. It overlooks elements, introduces discontinuities, separates what is joined, and marks off boundaries. Though this relation between power and sex takes an unpleasant form in these stories, Foucault states that it is the language through which power's hold on sex is maintained. Various examples have been mentioned above which further add to the substantiality of what Foucault proposes.

Under the title of "The Perverse Implantation", Foucault describes how sexuality practiced in marriage was not paid much attention. It was the sexual practices of madmen and women, criminals, homosexuals, maniacs, transport of rage that gained the limelight. They constitute what is called Peripheral Sexualities. The Marquis and Rene form a part of a dire circle of such unusual sexuality.

From the above aspect of perverse sexuality, one comes to the notion of powerlessness. *The Story of O* is leashed with the events reminding the readers of her abject powerlessness. The act of blindfolding her metaphorically throws light on her sense of being helpless and voiceless. However, the moment its reader begins to show sympathy towards her, she apparently seems to shun it by putting her sexual pain equivalent to seeking deliverance. One sees how Reage draws parallel between the fructification of Jesus Christ and O's own brutal treatment in the hands of the chateau's men. It is the ecstatic union she is seeking that can only come in "imitation Christ" meaning imitation of the suffering of Christ. Some people call it the Passion of Christ.

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted and behold, service was joy."

Rabindranath Tagore

If read in the context of O, one can sense the masochistic overtones in these lines by Tagore. A similar parallel can be drawn between O of *The Story of O* and Severin of *Venus in Furs*. Severin is in love with Wanda but feels disdain when she falls in love with another man. Obviously, Severin is a masochistic lover.. A similar behavior is shown by O when Rene starts liking Jacqueline.

A similar kind of sadomasochism is seen in a twenty first novel called *Fifty Shades of Grey* written by E. L. James. This book, published in 2011 too brings to light the intriguing story of BDSM of a young girl and an efficient employer of a huge company. The entire book is replete with insightful scenes where Mr. Grey unveils his "other" side. The story of O is too reveals the same kind of pleasure as sought by Anastasia Steele of James's novel

In terms of allusions, both Carter and Reage have been very deft. In Carter's story, one sees how the story alludes to the biblical story of the temptation of Eve. The way she is lured by the forbidden fruit is similar to the way Carter's heroine gains interest in entering the forbidden chamber. In general, such parallel with the admirable mythic heroine affects the spiritual and social progress of women. However, Eve's knowledge lets humankind fall while the Marquis's wife's "dark new-born curiosity" finally unfolds the mystery and imparts liberation.

"I gave no permission for a woman to teach or to  
Have authority over a man. A woman ought to  
be quiet because Adam was formed first and  
Eve afterwards, and It was not Adam who  
Was led astray and fell into sin."

(1 Timothy 2-11-14)

These lines by Paul in New Testament bring to the fore the misogynistic attitude towards womankind as followed in the biblical story. But Carter twists the end of her story by putting a final end to an unbridled inhuman passion of the Marquis. The girl's mother in *The Bloody Chamber* appears as a saviour, but there is no such figure in *The Story of O* where sex is depicted through images both grim and gory. This difference is further elaborated later in this essay.

In *Justine*, a work by Marquis de Sade, one comes across the symbol of a ring or band which not only denotes a relationship but a confinement of entire lifetime. A similar kind of symbol was used during the French revolution where a snake was shown to have its tail in its mouth. It gave the message of eternity. In *The Bloody Chamber*, the girl remarks, "His wedding gift clasped around my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide like an extraordinary precious slit throat." Also, the description she makes of her dresses is done in quite a sadistic fashion. She calls her neckpiece a "cruel necklace" and mentions that "he kissed (them) before he kissed my mouth". This shows how authority takes over, and love and relationship remain at the lower rung.

Similarly, in Reage's *The Story of O*, there are constant references made to collars, chains and bracelets besides "branding" her on the buttocks. She is labeled as someone else's object of sexual gratification, hence, bearing acute pain. The iron pieces hung to her labium are marked with Stephen's initials.

