

Artificial Enough to Become Genuine? Gender Politics in Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

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Abstract: The following essay aims at examining the artificiality of social gender construction as depicted in Angela Carter's 1972 novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. With the inclusion of her later, theoretical work, *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), I will argue that the novel wants to raise awareness for prevailing patriarchal structures to facilitate change towards a gender-equal society. At the same time, *Desire Machines* offers a first glimpse at what a then liberated society could look like.

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With the increasing prevalence of feminist movements from the middle of the 20th century onwards, the main aim of feminist writers has been the depiction of empowered female characters who do not require or feel the need to subject themselves to patriarchal patterns or reproducing the prevalent dichotomy of *active, strong male* vs. *passive, weak female*. While, of course, such depictions are relevant, I will argue that they can often appear unrealistic, as equality certainly has not yet reached every aspect of our society and cannot simply be achieved by depicting women in an empowered, yet purely *fictional* state. Instead, it requires a complete change of thinking that can only be achieved piecemeal. Angela Carter can surely be seen as one of the feminist writers to have fully grasped the necessity of raising awareness for an issue,

before one can work towards social change, which is mirrored by the development of the topics she deals with throughout the years and her literary oeuvre.

One of the issues criticized by Carter is the fact that women are suppressed, while being unaware of this situation. This suppression can still be found today. Some women can be so trapped inside misogynist beliefs and customs that they succumb to their suppression in silence or even ignorance. This is why Carter's 1972 novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*¹ has remained to this day a highly important part of feminist writings as it tackles exactly this issue and aims at raising awareness for intolerable circumstances first, before even considering to depict an alternative reality that can only come to be after many drastic changes.

The feminist approaches on *Desire Machines* in literary criticism is rather shallow. The multiple and diverse female characters presented during the narrative are often belittled by critics who state they lack agency and are denied a chance to represent themselves, as they are not given a voice to speak for themselves. This is true to some extent, as the main aim of this novel appears to be to illustrate that even female self-representation is determined by the patriarchal society surrounding many women, meaning they unconsciously gender themselves according to male-centered societal expectations. Therefore, the representation of women in *Desire Machines* appears to be underdeveloped on the surface. As Smith states in her introduction to the novel,

[i]t leaves its readers questioning and asks them to be wise – both to the structures which work to categorize or limit who and what we are, and to the ways and potentials of the imagination. It is a book full of curiosity about what's real, what's artifice, how we live, and what art can do. (Smith, 2011: xii)

It is exactly these questions which the novel not only asks but already answers: as I will argue, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* implicitly unveils the artificiality of gender construction by disrupting traditionally adopted gender prejudices, while at the same time raising awareness of women's miserable position in still predominantly patriarchal societies.

The storyline of this novel is as complex as its title suggests: Doctor Hoffman, a scientist with questionable motifs and morals, wages a war against rationality by materializing unconscious human desires into actual reality, leading to chaos. His opponent is the Minister of Determination, a person embodying pure ratio. In order to end the conflict, the Minister dispatches his employee Desiderio with the order to annihilate Hoffman. Desiderio appears to be uniquely suited for this mission, as he is seemingly immune to the irrationality driving vast numbers of people insane. What follows is Desiderio's picaresque quest through a number of different societies, during which it becomes apparent that there is also something Desiderio desires – the Doctor's daughter Albertina, who works as her father's agent. In the end, Desiderio

1 References will be given under the abbreviation *DM*, 2011 and the page number in parenthesis.

is faced with the decision of either being with Albertina, and thus letting Hoffman win the war, or putting an end to his desires. Ultimately, having been disillusioned about his love and not being able to find another way for bringing peace, he brings the War of Dreams to an end by killing both Doctor Hoffman and his daughter.

Unveiling the Artificiality of Gender Construction

At the beginning of the feminist debates, it was shocking enough to differentiate between biological sex and gender, and the theories about the construction of gender were not as revolutionary and positivistic as they would be years later, with Judith Butler's proclamation of gender being performative. In the early 1970s, when Carter was writing *Desire Machines*, gender was still seen as something ascribed to the individual from without, determined by the historical, cultural, and social circumstances one happens to live in (Constantini, 2002: 17), without one's active knowledge and based on prejudices and archetypes (Rubinson, 2005: 160). These are mostly derived from long-established myths and, for Carter especially, "gender is a relation of power [...] whereby the weak become 'feminine' and the strong become 'masculine'" (Robinson, 1991: 77). So, everyone is, according to this theory, socially "gendered in accordance with their position of power within society, which is furthermore very much prone to change, which also implies the possibility of gender fluidity as perfectly possible.

