Feminizing the Masculine Body in Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*

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Mainly applying gender studies to the analysis of Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, with the body as the focus, this paper explores how the masculine Amelia is feminized for the purpose of resolving masculinity crisis embodied by Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon, concluding that the culturally constructed normative sex and gender dichotomy operates by disciplining otherness, causing gender identification trouble and disempowerment.

Keywords: Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, feminizing, masculinity

Introduction

Since Simone de Beauvoir declares in *The Second Sex* (1949) that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, the division of sex as an ontological concept and gender as a social and cultural construction has been a pivotal perception to question the fixed dichotomy of female/femininity and male/masculinity in that the bodily, psychological and behavioral traits that prescribe the ways of being a female/male are also constructed in a certain historical and cultural context, always being fluid and plural (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 295). The feminist constructionist point of view on gender along with femininity and masculinity is also shared by scholars of men's studies and queer studies. Joseph Pleck identifies in *The Myth of Masculinity* (1983) the traditional notion of masculinity as “The Male Sex Role Identity Paradigm”, arguing that it is an unrealistic myth built on stereotypes and idealized yet impractical norms of being males (Pleck, 1984, p. 15). Judith Butler puts forward the idea of gender being performative, “a choice, [...] a role, [...] a construction that one puts on” (1993, p. 21). That is, between sex and gender, there is no natural correspondence, rather gender as “a free-floating artifice” can be independent of sex, “with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 2008, p. 9).

From the constructionist perspective, the disconnect between sex and gender is a normal phenomenon yet the binary scheme of female/femininity and male/masculinity is constructed as a power mechanism that sustains patriarchy as R.W. Connell points out that “[t]here is an ordering of versions of femininity and masculinity at the level of the whole society” where femininity is made subordinated to masculinity (Connell, 1987, p. 183). From social and cultural constructionist viewpoint, human body is never simply a material existence but is a text, a carrier and a space, subject to historical ideologies and practices. There is no such thing as a body inoculated against cultural inscription rather “our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing

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historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity" (Bordo, 1992, pp. 165-166).

Regarding sexual and gender identity, "the docile body" is imprinted by the fixed opposition between male/masculine and female/feminine prescribed by patriarchal and conventional heterosexual norms (Foucault, 1995, p. 135). The binary scheme proves particularly harmful to the female body in that femininity entails the feminized body characterized by weakness, sexual desire and fertility serving mainly as sexual objects and reproduction tools in contrast to the energetic, strong and mobile masculine body, the dynamics behind which is to maintain the sexual hierarchy of males in the dominant position by putting females in a fragile condition. Thus the female body with masculinity traits figures the appropriation of male power, calling into question and even subverting the normative male and female power structure with the male body in masculinity crisis, which leads to the female's masculine body being rendered deviant that needs to be corrected, namely to be feminized so as to restore the sexual/gender identity dichotomy and male/masculinity dominance. It is based on the theoretical foundation of masculinity and femininity as attributes under on-going construction plus the power hierarchy between the two that this study is conducted.

The Masculine Amelia: Masculinity in Crisis

The Amazonian Amelia is a woman with a masculine body as the narrator describes, "Miss Amelia was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality", always "dressed in overalls and gum-boots" (McCullers, 2000, p. 8). Not only does Amelia's physique appear masculine but she also utilizes her body, not in the traditional feminine way such as taking care of the household like most Southern Belles do, rather in the way males do such as carpentering, building houses and practicing medicine—"with all things which could be made by the hands Amelia prospered" (McCullers, 2000, p. 8). Apart from that, she is also a shrewd businesswoman, operating a store, a brewery and sawmill, the profits from which make her the richest woman in the town, proving that her body is a body with strength and intelligence, upon which she makes an independent woman physically, economically and mentally.

She practically ignores the "bodily discourse [of] what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behavior are required" for women, which termed by Brownmiller as "tradition of imposed limitations" (Bordo, 1992, p. 170; Brownmiller, 1975, p. 14). Her body subverts the normative correspondence between female and feminine body and threatens masculinity that is supposed to be owned only by the male body, being a living case of gender as a performance through the body as "styles of the flesh", hence tentative direct control, interference and even torture being imposed to feminize it and to restore the binary identification of body politics (Butler, 2008, p. 190). According to Judith Butler, gender is not an ontological feature but a performance through the body as she puts it, "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body [...] in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 2008, p. 191). Seen in this way, the inborn link of the female body and femininity is problematic, which is embodied by Amelia, challenging the naturalization of conventional feminine body imagery.

