

## Exploring Womb Envy in Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance*

### Angela Carter'in *Shadow Dance* Romanında Rahim Kiskançlığı Kavramı

#### ABSTRACT

Angela Carter's first novel, *Shadow Dance*, published amid the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, is a literary testament to the changing gender dynamics in that chaotic period. In the text, Carter crafts a tale that exposes the themes of misogyny, patriarchal domination, and gender-based violence. This novel is of particular importance in the context of second wave feminism, which coincided with the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill in the Western world. In this exploration of Carter's work, the concept of "womb envy" emerges as a central theme, highlighting the deep anxiety underlying the male psyche. Carter's characters, Morris and Honeybuzzard, are portrayed similar images of these anxieties and desires, expressed in their so-called creative practices. Morris seeks to emulate women's creativity through painting, while Honeybuzzard plays the role of a bad mother who controls and punishes his/her children. When their attempts to imitate women's fertility fail, they often resort to violence against women in the brand new world of contraceptives. Thus, the text serves as a mirror to the changing feminist discourse of the time, emphasizing the interdependence of women's agency, identity, and men's responses to with these changes. By addressing the complex interplay between gender dynamics, this paper provides insight into *Shadow Dance* in relation to its thematic depth and enduring relevance in the study of gender relations and women's rights.

**Keywords:** Angela Carter, womb envy, *Shadow Dance*, gender, psychoanalysis

#### Öz

Angela Carter'ın 1960'larda ikinci dalga feminizmin ortaya çıkışı sırasında yayımlanan ilk romanı *Shadow Dance*, bu kaotik dönemde değişen cinsiyet dinamiklerinin edebi bir yansımasıdır. Metinde Carter, kadın düşmanlığı, ataerkil tahakküm ve cinsiyete dayalı şiddet temalarını açığa çıkaran bir olay örgüsü yaratmıştır. Bu roman, Batı dünyasında doğum kontrol hapının yaygın olarak kullanılmasıyla yükselen ikinci dalga feminizm bağlamında özel bir öneme sahiptir. Carter'ın metninin bu incelemesinde, "rahim kıskançlığı" kavramı ana tema olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Carter'ın karakterleri Morris ve Honeybuzzard, sözde yaratıcı pratiklerinde ifade edilen bu kaygı ve arzuların benzer sembolleri ile betimlenir. Morris resim yoluyla kadınların yaratıcılığını taklit etmeye çalışırken Honeybuzzard çocuklarını cezalandıran kötü bir anne rolünü üstlenir. Kadınların doğurganlığını taklit etme çabaları başarısızlıkla sonuçlanan bu karakterler kadına karşı şiddete başvurmayı seçerler. Dolayısıyla metin, zamanın değişen feminist söylemine bir ayna görevi üstlenir; kadınların kimliğinin ve erkeklerin bu değişikliklere verdiği tepkilerin karşılıklı bağımlılığını vurgular. Cinsiyet dinamikleri arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi ele alan bu makale, *Shadow Dance*'in tematik derinliği ve cinsiyet ilişkileri ve kadın hakları araştırmalarındaki kalıcı önemi açısından yeni bir anlayış sağlar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Angela Carter, rahim kıskançlığı, *Shadow Dance*, toplumsal cinsiyet, psikanaliz

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## Introduction

A woman is not born, but rather, she is carved into one. Published during a tumultuous period in the 1960s when the second-wave feminism emerged in the West, Angela Carter's debut novel *Shadow Dance* (1966) reflects the apparent shifts taking place in relation to gender dynamics through her carefully crafted depictions of misogyny, patriarchal dominion, and gender-based violence. The second-wave feminism emerged shortly after the approval and widespread distribution of the contraceptive pill in the West. This development, which allowed women to have a say over their bodies and the decision of whether to bear children, is closely linked to female agency and identity. Of course, the uproar caused by patriarchal institutions in response to women's control over their sexuality can be scrutinized through extensive scholarly research, but Carter's own interpretation based on her observations regarding the origins of subjugation and oppression of women pinpoints a deep-seated anxiety in the male psyche: "womb envy." *Shadow Dance* focuses on two male characters, Morris and Honeybuzzard, who are both preoccupied with anxieties related to their power to create and procreate, as well as the destructive urges that accompany these abilities. For Morris, the artist figure in the text, the act of painting holds the possibility to gain access to the realm of creation in the way women biologically do, whereas for Honeybuzzard, it is puppetry that gives him the pleasure of maternal control. He treats Ghislane, the girl with whom he has a sexual relationship, as a human-doll. He believes he can give life to her or discard her in a way that only a sexually liberated woman can in the post-contraceptive pill world. Seemingly, in his twisted mind, he plays the role of a controlling and reprimanding surrogate mother to her. Thereupon, in the light of womb envy, in *Shadow Dance*, the characters of Morris and Honeybuzzard represent two ostensibly distinct, yet remarkably similar projections of anxieties and desires related to the possession of female sexuality in their so-called creative pursuits that desperately attempt to mimic female fecundity. However, the text highlights that these men's attempts of mimicry more than often resort to hatred, perverse urges, or even violent acts towards women upon the realization of their lack of womb.

