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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "A HAUNTED HOUSE" AND ANGELA CARTER'S "THE BLOODY CHAMBER"

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ABSTRACT

Mark Leary's definition on identity formation sheds light on the challenges that women face in their journey for seeking an identity. Women living in patriarchal societies usually shape their identity by seeking the approval of a male gaze that gives them an existence if the women manage to gain a respected position in society. In gaining approval women seek marriage as the ultimate goal of respectability. Foucault's concept of the panoptical discipline of social institutions along with Jean Paul Sartre's concept of existence can help unravel the intricate process of identity formation in feminist literature. Thus, reading "A Haunted House" (1921) by Virginia Woolf and "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) by Angela Carter from a sociological perspective adds to the ongoing discussion in feminist literature on the vital importance of understanding the multidimensional factors that are part of the evolvement of identity in general and female identity in particular.

Keywords: Carter, Foucault, Identity, Sartre, Woolf

Identity is a controversial term; it has been discussed by various theories and as a result has a number of definitions. Mark Leary in a *Handbook of Self and Identity* defines identity as "the traits and characteristics, social relations, and social membership that define who one is" (69). According to Leary, identity is something that can be constructed, built, and shaped in light of various perspectives such as, social, psychological and cultural aspects. Embedded in the concept of identity is the sexual aspect that is a key component in the process of constructing an identity especially in women. Mark Leary's definition sheds light on the challenges that women face in their journey for seeking an identity because women in a patriarchal society shape their identity by seeking the approval of a male gaze that would give them a respected place in society through marriage. Foucault's concept of the panoptical role of social institutions along with Jean Paul Sartre's concept of "existentialism" can help unravel the intricate process of identity formation in feminist literature. The following paper aims at analyzing selected literary works by the two celebrated feminist authors and suggests that reading "A Haunted House" (1921) by Virginia Woolf and "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) by Angela Carter from a sociological perspective and as feminist literature highlights important factors in defining identity in general and female identity in particular.

Both writers emphasize that female identity has been shaped and influenced by the patriarchal society in which the major characters have succumbed to. Similar to most women in similar societies portrayed in the novel, the women in the narratives construct themselves according to a male's perspective. Women from the onset rely on their fathers to take care of them. Then, as they grow older, women start searching for

a spouse to depend on and to gain the respect of a patriarchal society and, therefore, a woman decides to marry to gain approval.

The heroines in "A Haunted House" and "The bloody Chamber" are portrayed as searching for their identity through marriage; one imposed on them by the patriarchal society. Moreover, they are semi-conscious that they are seeking the stereotypical image of the feminine which culminates in being a married woman. For example, the ghostly couple in Woolf's "A Haunted House" search for something from the onset; they are looking for a precious object in the house. "Here we left it," she said. And he added, "Oh, but here too!" (3). The identity of this object is not revealed; it is also something not fixed, which means the missing object exists in their inner psyche. The readers are also led to believe that the couple are looking for an abstract object not a physical one; therefore, the hunt indicates that both are searching for a similar object because it is lacking and the suggestion is probably related to their relationship.

The ghostly couple also observes the life of an ordinary human couple, whose life seems dull, boring, and lacking in sentiment. Thus, both couples reveal that since they have been married their sense of love has been lost and as a result their identities are also unattainable. Josephs Catalano states in "A Commentary on Jean- Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness" asserts that "we are conscious of our emotions; this consciousness makes them to be, giving them their entire weight and value" (85). Therefore, emotions are one way of discovering our existence; they also help us as individual in understanding ourselves. Getting in touch with our emotions leads us to a better assessment of our self-esteem which is vital for creating happiness and a more meaningful existence. In marriage, the sexual relationship is an important tool for discovering and shaping an identity. Being aware of gender distinctions means that both men and women shape their identities accordingly and as a result conceive the world in a different way. "I forced myself to be seductive. I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then" (Carter 21). The heroine's awareness of her ability as seductress helps in crafting her escape at the end which points the paradoxical nature of gender relationships.

The women in the stories provide an example of identity formation for the readers. Mark Leary asserts that "self and identity theories assume that people care about themselves, want to know who they are, and can use this self-knowledge to make sense of the world" (70). So, both couples, the mortal human being and the ghostly metaphysical form, try to discover their inner identities in light of their gender relationships which seems to be a mandated relationship; the human couple's relationship shows a lack of love and this kind of emotional emptiness in their relation is reflected on the ghostly couple. So, the purpose of marriage for women is revealed as not for the sake of love; it is for the sake of achieving a value in society.