Thus, in order to raise the necessary awareness of this socially determined artificiality of gender, the novel calls "into question the whole notion of how identity, male or female, is constructed" (Lee, 1997: 91) and, in doing so, the flawed societal structures that can be forced onto the individual. Therefore, instead of depicting what an undetermined female desire could be like, she demonstrates "the ways that women internalize sexist and misogynist beliefs and, in turn, how women's sexual desires are shaped by living in patriarchal environments" (Koolen, 2007: 400). According to this, the internal view on the self has been shaped by the external demands on identity.

In the novel, most subjects, which are depicted or perceived by the protagonist and other male characters as objects of desire, are proven to be fully artificial. Like classical patriarchal gender perceptions, they are constructions to serve the male principle, while holding no genuine desirability and are destroyed in the end. The first example of this can be found in the so-called peep-show samples, upon which Desiderio stumbles at the beginning of his quest. While they hold a special meaning within the lore of the narrative, their main importance for this essay lies in their inherent criticism concerning the artificiality of desire, and the *construction* of gender, as well as criticizing voyeurism and the resulting objectification of women.

These samples represent the ultimate objectification of women and their reduction to something to be consumed, not equal to men. The last chapter

of Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* (1979)² further emphasises this point, as in it, Carter draws an important distinction between "flesh, which is usually alive and, typically, human; and meat, which is dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption" (*SW*, 2006: 161), and stresses the importance of the separation of these two terms in the light of sexuality (*SW*, 2006: 162). What these exhibits show is the 'meatification' of women, from living, feeling humans to pure objects "intended for consumption" (*SW*, 2006: 162).

Being mostly made of wax and constructed to appear as realistically as possible, the samples nevertheless look so artificial that they do not even count as meat anymore (*DM*, 2011: 45 ff.), but they prove to be only manufactured things in an equally constructed environment. This shows how initially desirable parts of the female body lose any attraction they ever bore once they are stripped off their natural context and thus artificially reduced to an abstraction of the formal elements of femaleness.

It can be said that "[a]s a proto-cinematic apparatus, the peep-show thus anticipates Carter's critique of the 'Hollywood myth of femininity'" (Simon, 2004: 82), which she mentions in *The Sadeian Woman* (*SW*, 2006: 71 ff.), and which is a part of the social and cultural construction of the female gender. At the same time, the peep-show "does not liberate sexuality from repression but produces it as a site of subjection" (Simon, 2004: 86) in the first place. The function, then, of the peep-show within the novel is that of arousing disgust for the depicted practices in the reader, who, in turn, should realize that the power relations that enable such mutilations are as artificial and constructed as the wax models themselves, and that they have to be disposed of just as the objectification.

Probably the most striking example of the depiction of the artificiality of gender construction in *Desire Machines* is given in the form of the prostitutes in the House of Anonymity, which is visited by Desiderio on request by the ominous Count, a figure embodying pure sadism, during the episode *The Erotic Traveller*. These women were especially crafted only to serve erotic purposes, and thus represent nearly every possible embodiment of male fetishism. Here, the female figures are reduced to beings lesser than animals and it is questionable whether they are even alive (*DM*, 2011: 157). The ideal femaleness mentioned in this chapter is a purely male-centered, misogynistic one. Some of the prostitutes are part animal or plant, which "literalises the patriarchal construction of woman as ambivalent [...] mediator between nature and culture" (Simon, 2004: 61). As such, they are at first portrayed as ancient "goddesses" (*DM*, 2011: 157), only to be stripped of their holiness and naturalness by the male appetite. "All the figures presented a dream-like fusion of diverse states of being, *blind*, *speechless* beings" (*DM*, 2011: 158; emphasis added), thus reinforcing the misogynist archetype of female passivity as desirable.

2 References will be given under the abbreviation *SW*, 2006 and the page number in parenthesis; published seven years after *Desire Machines*, her *Exercise in Cultural History* often deals with topics and theories that Carter had already implemented into her earlier novel.

