

GENDER AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE*: CARE ETHICS AND QUEER ETHICS

Yeşim İpekçi

Research Assistant/ Department of English Language
and Literature/ Fırat University /Turkey

Abstract

This study re-examines the question of gender, sex, and sexuality under the practices of heteronormativity that has been widely discussed in the field of queer theory. Rejecting the common attempt to connect gender identity to biological sex, queer ethics accepts the validation of new identities and sexualities as much as the earlier ones. The emphasis upon the acceptance of the marginalized groups opens the way to establish a link between queer ethics and care ethics, which has not been adequately addressed in previous works. This study first intends to deconstruct and reconstruct the concept of 'normal', with a special attention to Angela Carter's "The Passion of New Eve" (1977), introducing ambivalent identities that arise out of heteronormative hubris. Secondly, it will put care ethics in the centre to shed light on its relation to queer ethics, based on the rejection of traditional universalist ethics.

Key Words: care ethics, queer ethics, Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, autonomy

Introduction

Beginning from the end of the nineteenth century, along with the introduction of the term 'homosexuality', people have started to be categorized as homosexual and heterosexual, preventing the autonomous "constructs of individual identity, truth and knowledge" (Sedgwick, 1990, 3). Thus, the ethical concerns have become very prominent in understanding and responding to the categorizations of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as other forms of 'deviant' identities as termed by the cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1999, 145). Underlining the well-known argument regarding the ideological construction of identities and sexualities, this study tries to analyse one of the main concerns of queer ethics which is to go beyond all the categorizations that threaten one's gender and sexual autonomy. However, the traditional ethics, particularly the deontological/Kantian ethics, assumes the supremacy of reason over emotion and approves the applicability of impartial rules to all individuals under all circumstances. Acting as a medium between queer ethics and traditional ethics, the ethics of care, having its roots in feminist thought, builds its moral significance upon feelings such as sympathy, compassion, and sensitivity towards the dependent. Referring to *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Tucker asserts, "Carter's interest in the construction of gender is very creatively engaged in this text and tends to render problematic the definitions of androgyny and transsexuality" (1998, 119). This study seeks to deal with this problematic side with an explicit emphasis upon gender and sexual autonomy by decoding the notion of 'normal' and embracing a care perspective to queer ethics, for "the ethics of care envisions caring not as practiced under male domination, but as it should be practiced in post patriarchal society, of which we do not yet have traditions or wide experience" (Held, 2006, 19).

The Normal

This study highlights "the distinction between the naturally-given, normative self of heterosexuality and the rejected 'Other' of homosexuality" (Barry, 2009, 145) as part of the argument that identity construction contradicts with the idea of inherent gender identity imposed by the society. The concept of 'normal' generally means "certified, approved, as meeting a set of normative standards" (Warner, 2000, 56). Considering the common practice of associating the normal with the heterosexual, Foucault puts forward that heterosexuals are members of the

disciplinary society, and their identities are formulated within the process of a discursive subjectification. Underlining the constructed nature of 'normal', Butler argues that the identity politics are under the domination of regulatory regimes and oppressive structures. While the sexual preferences, desires and practices are assumed to be part of one's actual identity and therefore necessary to be freely internalized, Butler draws attention to the performative character of gender, which queers "not only hegemonic institutions, identities and relations –what Butler refers to as a 'heterosexual matrix' but also identity politics and the fundamental assumptions upon which it (in its various forms) has been founded" (Sullivan, 2003, 81-82). In *the Passion of New Eve*, Eve(lyn), as a male to female transsexual, suffers from an identity crisis and endures the complications of living in or being confined to the wrong body. No matter whether it was a willing or unwilling surgery, the ideological message inserted in the text is the new Eve(lyn)'s coming to the stage as a representative of forcibly constructed identities. Butler goes on to say that "the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations" (1988, 278). It would not be wrong to assume that there is no such thing as heterosexuality and homosexuality but just fictions, because gender does not have an essentialist character, neither does sexuality. Compared to the Kantian/deontological ethics, which persists in limiting any kind of desire or feeling outside the rationale of heteronormativity and thus sets the stage for the destruction of gender and sexual autonomy, queer ethics fundamentally cares for all kinds of varieties on the grounds that our knowledge of body and truths about it are all the ideological constructions.