### Womb Envy and its Reflections in Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance*

According to Sigmund Freud, the psychosexual development of women begins when a young girl realizes her mother, her first love-object "lacks a penis and as a

result of this castration she feels hostile towards the mother" (Bayne, 2011, p. 151). This shocking realization turns into what he calls "a narcissistic wound" (p. 151) also known as "penis envy". However, numerous scholars such as Karen Horney, Erich Fromm and Felix Boehm have demonstrated that a male version of penis envy that is driven by the desires of "being sexually complete" (Bayne, 2011, p. 153) also exists. From an early age in boys' psyche a "regressive yearning for the nourishing, sheltering womb may emerge" (Eschbach, 2008, p. 63). Horney introduced the term "womb envy," suggesting that men experience a form of envy toward women due to their unique ability to give birth, which reflects deeper psychological dynamics regarding gender and creation (Bayne, 2011, p. 152). This envy, she believes, is the cause of the undisputed misogyny that lies in the foundation of patriarchal societies where women are often devalued, as "devaluation of an envied object is a typical defensive maneuver" (Lerner, 1974, p. 542). This notion of devaluation, however, can easily turn into feelings of intense hatred, hostility and violence. As Eva Feder Kittay (1984) explains, womb envy in men prevents them from fully appreciating the joy of witnessing life's emergence and reliving the precious moments of nurturing a child. Their destructive actions, driven by anger and unsuccessful attempts at gratification, only result in renewed heightened fury:

Envy of the woman interferes with the gratification of seeing life emerge and empathetically reliving the best moments of symbiosis and the experience of parental power and generosity available in nurturing a child. But the destruction of life does not yield the sought-after gratification. Since the transposition of values has been accomplished to deal with the envy, and since there is anger at the failure of gratification, the destruction is renewed, fueled now with greater anger. (1984, p. 120)

On the other hand, in her research paper that focuses on the development of the wish for a child in young boys, psychoanalyst Edith Jacobson (1950) points out that "creative work quite normally is the main channel for sublimation of feminine reproductive wishes in men" (1950, p. 142), linking artistic tendencies in men to the fact that they are biologically unable to give birth. Horney suggests that men's desire to create "is precisely due to their feeling of playing a relatively small part in the creation of living beings, which constantly impels them to an overcompensation in achievement" (p. 61). Similarly, Sherry B. Ortner (1974), using Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1953) as a framework, suggests that culture limits women to the realm of reproduction, while providing men the freedom to express

their creativity through technology and symbols. This causes men to create long-lasting and transcendent objects, whereas women create perishable human beings (p. 75). According to van Leeuwen (1966), the more men acknowledge their positive desire to create life and emphasize their contributions, the less likely they are to exert power through destructive inventions. However, men's envy of female body may lead to "marital difficulties, abortion wishes, mutilation fantasies" (p.54). Therefore, one can argue that womb envy can manifest itself in both creative and destructive ways.

Accordingly, the cover of the Penguin US edition of *Shadow Dance* that was illustrated by Roxanna Bikadoroff, an artist whose surrealist works have been closely associated with Carter, highlights the blend of creativity and destruction in its male characters. On this cover image, Morris holds a paintbrush, while Honeybuzzard wields a knife. When juxtaposed, these two male characters, who serve as doubles of each other in the text, are exposed as two sides of the same coin. Yet, there is one difference: Honeybuzzard can act out the desires that Morris only fantasizes about. What connects these desires is the fact that they both stem from a shared origin, which can be summarized as womb envy. Throughout the novel, both men try to merge with the womb "in order to claim this primordial, protected, and exclusive space for oneself" (Eschbach, 2008, p. 63).

For example, Morris, who is described as "a bad painter" (Carter, 1966, p. 6), is aware that he does not have any talent, but his frustration in the face of being unable to create art transforms into a misplaced hostility against Ghislaine. Likewise, during their first encounter after her assault, he is mocked by Ghislane for being poor. "Always penniless, poor Morris" (p. 1), as Ghislane calls him, is not on equal footing with her regarding finances. Ghislane says, "I have a lot of money, Morris, if you would like me to buy you a drink" (p. 3) displaying a sense of superiority that makes him uncomfortable. Additionally, the text tells the reader that Morris is obsessively angry with Ghislaine because she previously made fun of him during a brief sexual encounter. In other words, his financial, sexual and creative insufficiencies run parallel to each other. Morris's attempts at claiming this exclusive feminine space result in intrusive thoughts where he can symbolically penetrate her body and possess it. For example, the text informs the reader that Morris has dreams in which he "was cutting Ghislaine's face with a kitchen knife. The knife was blunt and kept slipping. Her head came off in his hands, after a while, and he cut her into a turnip lantern, put a candle inside and lit it through her freshly carved mouth" (p, 178).