Although both heroines are looked down upon by the male partners in their respective stories, yet there is one aspect that makes the two very different. In *The Story of O*, O emerges as a plausible example of a masochistic beloved who happily accepts all the brutality her lover thrust upon her. However, Reage deviates a bit from how Deleuze describes masochism in his book *Coldness and Cruelty*. In Reage's story, O is blindfolded, yet she derives pleasure from whosoever puts his genitals into hers. She is not bothered about the identity of the man involved while her love for Rene remains as vibrant as ever. The reason behind her love is that the whole act of prostitution serves as a spectacle which gives pleasure to Rene. She accepts it without any hesitation because Rene wants it and therefore, she has no qualms about doing it. Reage has rightly named the protagonist as O. One can draw the parallel between the shape of the letter "O" and that of the vaginal orifice of the character, O. Both suggest a sense of openness which is quite central to the whole realm of prostitution she is involved in.

While further elaborating the character sketch of O on Reage's story, one comes across the dark beastly side of a human relationship. "I love you." This one sentence is often repeated by O and throws light on the amoral way through which the relationship between O and Rene is carried on. O's condition is found to be similar to that of the prisoners who are whipped and chained, and eventually, died. However, she accepts all the pain with a feeling that Rene feels gratified. Reage starts her story with the description of a park at Roissy, the season and the passage. In other words, the writer tries to set its readers in a mood that helps in extracting out the real meaning of the story. Each description is laced with sexual connotations and further adds to the intensity of the sadistic aspect of this story. This brings the reader to another thread that links Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and Reage's *The Story of O*, i.e., both the protagonists are keen observers. Both writers have emphasized upon the explicit description of the places surrounding their protagonists. Though the young girl addresses the Marquis's abode as "marvelous castle". The castle is grand but the tone in which she describes it is that of mystery and anxiety. Their narrow bedroom indicates towards her virginity which is lost very soon. She makes a comparison of her husband's great wealth to that of Croesus and quotes that he has "acquired a whole harem for (himself) in the mirrors that line her bedroom". These mirrors represent the images of women who share the same plight as that of this heroine. The character of the Marquis has been deftly sketched by Carter. His interest in "Immolation of the wives of the Sultan" hints towards what he pursues in reality. Besides this, the carpets, the orient gallery, etc. further add to the elements of awe and terror.

Though both stories bring to the fore the deviant form of sexuality, the stories end in a different fashion as already pointed out. In *The Bloody Chamber*, the wife remains submissive to the Marquis whose grandeur is too great to be brushed aside. The meek and gentle wife, a young girl who considers her marriage to be an exile, remains forlorn in her marital life. She is both apprehensive and anticipatory about the ordeal she must pass through, i.e., the loss of her virginity to an older and experienced man. However, the ending reveals how to put an end to the plight of such woman. The mother of the girl who kills the Marquis defies all the usual conventions of the status quo and appears as the new woman in the old world. The powerful husband had created an environment of terror and fear in the mind of the heroine through the horror of that forbidden chamber and the fear of sexual intercourse. Eventually, she would commit the mistake and he would relish in inflicting pain upon her. Hence, Carter shows a reversal of what the society expects where generally, the heroine's curiosity is to be suspended as an undesirable trait. In nutshell, Carter gives an optimistic end to her story but it is not the case with *The Story of O*. O is brutally harassed and beaten up but she bears it without any opposition. She is supposed to wear dresses in which her breasts are covered by just a translucent lace. Further, the end of the story reveals a heightened form of her submission where sexuality showcases its extreme form. Her death, in the end, is put in parallel to Christ's fructification as already mentioned before. In other words, her death is evidence that further concretizes the sadistic trope of the story. Thus, the ending shows how both stories become different in terms of sexuality.

In this concluding paragraph, it can be remarked that though such stories on the heinous nature of sexuality have been written, but society is yet to be made fully aware. Foucault puts emphasis on the creation of a discourse so as to make talking about sex morally acceptable and technically useful. The word sex needs to be subjugated at the kind of language and it is necessary to take it away from the level of a taboo. Thus, the main motive here is to unmask different faces of sexuality and to show how writers tend to foreground the reasons, social and personal, responsible for it.

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