READING THE BLOODY CHAMBER BY SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S
EXISTENTIAL FEMINIST APPROACH

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Abstract

In this study, the process of finding the protagonist of The Bloody Chamber, one of the important works of Angela Carter, and its transition from childhood to woman, from unknown to known, is analysed with an existential feminist view of Simone De Beauvoir. Beauvoir's "Woman is not born, she becomes a woman." statement emphasizes how Carter shapes the protagonist. In addition, this work of Carter is told as a revolt to the 20th century. Carter transforms the tradition into a modern by using the feminist approach and proves that women can become individuals without being dependent on men. Marriage is a beginning for the protagonist to find herself, and when she discovers her sexuality, she closes to find herself more. Thanks to Simone De Beauvoir's existential feminist approaches and Carter's contrast to traditionalism, it is concluded that the woman exists not only with femininity, but with her own decisions and experiences.

Key words: Simone De Beauvoir, sexuality, finding own self, existential feminist approach

Özet


Anahtar Kelimeler: Simone De Beauvoir, cinsellik, kendini bulma, varoluşçu feminist yaklaşım

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Introduction

*The Bloody Chamber* is a story that re-written of *The Bluebeard* fairy tale by Angela Carter's feminist approach. This story was published in 1979. Although patriarchal system had strong influence in this period, the story has different characteristics.

Unlike the usual fairy tales, it has a different plot, characters and end, so that the story can be described as a ‘modern fairy tale’. Carter used gothic items in the story that one of the Victorian period features. The ‘castle’ symbol is an example of this.

As one of the important authors of the 20th century, Carter, who had many successful works, was a marginal and brave author according to many critics of that period. In 1960, she studied medieval literature at the University of Bristol.

While she was emphasizing subjects of gender and sexuality in her works, she used also mythological elements. She won the Somerset Maughan Award for her work, *Several Perceptions* (1968). Thanks to this award, she went to Japan and stayed there for a while. The effects of Japanese culture can be seen in many of her works. One of Carter's most important goals was to provide rights of free sexuality for women. She also emphasizes this goal in *The Bloody Chamber*. The story tells a 17-year-old girl marries an older Marquis because of poverty. In fact, this is a story about a girl's self-awareness and the transition process from childhood to womanhood. Carter shows this process by reversing elements of the traditional story. She makes the girl, a heroine rather than a victim, and finally makes her free. Although this story based on *The Bluebeard* fairy tale, there is a big difference between them. At the end of The Bluebeard, the girl is saved by her brothers, but at the end of The Bloody Chamber, the girl is saved by her mother. This is one of the evidences of how it differs from traditionalism. Carter makes women characters powerful and brave unlike the women characters of the traditional fairy tales.

**Simone de Beauvoir and Her Feminist and Existentialist View**

Simone de Beauvoir who was born in 1908, studied mathematics, literature and language first. Then she focused on philosophy. Her purpose of choosing philosophy is related to the pressure of women in her period and to reject the responsibilities imposed on them, because as she questions this pressure on women, she begins to question her existence. So that, she can be defined as existentialist philosopher, feminist and social theorist.
The idea *existence precedes essence* is key for Bouvier’s philosophy. She, and Jean Paul Sartre come up with this idea that is known as the basis of *existentialism*: “*Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning.*”¹ Thus, a man is determined, and defined by his experience and choices in life. Another point that we understand from this way of thinking is that although we are not free to choose our family, biological structure or our history, these should not be some excuses for our behaviours.

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, strongly objects to understanding makes women “the other”. It is possible to say that what Beauvoir tries to do is to re-arrange the relationship between object, and the other in existentialist philosophy in the case of relationship between man, and woman. Thus, she became the first in feminist existentialism. The sentence “*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*”² made a huge effect in feminist area.

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, claims that men defines women for himself, and being a real individual is obstructed for a woman. Thus, woman is turned into some kind of “object” that is always determined, defined, and discriminated by men. While man is absolute, woman is something arbitrary.

Now, it is possible to criticize the main character in *The Bloody Chamber* with the help of Beauvoir’s ideas which we summarized briefly. The protagonist tries to take the control of her own life as well. The story, in a way, shows the process of being a woman/a real individual by getting rid of definitions thrown upon her.

**Transition Process from Childhood to Womanhood: The Protagonist who tries to be the subject of her life**

First of all, protagonist is important through anonymousness. The purpose of the author not to give a name to the protagonist is to prevent her from being objectified. She not only prevents objectification of her, but also refers to all women. It is like in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Yellow Wallpaper*, protagonist is anonym. In her story, Gilman emphasizes that women exist not only with their femininity, but also with their thoughts, emotions and

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² “google privacy policy,” last edited on May 1, 2020, https://gaiadergi.com/oteki-cinsin-varolus-mucadelesinde-bir-kadin-simone-de-beauvoir/
experiences. At the end of the story, the protagonist becomes independent by going mad in her own attitude.

The protagonist of *The Bloody Chamber* becomes an individual by discovering herself and her sexuality. She also gains experience with her acts and finally finds her own self. This is the story of the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and clues that she will go on that journey: “... away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.” She will take the first step towards becoming a woman with new experiences by leaving her girlhood behind and getting married.