Macy, an epitome of masculinity, "the handsomest man in this region—being six feet one inch tall, hard-muscled, and with slow grey eyes and curly hair", well off and making good wages, attracting and having affairs with "gentle young girls who were clean-haired and soft-eyed, with tender sweet little buttocks and

charming ways”, surprises the whole town by choosing the “solitary, ganging, queer-eyed” Amelia (McCullers, 2000, p. 34). For a man like Macy, the reason he prefers Amelia with a masculine body that bespeaks the “masculine language and values of that arena--self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery” to those stereotypical feminine bodies appears perplexing unless consideration is given to the gender power structure within which masculinity’s dominance is sustained by the less powerful and powerless, women included (Bordo, 1992, p. 171). Amelia’s masculine body topples the fixed hierarchy, facilitating her rise from the marginalized to the locus of power used to be only accessible to males thus she becomes the usurper of male power embodied by Macy who stands for masculinity and patriarchy hence his attempt to bring Amelia’s body back to normal, i.e. to feminize the masculine body so as to restore the normative order. What happens to Amelia subsequently illustrates how the dichotomy of body politics practiced by patriarchy spares no effort to make “female bodies become docile bodies--bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (Bordo, 1992, p. 166).

In the first place, Macy’s marriage to Amelia gratifies the whole town because people count on this marriage to “reform his bride”, to “tone down Miss Amelia’s temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her at last into a calculable woman”, the expectation of which makes Macy a representative of the town, obviously a patriarchal society, to carry on the mission of disciplining Amelia yet the unconsummated marriage becomes a locus of struggle between Macy trying to turn Amelia’s body into a sexual object and reproduction tool and Amelia’s rejection of giving up her virginity (McCullers, 2000, p. 38). On the church wedding, Amelia does present a feminine “style of the flesh” when she wears her dead mother’s bridal gown, “a yellow satin at least twelve inches too short for her” which makes her “impatient, bored, and exasperated” because she cannot “find the pocket of her overalls” (McCullers, 2000, pp. 37, 38). The unfitting dress and Amelia’s unpleasant reaction indicate her unease with a traditional feminine body style functioning as sexual object under the male gaze and as reproduction tool in marriage following her mother’s step thus the struggle over the body between the couple becomes explainable.

Marriage as an institution of heterosexuality and patriarchy operates in that for the husband, the wife is “sex—absolute sex, no less” and in mothering, she is “reduced to her corporal, material form as a reproductive body: ‘the instrument of reproduction, her only tool’” (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 16; Huffer, 1998, p. 15). On the wedding night, Amelia refuses to have sexual intercourse with Macy, stomping down the stairs “in breeches and a khaki jacket”, back to her usual masculine style from the transient femininity earlier in the wedding ceremony, a gesture of reject performing her body according to conventionality, leaving Macy with “a sick face” since “a groom is in a sorry fix when he is unable to bring his well-beloved bride to bed with him, and when the whole town knows it” (McCullers, 2000, p. 39). For Macy and the patriarchy behind him, sexuality is one of the pivotal elements that constitute masculinity which makes the conquering of the virgin female body imperative therefore the inability to bring Amelia to bed once again puts masculinity in crisis that needs resolution.

Feminizing the Masculine Body: Resolving Masculinity Crisis

Macy resorts to presents, “an opal ring, a pink enamel doreen of the sort which was then in fashion, a silver bracelet” and “a box of candy” and he signs over to Amelia his property, all of which make his wish to turn his bride’s body into a feminine one clear and his mentality of marriage as an exchange of the husband’s fortune and

the wife's body (McCullers, 2000, p. 39). As Irigaray states, "In our social order, women are "products" used and exchanged by men. Their status is of merchandise, "commodities" (1985, p. 171). Amelia's indifferent reaction, selling the presents, taking the property yet still sleeping in the kitchen, is a sarcasm of the commodity logic and declaration of refusing to be a sexual object exchanged between men because she knows that as commodities, women are objects, deprived of subjectivity just as Irigaray observes, "The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as subjects" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 171).