Not only does this dream reveal his frustration with his sexual dysfunction, as the knife as a phallic symbol that functions as a substitute for his penis, but it also exposes his desire to possess Ghislaine's body through imagery such as turnip lantern that evokes womb due to its shape and connection to containment and protection. Furthermore, the transmutation of his sexual feelings into murderous ones also validates Kittay's aforementioned remarks postulating that womb envy carries the potential for morphing into violent behavior.

It should also be noted that, in the very first description of Ghislaine that focalizes on Morris includes the information that she smells like "chemical contraceptives and her own sexual sweat" (p. 5), associating this newfound female agency in the '60s with artificiality and promiscuity. If women are, suddenly in charge of their own bodies when it comes to reproduction, men lose the sole sexual advantage they have over them. In that sense, for the first time "the Jewish myth of creation, whereby Eve is from a rib of Adam" (Bayne, 2011, p. 156) that designates Adam as superior is challenged. However, this sexual liberation of women is employed to oppress and devalue them, as evidenced by Morris's attitude towards Ghislaine and Edna.

Likewise, in the scene where Honeybuzzard attacks Ghislane, we can see that in a symbolic way he gains temporary access to the female body through penetrating it with a knife. The narration describes Honeybuzzard's enigmatic appearance by referring to his "androgynous face [...] hard and fine and inhuman; Medusa, marble, terrible" (Carter, 1966, p. 183), hence for a split second he can pass as a woman. However, he is referred to not only as Medusa, but also as a marble, possibly alluding to a beheaded statue of the snake-haired Gorgon in classical mythology, exposing that his transformation is merely an imitation, a sculptor's artifice. Some of the most famous statues of Medusa depict her head in Perseus's hands, signaling the idea that there is a man holding the likeness of a woman. From this perspective, Medusa becomes a mask for Honeybuzzard akin to countless masks in the shop that he wears, rendering his attempt to imitating femininity pointless and abortive.

Honeybuzzard's prosthetic efforts of merging with the womb can also be observed in the text's illustration of his bedroom. Indeed, this room is the locus of penetrative sexual acts with which he can possess women's bodies and tap into female power, making it a place where a form of symbiosis happens between both sexes. All the details about the room in Carter's text turn the room into a metaphor for the womb. For example, this walled womb

contains a bust of Queen Victoria, but this bust is wearing one of Honeybuzzard's "ubiquitous false noses" (p. 176), once again associating his fleeting fusions with femininity using a mask. The inclusion of Queen Victoria is curious, as in the "mad dream of Victoriana" (p. 87) these characters live, she both embodies a revered feminine energy and a time for England when societal rules strictly dictated what women could or could not do. Besides, there is also "a jar containing a pickled foetus" in the room (p. 176). Usually displayed in sideshows and circuses, this object seems peculiar even for a man like Honeybuzzard, who is widely known for his eccentricity. However, it completes the image of the room as a maternal space for him. This pickled foetus, dead and kept in a jar, becomes a surrogate child for Honeybuzzard in this context. By preserving this dead baby in a womb-like object, he can pretend to have given birth and experienced the power of female reproduction.

While the umbilical affiliation between Honeybuzzard and the foetus signifies the latter's desire to give birth, his relationship with Ghislaine signifies a performance of a make-believe version of motherhood. Since Ghislaine is a compliant figure who obeys what Honeybuzzard says, he can impose a disturbing sense of motherly authority over him. This desire to associate himself with an authoritative femininity is made explicit in the scene where he piles his hair on top and envisions himself as "a virgin schoolteacher, mistress of math or classics, withering as if pressed between textbooks in some ivied, select girls 'boarding school" (p. 124). In this vision he can discipline the female body and make sure that they cannot escape from the confinement that the boarding school walls bring. A toymaker, puppeteer, performer, Honeybuzzard concentrates solely on domination, and his behavior towards Ghislaine is also an indicative of it. For him, Ghislaine is nothing but a doll to play with and discard whenever he feels frustrated; a grotesque patchwork Venus with stitches created by an aggressive Botticelli, a stone-cold and lifeless Galatea without Athena's animating touch to his murderous Pygmalion, the horrifying bride-to-be for the monster of Victor Frankenstein. He seems to be proud of his so-called creation, as he was able to turn a beautiful girl into "a Halloween mask" (p. 145) and a "vampire woman" (p. 40). His mutilation and the subsequent murder of Ghislaine, in this context, functions as a coalescence of the acts of creation and destruction. After all, Honeybuzzard takes full responsibility for the creation of this "ravishing automaton" (p. 7), therefore he has no reservations about her destruction.