Desiderio furthermore notices that “some trembled on the point of reverting completely to the beast” and wonders whether this is the reason they are kept in cages (*DM*, 2011: 157). Their confinement adds to their ‘function’ as decorative elements, something to be looked at and only taken out of the cage when a customer decides he wants to use them. The notion of the prostitutes being mere dehumanized objects is further emphasized when the Count sets one of them on fire and “[t]he Madame rang up the price of a replacement on her till” (*DM*, 2011: 161) instead of stopping him. If one of these ‘objects’ is ‘broken’, it is replaced instead of mourned over.

Another object of desire to several men can be found in the main female character Albertina, who serves as a puppet in her father’s war as well as being the main interest of Desiderio. Throughout the novel she becomes the victim of several sexual violations. The careful construction of her character is most fittingly summarized by Pitchford:

Albertina’s involvement in her father’s war of dreams illustrates both [...] its political potential – and its great power to oppress. The war of dreams obviously engages Albertina’s commitment; it *seems to promise* her power and freedom from the single image of sex object. It offers a world where she can *play* the powerful roles of Ambassador and ‘Generalissimo.’ Yet even as the appointed representative of liberated desire, *she cannot be both woman and agent*. (Pitchford, 2002: 126 f.; emphasis added)

Desiderio first encounters her in his dreams, as a woman made from glass, adorned with flowers, who remains completely silent and motionless (*DM*, 2011: 22 f.). This first depiction of her again caters to the ideal of feminine passivity. She is furthermore half naked and reduced to the *formal elements of physicality*, as is, according to Carter in her *Sadeian* essay, always the case for pornographic depictions of women, but gives away nothing as to the essence of their being. A woman as depicted in pornography thus has little to nothing in common with a woman encountered in the real world.

The first time Desiderio encounters Albertina in the real world is in a meeting with the Minister, where she has to play the part of her father’s Ambassador in order to convince their enemy to surrender his fight. It is important to note that, while the Ambassador’s sex is never put into question and he is clearly regarded by Desiderio and the Minister as a male being, he is still described in a highly ambiguous and feminine way. Desiderio spends nearly two pages describing the Ambassador’s appearance (*DM*, 2011: 30 f.) and finally states: “I think he was the most beautiful human being I have ever seen – considered, that is, *solely as an object, a construction of flesh, skin, bone and fabric?*” (*DM*, 2011: 31; emphasis added). Thus, even disguised as a man, Albertina remains primarily an objectified and reduced being, defined only by her body, while both the Minister and Desiderio only fear her due to the threatening situation of both the meeting and the war in general, and not necessarily because of her presumably powerful role as an ambassador. It is not her own character

that creates the aura of fear, but rather the power that her father's machinations can put into action.

It is also important to note that Albertina is only able to exert power while remaining in the role of the *effeminate* Ambassador. Once the Minister starts speaking up against her/him, “*he instantly ceased to look like an avenging angel, [but] he also instantly became less epicene*” (DM, 2011: 35; italics in original). From this point onwards, the Ambassador's spell seems to be broken and Albertina has to leave without having achieved her goal. This scene delicately plays with the traditional gender binaries and power relations related to them. Albertina seems to consider it necessary to take on the guise of a man in order to be empowered and thus of help to her father. In fact, she is only able to exert any power at all over her male counterparts for as long as her female attributes prevail during her performance. The second the Minister speaks up against her (DM, 2011: 36), she sees this as a need of acting out her role in a more masculine manner, her voice deepening and her overall aura becoming “*less epicene*” (DM, 2011: 35), which has exactly the opposite of the desired effect for her. As a woman, she might have been able to convince the Minister to capitulate, as he is clearly intimidated at the beginning of their meeting (DM, 2011: 30 f.). Still, through the veil of the patriarchal world view surrounding her, Albertina thinks she has to act like a man in order to be of help and does not even realize that exactly the opposite is the case.