The couples' relationships suggest that marriage kills love and hence life becomes senseless and meaningless. Thus, marriage, even in the presence of a strong sexual bond, is considered a lapse in crafting identity in general and female identity in particular. As an example, the meaningless of such a relationship is cast on the ghostly couple who as the narrator states: "The ghostly couple seeks their joy" (Woolf 3). Therefore, through marriage both sexes try to find something which does not exist and in the end succumb to a deplorable existence as revealed in the ghostly couple; marriage in the case of the man is to satisfy his desire in this mortal life; while in case of the woman, it is to have an existence in patriarchal society, which proves to be a stereotypical identity without assigning any uniqueness to any individual. Women as portrayed in the fictitious world of the narratives are a subordinate sex who depend on men to construct and shape their identities through different relationships, such as their relationships with their fathers followed by their husbands and finally, their sons. Therefore, women's identities have become inseparable, dependent, and completely linked to men's perceptions and desires.

In "A Haunted House" the female character died after her husband's death which suggests that her existence is bound to him. Moreover, her identity is linked to his identity. In this case identity is revealed as a constructed and shaped object which depends on various aspects; psychological, cultural, social, political and gender aspects. "Identities are not the fixed markers people assume them to be but are instead dynamically constructed in the moment" (Leary 70). This suggests that an individual's identity is a constructed object that depends on several various factors such as culture, gender, social and political norms.

In the case of "A Haunted House," the ghostly female builds, shapes and forms her identity depending on her husband; therefore, suggesting that "real" women can't have an identity without men. Thus, Woolf, in her story, criticizes the idea of marriage because it has become for women the only way of discovering their identities in a patriarchal society. The stories of the women reveal that marriage for women is neither for the sake of love nor for self-satisfaction and becomes only as a tool used for seeking an acceptance in patriarchal society. The source of frustration is linked to their inability to consciously shape an identity outside a marital relationship. The result is that the ghostly and the ordinary women marry to seek identities based on social norms and therefore, their lives are meaningless, empty and senseless. "What did I come in here for? What did I want to find? My hands were empty" (Woolf 3). Moreover, Woolf's female character marries to gain respect from the society that imposes certain characteristics on female's identity. According to sociologists, identity is a product of the social world that surrounds individuals. Therefore, they are representations of the social and cultural beliefs, values and even conventions. An integral part of identity theory is the belief that "people possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of multiple groups, and claim multiple personal characteristics, yet the meanings of these identities are shared by members of society" (Burke 3). Thus, every individual identity is a mixture of the social environment where he or she lives and as a result a person becomes an object and lacks agency in shaping a unique identity.

The social aspect of shaping an identity is intertwined with the psychological aspect that links emotions with identity formation. Psychologists suggest that emotions play a monumental role in shaping an individual. Experiences that a person gains from marriage and feelings of love, betrayal and hate become tools for discovering our identities. Moreover, Jean Paul Sartre suggests in his book *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* "And what this is we know from the beginning: an emotion signifies in its own manner the whole of the consciousness, or, if we take our stand on the existential plane, of the human reality" (12). Therefore, according to Sartre reality exists within us and as a result of that our identities are self-constructed within our range of emotions. Thus, Sartre shows a possibility of a way out identity as a production of different aspects such as cultural, social and political factors. This is the feminist case of the heroines of the two stories; they experience their emotions and emphasize that they have been led to believe that truth of their humanity and identity can only be attained through marriage by a manipulating patriarchal society.

"A Haunted House" suggests that the self-knowledge and identity is something within us and we as individuals build our identities in light of social factors that are imposed on us. However, both feminist writers suggest that as individuals we should not make our identities based on social whims and should resist a dominant practice of patriarchal societies. The novel shows that the first step in knowing your identity is to accept yourself to form a healthy identity. Moreover, the writers suggest that women should work hard to construct themselves and their identities without being a subject of oppression or inferiority. Therefore, readers infer that women should be blamed for their inferiority because they willingly accept this position without trying to change the stereotypical image that is result of identity formation based on patriarchal standards.

The two narratives reveal that forming the female's identity corresponds to the male identity through a marriage relationship has negatively affected women's identities in which women become subordinate subjects and have willingly accepted patriarchal hegemony. Therefore, marriage which is imposed on women is intended to produce the feeling of inferiority; and ironically it is used as a tool for gaining social respect. Some critics believe that the process of forming identities is a controversial process not only in the case of women but also for men.