Besides, at the beginning of the story, the protagonist defines herself by saying: “And, in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife.” This expression shows that she exists thanks to her mother or her husband and defines herself through their lives. She is just a young girl at the beginning of the road, who has not yet become the subject of her life, who defines her existence through others.

She marries someone older than herself because of poverty. Her father went to war, and he could not come back so, she lives with just her mother, and perhaps she may have seen this marriage as an escape. In this case, her effort about becoming an individual through a man rather than an individual her own can be clearly seen. She is a character who a 17-year-old girl, adapts to her period and cannot live without a man. That is exactly what Virginia Woolf says in her *A Room of One’s Own*: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” It is the formula that how a woman can be an individual by herself.

At that time, while women were defined by the responsibilities that society imposed on them, Woolf gave them the formula of how they would become the subject of their lives. However, every woman cannot do it, just like the protagonist in the story.

She marries because of obligation, she defines the marriage as an exile: “Into marriage, into exile; I sensed it, I knew it - that, henceforth, I would always be lonely.” That means somehow marriage is a forced isolation for her. However, this marriage helps her find herself and she will also discover her own sexuality.

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Her virginity is one of the most important themes of the story and represents innocence. Her husband talks by insulting her because of her virginity and age: "*My little nun has found the prayer books, has she?* "*Baby mustn't play with grownups' toys until she's learned how to handle them, must she?*”

After she sleeps with her husband, she mentions a stanza of her husband’s favourite poet: "*There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer.*" This is the evidence of his attitude towards her. According to him, there is a link between love and torture, and this shows that his dark, and sadist identity. She catches a clue of the real face of her husband she could not see before, and when her husband leaves home for work, she will learn more about his identity.

After she experiences sexuality, she sees herself reborn, because this experience changes her. When she looks at the mirror, she sees herself differently. It takes a step from innocence to sexuality, and it continues the transition from unknown to known. The discovery of sexuality is a beginning for her to find herself. Her husband leaves home for work, and it is inevitable that she will go on her way to finding herself. He leaves her with the keys to all the rooms in the house, but he only warns her not to enter a room. After her husband is gone, she goes to his study room and researches to get information about him. When she finds something about his ex-wife there, she wants to learn more and enters that room where his husband does not want to enter. This room will help her to realize herself. She will reach the threshold, which is the symbol of the unconscious by entering the forbidden room. After passing through that threshold, the process of finding herself will be completed. In that room, she finds the dead wives of her husband in blood. The hint she had previously found about her husband’s sadistic identity, now makes sure that he is a sadist. She terrifies her what she sees, but also realizes how strong she is. She suddenly drops the key from her hand and the key stained with blood. This will then determine her fate. When she leaves the room, she wants to play the piano to calm down. The piano-tuner awaits her near the piano. This man is described in the story as blind, weak, and poor. Carter again spoils the traditional male stereotype by using this character. The girl cannot stand and tells a piano-tuner everything she sees. The man says that her husband can be at home at any time and warns her to clean the bloodstain on the key. Whatever she does, she cannot clean the bloodstain and her husband sees it when he arrives at home. He tells that his wife did not obey him, and he will punish her because of it. Death is inevitable for her now.
He presses the key on her forehead, and the stain stays there forever. This can also be seen as the 'price' in transition from childhood to womanhood.

He dresses her with a white dress, takes her to the ‘bloody chamber’, and takes his sword. Although there is no salvation for her, a woman appears on the horse through the window. This person is the mother of her. She called her mother because she was very unhappy before, but her mother understood that there was something wrong with her speech.

When she understands this, she immediately takes the road to her daughter. Just as her husband is going to kill the girl, her mother kills the man with the gun by shooting his on the forehead. This is the punishment of him.

**Conclusion**

Although the protagonist is seen as a victim at the beginning of the story, at the end, she is saved by her mother, who is referred to as a strong character. In other words, while a female character becomes a heroine, the male character is punished. Carter revolts against patriarchy by reversing the genders’ roles through this story. Also, at the end of the story, the protagonist rejects her husband’s power and donates his money to some charity organizations and the blind piano-tuner becomes her lover. The fact that, he cannot object her with her appearance or femininity, because he is blind, weak, and poor. Carter criticizes that men see women as an object through this character.

According to Phacharawan Boonpromkul’s article “Rewriting Genders, Revising Genres: Reading Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' As a Female Bildungsroman ”, The Bloody Chamber is evaluated as a female bildungsroman. That means the story is about a woman’s growth, development, and reaching maturity. Moreover, this story is can be associated with “Two Sisters of Persephone” by Sylvia Plath. Although Plath says there are two sisters in this poem, in fact, she mentions about two sides of a woman. “One sits; the other, without. / Daylong a duet of shade and light” She defines them as two women as ‘light and shade’. Shade one is a woman who fits the roles of society defined as traditional, so that she is under the male domination. Light one is the woman who discovers her sexuality and herself: “Grass-couched in her labor's pride, / She bears a king. Turned bitter”

The protagonist in the story can be described as shade while she is under her husband's domination, but then, when she discovers her own sexuality and strength, she is described as light.
This shows the difference between the woman who is ideal for society and the woman who can be independent as being herself. As a result, Carter shows that women can exist without men with their own acts and experiences through the story as a reaction to the patriarchy in that time.

REFERENCES


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