Towards the end of the novel, upon arriving at her father's castle, Albertina again undergoes some interesting changes. Whilst flying to the castle by helicopter, she soon “put on one of their spare combat suits” (DM, 2011: 234) and “plaited her hair and, as she did so, so she put away all her romanticism” (DM, 2011: 235). Alongside with the pilot calling her “Generalissimo Hoffman” (DM, 2011: 234) – the usage of the male suffix is noteworthy here – Desiderio now perceives her as “a crisp, antiseptic soldier” which makes him feel “an inexplicable indifference towards her” (DM, 2011: 235). Albertina is now again fully invested in playing her role as her father's agent, which makes Desiderio's indifference turn to rejection, as he “had no respect for rank” (DM, 2011: 235). What is interesting for this part of the novel is the fact that Albertina is now described not only as the soldier, but at the same time as a princess, the epitome of prototypical and clichéd femaleness, with “her heavy black plaits hanging down her back like *a little girl's*” (DM, 2011: 240; emphasis added), emphasizing her function as daughter rather than agent. This ambivalent portrayal of Albertina and her perceived gender already hints at the disillusionment Desiderio will finally experience.

Once they fully arrive within the confinements of the castle, Albertina turns into “a prototype daughter in Victorian lace while serving dinner” (Filimon, 2010: 185), which again reinforces the notion of her father exploiting her for whatever he sees fit at the respective moment. At home, she has to wear pretty dresses appropriate for the daughter of a wealthy and influential man, and she has to serve him and his guests (DM, 2011: 224). Nevertheless, while Desiderio is repelled by Albertina appearing too masculine, he is also

not impressed by this all too feminine apparel and he “was already wondering whether the fleshly possession of Albertina would not be the greatest disillusionment of all” (*DM*, 2011: 245), which is exactly what happens only a few pages later. After the Doctor’s lengthy explanation about the workings of his desire machines, Desiderio recognizes that now the time has come for him and Albertina to act out their mutual sexual desires. Nevertheless, as soon as Albertina gets naked he cries out and tries to run away (*DM*, 2011: 263). Recognizing that Albertina is and always was solely a woman, her father’s daughter, destroys every over-romanticized idea about her that Desiderio ever made up. It is noteworthy that, at this point, Desiderio calls her ‘Generalissimo’ himself (*DM*, 2011: 263), in a last attempt to keep her ambivalence alive. Throughout the novel, he has found her the most interesting and most arousing whenever he was not sure about her gender, as she assumed her various guises according to the wishes of her father and Desiderio’s desires (*DM*, 2011: 248). Now, as he sees her for what she really is, he understands that there was never anything desirable for him about her, but that she was only ever a tool for Doctor Hoffman to fulfil his schemes.

These final scenes with Albertina thus unveil, not only for Desiderio but also for the reader, how gender, its perception and the prejudices associated with it, are artificially constructed. At the end of the novel, Desiderio states that the only thing he has left from his adventurous journey is “that insatiable regret with which we acknowledge that the impossible is, per se, impossible” (*DM*, 2011: 270). Kang claims that what is meant here is the fact that “[a]ll the seemingly binary oppositions that are inscribed [in the narrative]: reason and desire, reality and fantasy, empiricism and idealism, turn out to be impossible to be pinned down” (Kang, 2016: 156). The same is the case for binary oppositions such as male and female, masculine and feminine, when it comes to the discussion of gender, not sex. ‘Impossible to be pinned down’ in this case means that they cannot be ascribed from without, as this leads to a purely artificial perception. Kılıç thus rightly mentions that “the masculine and feminine identities that Albertina assumes are only outer definitions that mean nothing as to her essence” (Kılıç, 2009: 80).

On the one side, this further reinforces the notion of purely artificial gender perceptions within a patriarchal society and thus again implies that gender identity can only be formed and found within oneself and should not be forced unto anyone by history and society. At the same time, Albertina’s “fantastic images of transformation [...] function as the tools for transgressing the limiting borders of gender roles attached to women” (Kılıç, 2009: 80). While the character of Albertina may only be used as a puppet in her father’s war, her various incarnations still hold the power to show to the reader the many possibilities one has to live one’s life when not confined to one single gender identity formed by prejudices instead of reality.