According to Madeline Klein (1957), there are six markers of womb envy in men: "1) idealization of the object

of the desire, 2) devaluation of the object, 3) devaluation of the self, 4) appropriation, 5) stirring up envy in others, 6) stifling feelings of love and corresponding intensifying hate" (Bayne, 2011, p. 153). When one takes into account the treatment of Ghislaine, Edna and Emily by Morris and Honeybuzzard, it becomes clear that Carter's text showcases all of these markers. For example, in her initial state where she is described as "sweet, white, innocent and childish like ice cream" (Carter, 1966, p. 7) Ghislaine's idealization by men is obvious. Prior to her mutilation she "used to look like a young girl in a picture book" (p. 2) that resembled "moonlight on daisies" (p. 3). However, after Honeybuzzard's attack that scars her and turns her into a grotesque figure like "the bride of Frankenstein" (p. 34), her devaluation by the anxious psyches of Morris and Honeybuzzard begins. Once she loses her beauty, she becomes "a horror movie woman" (p. 6). Although we cannot say that Honeybuzzard displays any signs of devaluation of the self, considering Honeybuzzard and Morris are the doubles of each other, Morris becomes the former's devalued and inferior alter ego who wears his insecurities on his sleeve. Moreover, there are examples of appropriation in the text such as Honeybuzzard's use of several expressions at the end of his sentences that are traditionally associated with femininity such as "darling" (p. 45) and "dear" (p. 78). Similarly, Honeybuzzard's dominance especially in his interactions with women causes envy in Morris because he can, albeit for a limited amount of time, "possess" female body either through sexual acts or penetrating and carving them with his knife. Finally, both Morris and Honeybuzzard display stifling feelings of love and intensifying hate, as their fantasies range from fervent dreams of sexual dominance to graphic visions of murder.

As *Shadow Dance* is a novel which primarily focuses on an apparent crisis in masculinity in the characters of Morris and Honeybuzzard, it is by no means a surprise that female characters are repeatedly victimized, exploited, or backgrounded. Ghislaine, the main target for gender-based violence related to womb envy, pays the ultimate price for her compliant attitude towards male dominance with her life. In a similar vein, Edna, Morris's wife, showcases a meek and passive attitude all through the novel. She believes "husbands were a force of nature or an act of God" (p. 45) and does not seem to have problems with her role as someone "docile and obedient because that was how wives should be" (p. 46). However, she eventually is able to escape from the shackles of her marriage. It should be noted that there is only one prominent woman in the text who is reminiscent of the emerging second-wave feminism: Emily. Although she starts out as another subservient girl in

the first parts of the novel, she gradually becomes increasingly in tune with her own power. Her display of “remarkable confidence in resisting the male attempts to belittle women” (Ramesh, 2011, p. 2) makes her a subversive female character. In accordance, at the end of the novel, Emily becomes the one who cuts the umbilical link between Honeybuzzard and his distorted version of a baby by destroying his pickled foetus. Similarly, she also gets rid of the strange objects in his womb wall of a room including the bust of Queen Victoria, which “throws light on her rejection of the past and its patriarchal perversities” (p. 2). Furthermore, despite being pregnant, she makes it clear that keeping the baby is her own decision. In this context, Emily emerges as a personification of the envy-inducing womb that can give life or take it away, a neo-New Woman who can shatter the glass ceiling of the Victorian age, a poster child for female defiance in the post-contraceptive pill climate of the ‘60s.

### Conclusion

Overall, Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance* serves as a reflection of the changing gender dynamics and the subsequent reactions by men who feel threatened by the emergence of female empowerment during in the 1960s. Through her portrayal of misogyny, patriarchal dominion, and gender-based violence, Carter captures the societal transformations occurring at the time. Central to these transformations was the advent of the contraceptive pill, which granted women the ability to assert control over reproductive choices. However, she also illuminates a fundamental anxiety deeply rooted in the male psyche, which psychoanalysts call “womb envy”. By delving into the concept of womb envy, this paper aimed to expose the prevalent anxieties and desires associated with the possession of female sexuality. Ultimately, Morris and Honeybuzzard resort to hatred, perverse fantasies, and even violent acts towards women when confronted with the realization of their own lack of the reproductive potency of the female body. Thus, their so-called creative pursuits, while initially driven by a longing to give birth, eventually give way to the destructive forces of misogyny and violence.

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