A male identity as suggested in the stories seems to be constructed by personal factors, but their identity is also affected by social standards similar to the case in women. In fact, the narratives emphasize that appearances often direct social concepts rather than the natural aspect of what gender dictates. The mother in "The Bloody Chamber", for example, provides an instance where her unconventional attire gives her a certain kind of freedom. Cornelia Masonic in "Sartorial Rhetoric and Gender Roles in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber" states that "the idea that there is no such thing as pure femininity or masculinity; they are fixed, culturally and socially, by conventional outward appearance" (83). Therefore, both men and women undergo the social process of acquiring cultural and social codes that are usually superficial. However, a woman's

identity seems more affected by these aspects than a man because women are under the control of a patriarchal society which puts a disciplinary function on women in particular.

The unnamed heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" is similar to most women in seeking her identity through the idea of marriage. She is a seventeen years old girl who marries an older man. "He [is] older than I. He [is] much older than I" (Carter 3). Through marriage which is portrayed as a journey, the heroine witnessed many events that shaped and formed her female identity. Although her husband is a very old man, she decides to marry him to discover herself and form her identity. The writer shows that teenage girls aim at forming an image of themselves and are also struggling to construct a complete and separate identities to gain the respect and acceptance of their societies through marriage. The emphasis on the role of women's aspiration of marriage as integral to their identity can be seen in most of Carter's fiction. Kristine Jennings in "Moonlit Mirrors, Bloody Chambers, And Tender Wolves: Identity and Sexuality in Angela Carter's "Wolf-Alice" analyzes the short story's themes of identity and sexuality, as well as its intertextual connections to other stories in "The Bloody Chamber" using Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva's concepts and reveals how the social component affects the process of constructing an individual's identity (89-110). Saul McLeod in "Social Identity Theory" asserts that the social milieu is essential in the building and construction of identity (1). This is the case of the unnamed heroine; she surrenders to the social patriarchal demands in forming her identity, but at the end she fails even to achieve her constructed social goal.

Thus, her relationship with her husband seems to have no purpose except in finding her existence and identity which rely on her status as a married woman. "Identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership" (McLeod 1). Therefore, she tries to form her identity by being a married woman but the attempt is a failure as she recalls the encounter with her husband: "When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him. I caught sight of myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire" (Carter 5). So this kind of relationship is described as one that has corrupted the heroine's inner self because she starts to see herself in the same manner that her husband sees her, as an object of his desire rather than a human being.

However, women's identities are bound even at an earlier stage of their lives. At the beginning, their identities rely heavily on their fathers, then their husbands, and end up with their children. The dependency indicates that they are inferior creatures who do not have a chance to determine the course of their lives. Carter's heroine is similar to most women; first she is bound to her family then she marries a man hoping that she will have a chance to shape her identity, but she recognizes at the end that the choice backfired and that there are other possible choices that have not been explored. She realizes that women are considered as a subordinate object to others. "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" (Carter 2). Here, the heroine acknowledges her fear of being a subordinate object that can be sold, bought and passed on as a commercialized good. She reveals that the female's identity is bound to others: her mother, her husband, her family. Moreover, the relationship is subject to the male gaze for the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" is constantly trying to escape the questioning eyes of her husband. Her weakness is described in her own words: "I could not meet his eyes and turned my head away" (Carter 7). The protagonist in this situation is asking for the reader's empathy as well. This kind of relationship shows the inferiority of a younger woman who is kept by patriarchal society as a subordinate. These practices as the reader is aware of has an effect in marginalizing women and preventing them from being mature and able to make decisions. It shows a power relationship in which life threatening situations prevent women from saving their lives both physically and mentally.

On the other hand, Woolf and Carter reveal through the heroines that the culprit in the dissatisfaction and negative feelings is in fact the women's aim of pleasing society through marriage. The heroines in the narratives exemplify Sartre's conception on the role of the individual in drawing his existence. Jean Paul Sartre emphasizes that "The human being" is "also the one who can take the negative attitudes with respect to himself" (*Being and Nothingness* 86). Therefore, both women lie to themselves in which Sartre considers such a state as "bad faith." According to Sartre, people often are in a state of falsehood:

Thus attitudes of negation toward the self permit us to raise a new question: What are we to say is the being of man who has the possibility of denying

himself? But it is out of the question to discuss the attitude of “self-negation” in its universality. The kinds of behavior which can be ranked under this heading are too diverse; we risk retaining only the abstract form of them. It is best to choose and to examine one determined attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negative outward turns it toward itself. This attitude to me, is *bad faith mauvais (foi)* (87).