Amelia resolves to maintain her masculine body, a body of self-reliance and strength at her own disposal as indicated by the narrator that it is an unconscious habit of her, at the close of a meal, to "tighten her fist, and felt the hard, supple muscles of her right arm beneath the clean, blue cloth of her shirtsleeves", the muscles being a symbol of male power contrary to the bride-fat, symbolizing femininity and weakness, which the whole town wishes her to put on after marriage (McCullers, 2000, p. 17). Amelia's conception of the feminine body as a weak and powerless body is also evidenced from the fact that although she is, in the neighborhood, the best doctor who can treat diseases of all kinds, she has no knowledge about gynecology and the mere mention of female complaints makes her face "slowly darkened with shame", looking like a "great, shamed, dumb-tongued child" (McCullers, 2000, p. 23). Those incurable female diseases remind her of the fragility of the female body and hers being one of them despite her exterior appearance of man's build thus she makes every effort to attain and maintain her masculine body, hence her dissent of having sexual relationship with Macy, afraid of being turned like those ordinary feminine body. After the failure of material seduction, whenever Macy has the slightest tendency of getting close to Amelia, all he gets is being beaten up by the bride until ten days later being driven out of the house, which formulates the climax of masculinity crisis and makes his revenge a foregone subsequent plot.

The story closes with the wrestling match between Macy and Amelia, which to some extent is a symbolic sex scene with the two fighters "grappl[ing] muscle to muscle, their hipbones braced against each other" and "their deep hoarse breaths [as] the only sound in the cafe" (McCullers, 2000, p. 80). Macy is like a rapist trying to force himself upon Amelia by violence. The two eventually going to violence merits noticing. As Jeff Hearn observes, "Doing violence is [...] a resource for demonstrating and showing a person is a man. [...] Men's violence to women thus speaks and shows this difference. The difference is produced and reproduced in and through violence" (McCullers, 2000, p. 37). Seen in this way, violence is wrongly equated with masculinity, partly being what makes a male a man, different from female, which is what Macy is eager to showcase and Amelia's access to it is intolerable, her defeat foretold. Just when Amelia takes the upper hand and is about to win the match, with the unexpected help from Lymon, she is finally defeated by Macy, laying "sprawled on the floor, her arms flung outward and motionless" and Macy "stood over her, his face somewhat pop-eyed, but smiling his old half-mouthed face", which is more of a rape scene than a wrestle match along with the rapist Macy's conquest over Amelia's body and his consummation smile (McCullers, 2000, p. 80). The male with a masculine body eventually dominates over the female's masculine body. In this metaphorical rape as "the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood", masculinity is restored (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 14).

After Macy, colluding with Lymon, metaphorically rapes Amelia, her masculine body gradually turns feminine. “[Her] hair turned grey. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy”, her body deteriorating and losing vitality, and her voice becomes “broken, soft, and sad”, signifying her loss of discourse (McCullers, 2000, p. 83). Amelia, the female usurping a masculine body that challenges the body politics is feminized in a tragic way.

The tragic ending of Amelia locking herself up in the house, only occasionally opening the window to look over the town is McCullers's subtext of her gender identification trouble. “It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams—sexless and white, with two grey crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief” (McCullers, 2000, pp. 7-8). Amelia is in a dreamlike state, confused by gender norms. Her crossed eyes, one symbolizes masculinity and the other femininity are negotiating but the long gaze with each other in grief indicates that it is a long-term even lifetime negotiation that probably cannot be closed because as is analyzed in this paper, she cherishes masculinity but the patriarchy demands femininity of her, the conflicts between the two are difficult to be resolved.

Conclusion

In Amelia, McCullers once again proves the constructionist nature of masculinity and femininity, criticizes the limitation of conventional sex and gender dichotomy, voices with compassion for the Other whose gender identification is not contained by conventionality and warns the danger of gender trouble and disempowerment if the Other are deprived of the choice outside the normative binary scheme.

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