The Non-Heterosexual and Transgendered Other

Seeking to put an end to "the siege of the other", queer ethics, as mentioned earlier, prescribes that all relevant categorizations are artificial and therefore open to any kind of interrogation (Warner, 2000, 30). According to Warner, being heterosexual, married, and procreative is associated with the qualities necessary to be good, normal and natural while the opposite establishes a ground to be acknowledged as bad, abnormal, and unnatural (2000, 26). Thus, the denial of variant identities and sexualities also brings up ethical concerns, as it disregards individual autonomy, which could be considered as an automatic result of traditional approach to sexual morality. In Warner's words:

So sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them. Having an ethics of sex, therefore, does not mean having a theory about what people's desires are or should be. (2000, 7)

Valuing one's gender and sexual autonomy, "the ethics of queer life" presupposes the idea that sex "is not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized", contrarily it can be as various as people (Warner, 2000, 35). No matter whether it is a female or male, those who want to impose standards on other people are responsible for destroying the individual's sense of self. With the intention of describing her/his psychology, Eve(lyn) says, "I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman" (79). Forcibly exposed to the sense of in-betweenness, Eve(lyn) voices the inner world of the transsexual and transgendered. As a symptom of the heterosexual world domination, queers develop an identity problem and communities witness the rise of ambivalent identities, which demands to be evaluated as an ethical challenge. In this sense, care ethics and queer ethics can collaborate to make people realize gender and sexual autonomy.

Caring for the Other

The ethics of care, mainly developed by the works of Carol Gillian and Nel Noddings as a distinct moral theory, is based on the notion that all human beings are relational and dependent on each other. Care ethics introduces care-givers and care-receivers engaged in the care practice for the well-being of the entire world in general. Care ethicists believe that care ethics is not only an alternative perspective, but also a moral reasoning as valid as the male-oriented, justice-and-utility based deontological and utilitarian ethics. Equally valuing female perspective of moral reasoning, Gillian asserts, "to admit the truth of the women's perspective to the conception of

moral development is to recognize for both sexes the importance throughout life of the connection between self and other, the universality of the need for compassion and care” (1982, 98). Respecting the emotion-based moral reasoning of women, the ethics of care does not seek to set boundaries and limits to the individuals but calls for utmost sensitivity and responsiveness to particularly vulnerable groups. Fundamentally embracing similar motivations and purposes, the ethics of queer might work in collaboration with care ethics that would make contributions in line with Koehn’s idea of recognizing “individuals with distinctive and distinguishing interests and proposing “an ethic that preserves and respects individuality” (1998, 11).

Traditional/Reason-Based Perspective to the Other

“The man-made world” has been disregarding the female voice in moral reasoning until recently (Sage, 1994, 36). The moralities “built on the image of the independent, autonomous, rational individual largely overlook the reality of human dependence and the morality for which it calls” (Held, 2006, 10). Held, one of the well-known care ethicists, offers criticisms against Kantian/deontological and utilitarian ethics for their utmost reliance on reason by rendering women incompetent to make moral judgements due to their emotional nature. Although even this emotional nature is culturally constructed, “from the standpoint of male ethical theories, women’s reasoning appears to be ethically undeveloped, and women themselves immature and childlike” (Koehn, 1998, 2). As cited by Gillian, Freud believes women “show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility” (1982, 7).

Reflection upon the resonances of these classical views in *The Passion of New Eve* through the relationship between Evelyn and Leilah might offer better understanding of the need for the ethics of care in moral reasoning. In the ethics of care, “the moral world is not already ‘there’, fully formed in its rationality” (Koehn, 1998, 22). In this respect, Evelyn’s turning into Eve upsides down the male-oriented perspective to the relationships and introduces the female perspective that will be shaped based on the notion of ‘caring’. Leilah becomes the ‘other’, a submissive and dominated female figure for Evelyn. The weak position of Leilah reaches to climax when Leilah announces her pregnancy and begs him to marry her. With an ignorant attitude, Evelyn says, “but soon I grew bored with her. I had enough of her, then more than enough. She became only an irritation of flesh” (27). The image of Leilah as a flesh has never changed for him. This flesh was previously a source of lust and later on it turned into a source of boredom, but never a means to care for her. Considering Leilah’s position as a prostitute, this does not give any reason to Evelyn to care for her. However, from queer perspective, it is not right to determine her value based on her sexual practices.