Both major characters in Woolf and Carter have inferior positions in their society because they chose to be subordinate human beings. As readers we infer that each woman should have a purpose, meaning and function outside the dictation of social disciplinary gazes. However, the women seem to be more of a secondary element rather than having a real impact and influence. By mapping the characters’ personalities and relationships, the reader can visualize the insignificance of the heroines. The narrator in both stories tries to elicit feelings of empathy and self-identification, however, there is a distinction made between what could have been achieved and the challenges presented.

The heroine of “The Bloody Chamber” decides to marry and take this step because she is in “bad faith.” Although her husband is older than herself, she decides to marry him. This means that she deceives herself by claiming that she does not have the choice of being free and accepts an inferior position by escaping from her true identity. However, as readers we can infer that since the heroine of the story decides to marry, she is the only one who should be responsible for this choice. The heroine of “The Bloody Chamber” takes the choice of marriage at early age and she is the one who willingly chooses to be married to a very old man. “Are you sure you love him?” “I’m sure I want to marry him, I said.” (Carter 2) The lines emphasize the concept of *bad faith*; she takes the choice acknowledging the likelihood that she will suffer from this unequal marriage, however, she insists because she is living in falsehood. “The one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth” (Sartre 91). Thus, the heroine of “The Bloody Chamber” is lying by pretending to be unable to make a decision in her life and that she does not play a significant role in shaping her identity. Moreover, readers can realize that her choice was a conscious lie to get rid of the idea of responsibility and therefore, the heroine does not gain our sympathy.

The incident with the house boy reveals to the readers her desire for a subordinate position. The heroine seems to enjoy the inferior position by seeking help from male characters instead of asking her mother which means that she fondly cherishes the idea of being in a subordinate position. Her feelings show her female vulnerability as follows: “He took my hand; he pressed his arms about me. Although he was scarcely more than a boy, I felt a great strength flow into me from his touch” (Carter 21). Therefore, the heroine seems to enjoy her own weakness. Josephs Catalano in “A Commentary on Jean- Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness” refers to the concept of bad faith as a living in a situation where “The paradox is that we are conscious of lying to ourselves and yet believe (we have faith in) our lies” (86). The heroine of the story chooses to believe that she is an inferior human being and painstakingly tries to convince herself of limited options in the construction of her identity.

Therefore, women in general continue in the belief that marriage will allow them a respectable identity. Mardy Ireland in *Reconceiving Women Separating Motherhood from Female Identity* asserts that “Only when the assumption that all girls must become mothers to fulfill female adulthood is challenged will a women’s destiny truly be her own” (1). Ireland argues that the reason behind marriage is that a woman wants to move from childhood to adulthood to gain a respectable identity and forgets that there are other ways in becoming a more productive individual in society. “A Haunted House” and “The Bloody Chamber” reveal the failings of using marriage, and ironically both narratives are categorized as gothic literature. The writers both describe the patriarchal way for seeking a female identity through marriage sarcastically as horrific and suggest that seeking identity should be alternatively in a search of achieving uniqueness. Carter uses this genre in particular to explore women’s role in society as evident also in her other stories, as in “The Loves of Lady Purple,” “The Lady of the House of Love” and “Fall River Axe Murders” (Tavassoli 53-60). Mary Kaiser in “Fairytale as Sexual Allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” examines the book and explores how folklore can be anonymous and fluid and shows how seductive descriptions of sexual exploitation and victimization are related to sexual politics (7-30). One critical viewpoint in a linguistic and

stylistic analysis of Woolf's "A Haunted House" reveals that the narrative has the aims to "unravel the reader's expectations of a conventional ghost story" (Hughes 46). Woolf also used the presence of supernatural forces in intimate places usually associated with warmth to show the imprinting of human existence in her works such as *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob's Room* (Wisker 4-26). Thus, Woolf and Carter hope to inspire the readers that in order to achieve an identity one has to find the real truth in intimate places related to the human soul. Woolf and Carter through the stories provide the readers with different perspectives on how a woman's identity is perceived. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* considers identity as a "signifying practice" (184), and Woolf and Carter are involved in that important discussion in giving the readers a different perspective on marriage.

To sum up, an analysis using a sociological framework of the novels reveals that the heroine of Woolf's "A Haunted House" and Carter's female protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber" are passive characters. Moreover, the heroines show readers that an attempt at using marriage as the ultimate way for seeking an identity in particular is detrimental to any woman. The two writers use the major characters as examples of failed individuals who find themselves operating under the influence of a patriarchal society. This kind of inferiority prevents women from exploring or shaping their lives and embracing themselves. So, Carter and Woolf question marriage as the defining factor of female existence and identity and both writers seek the enlightenment of a younger generation in trying to find a better alternative for identity formation.

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