Emotion-Based Perspective to the Other

Contrary to the traditional ethics, which requires a totally impartial and rational moral reasoning even in particular cases, the ethics of care mostly focuses on partiality on the basis of the idea that “there are no moral absolutes” (Gillian, 1982, 65). As a woman is basically shaped by her relationship with others, “sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view” according to Gillian (1982, 16). Placing emotion to the same level with reason in moral reasoning, Held says:

In contrast with the dominant rationalist approaches, such emotions as sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness are seen as the kind of moral emotions that need to be cultivated not only to help in the implementation of the dictates of reason but to better ascertain what morality recommends. (2006, 10)

Evelyn’s relationship with the prostitute Leilah, deprived of all the feelings of care, empathy and trust, sets a contrast to Eve(lyn)’s relationship with the transvestite Tristessa. Evelyn’s transition from male to female drives him into the male-oriented female world, where Eve(lyn) starts to feel care and empathy more intense than the time she was a male. While his attitude towards Leilah was more or less same with that of Zero to his wives, Eve(lyn) voices her empathy towards the wives and says, “his wives, with their faces of ancient children, who so innocently consented to be less than human, filled me with an angry pity” (104). More significantly, not capable of being insensitive to the transvestite Tristessa’s suffering, Eve(lyn) says, “she sobbed a greeting or an invitation to pain. I

choked with love and pity for her” (123). Unlike Leilah, Tristessa, as the cared-for, manages to hold on to Eve(lyn) as the care giver who comes to be an outsider just like her and realizes that they should care for each other to survive. On the other hand, accusing Tristessa of homosexuality and yearning for murdering her for that reason, Zero, as a grotesque representative of those who are against gender and sexual autonomy of diverse identities and sexualities, forces Tristessa and Eve(lyn) to get married and have sex without thinking even for a second about what they actually want. This parody of heteronormative marriage, in the one hand, implies how people with hidden identities are forced to get married to meet the social expectations, and on the other hand may offer the reformative idea that “marriage represents a deep caring relation between persons and should be open to nonheterosexuals as well as to heterosexuals” (Whisnant & DesAutels, 2008, 55). Such attitude contributes to adoption of queer ethics more effectively, making the call for putting an end to “control someone else’s sex life” and gender identity (Warner, 2000, 1).

The More Care the Less Queer

Queer ethics seeks “to clear a space for thinking differently about the relations presumed to pertain between sex/gender and sex/sexuality, between sexual identities and erotic behaviours, between practices of pleasure and systems of sexual knowledge” (Hall and Jagose, 2013, xvi). Aiming to help the individuals voice their true inner selves, care ethics considers it as an obligation to leave our inner voices, objections and prejudices aside to “receive the other in his or her otherness” (Koehn, 1998, 22). Voicing those who feel to be trapped in the wrong bodies just like Tristessa, Eve(lyn) says, “I know nothing, I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg...I had only the one thought_ I am in the most ludicrous mess in the world!” (79). A person who is not allowed to freely expose her/his transgender identity and embrace her/his particular sexual orientation goes through a complicated sense of self. Considering Gillian’s idea “that other person is part of that giant collection of everybody” (1982, 57), it is a necessity to care for the transsexual, transgender, and others with non-normative sexualities in order to improve their psychological and physical well-being. While dealing with ethical concerns in this respect, it is the utmost importance to be aware of the autonomy of marginalized groups, for “caring for particular people and caring for the world as a whole are intertwined” (Koehn, 1998, 2). Despite Kantian perspective that acting upon our desires poses a challenge to our autonomy, both care ethics and queer ethics believe in individuals’ genuine autonomy based on emotions and feelings rather than rationality and impartiality, because “the age of reason is over” (9).

Conclusion

Care ethics, which offers a reconstructive ethical approach to non-normative identities and sexualities with an emotion-based moral reasoning, contributes to internalization of queer ethics that seeks to go against the standards expected to be followed like ‘normal’ and ‘heterosexual’, which are ideological constructions. This study has aimed to examine Angela Carter’s interest in taking apart these constructions and claiming gender and sexual autonomy via ‘queer’ characters in *The Passion of New Eve*. Establishing queer relations between characters, Carter intrinsically paves the way for queer ethics and its potential relationship with ethics of care. The emphasis upon the ‘relational’ nature of queer ethics and care ethics brings these perspectives together for a better attitude to the marginalized groups that would serve for a collective well-being of humanity (Koehn, 1998, 2). Losing the sense of self, feeling a perpetual sense of in-betweenness and getting trapped in hidden identities are the painful consequences of heteronormative world domination, as Carter depicts in her work.

Biography

Yeşim İpekçi, born in 1991 in Diyarbakır/Turkey, graduated from the department of English Language and Literature at Bilkent University and had her minor degree in the department of International Relations at the same university in 2013.

Currently she works as a Research Assistant and continues her master's degree in the Western Languages and Literatures Department at Firat University/Elazığ/Turkey. Her research interests include gender studies, queer studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and posthumanism.

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