Internalized Gender Roles

Desiderio spends one of his episodes with the river people, a highly interesting society in terms of gender relations. “The river people had evolved or inherited an intricate family system which was *theoretically matrilinear* though in practice *all decisions devolved upon the father*” (DM, 2011: 92; emphasis added). This social system will be shown to be a “critique of women who participate in the patriarchal control of female bodies” (Koolen, 2007: 407). Despite their own claims, the river people are clearly presented as a patriarchal society. From a young age onwards, the women are put in a subordinate position, for example having to hide from people not belonging to their society and “even with their own menfolk the girls displayed a choreographic shyness, giggling if addressed directly and hiding their mouths with their hands in a pretty pretence of being too intimidated to reply” (DM, 2011: 86). While this intimidation may only be acted out, it still shows how the females obey the hierarchies within their society without questioning. This goes as far as the women only using “a limited repertoire of stiff, exact gestures,” all moving “in this same, *stereotyped* way, like *benign automata*, so what with that and their musical box speech, it was quite possible to feel they were *not fully human*” (DM, 2011: 82; emphasis added), while the “manners of the men were by no means so outlandish” (DM, 2011: 82 f.). Again, women are presented as being something less than human, meat rather than flesh, stereotypes of male fantasies. This notion is further intensified when Desiderio learns of the river people’s

custom for mothers to manipulate their daughter’s private parts for a regulation hour a day from babyhood upwards, coaxing the sensitive little projection until it attained lengths the river people considered both aesthetically and sexually desirable. (DM, 2011: 96)

This practice denies the women a part of their femaleness, as it appears to be done only in favour for their sexual partners, while any mentioning of the women enjoying intercourse any differently, let alone more, is absent from the narration. This interference with their naturally given body cannot even be recognized by the women anymore, as the “techniques of these maternal caresses [had been] handed down from mother to mother” (DM, 2011: 96 f.) for generations, rendering the concept self-preserving among the women of the river people.

Another aspect of the river people’s society that degrades women is that they all are supposed to be “married at puberty” (DM, 2011: 97), leading to the engagement of Desiderio and nine-year-old Aoi. Their time of courting again demonstrates the stereotyped performance that is expected from the women in this society. Desiderio explicitly notices how Aoi “answered in the voice of a child who recites a poem she has learned by heart” and how “she seemed to have studied every word and movement from a book of manners” up to when Aoi “reached down for [his] penis in a very businesslike way” (DM, 2011: 95). And nothing more than business it is indeed, as it later turns out that the whole marriage was only ever supposed to be a ruse to keep

Desiderio with the river people. In fact, the male head of Aoi's family, Nao-Kurai, plans to kill and eat Desiderio, hoping to learn how to read through ritual, since, according to an old myth, the river people learned to make fire by consuming a fire-spitting snake (*DM*, 2011: 101 ff.). Aoi thus "represents all the aberrations of children's manipulation and socio-sexual training" (Constantini, 2002: 19), as everything about her only ever serves her father's interests, in which she resembles Albertina, and "the desire that Aoi expresses for Desiderio is allotted to her 'performance' of the role of seductress for her family's benefit" (Koolen, 2007: 409) only.

The river people are thus a portrayal of "how Woman is trapped *inside* gender" (Robinson, 1991: 102). Instead of acting out of their own volition, the women act out prototypes as imprinted on them by those who hold the power in their society, the males. This episode of the novel thus criticises women who do not question their suppressed position inside a patriarchal society.

Another issue that has recently returned to the centre of public attention is the practice of subjecting women due to religious myths, which can be found in some monotheistic religions. This is implicitly criticised in the episode in which Desiderio and Albertina reside with a tribe of centaurs. This tribe lives in accordance with an intricate mythology about a Sacred Stallion that was betrayed by his Bridal Mare, a betrayal that since has to be atoned for by the centaurs, mainly the females (*DM*, 2011: 221-225), "for they believed women were born only to suffer" (*DM*, 2011: 208). Their whole mythology recalls the Christian myth of the original sin, as well as other aspects from Catholic clerical practices, such as the fact that only males are allowed to perform the religious tasks like the tattooing, which is part of their atonement (*DM*, 2011: 228), or the recital and scripture of their myths, while all the physical labour has to be done by the women (*DM*, 2011: 212).

As Neilly observes, this "whole episode arises from a dangerous acceptance of ritual behaviour" which is neither questioned by any of the centaurs nor by Desiderio and Albertina. Instead, their myths are simply taken as a given "with universal application [...] and] inherently unable to progress to something more civilized. [...] the myth leads to an eternal cycle of barbarism" (Neilly, 2017: 213 f.), which needs to be disrupted. This perceived universality is harshly criticized by Carter, when she states that cultural elements such as religion, fairy tales or "pornography derives directly from myth, [so] it follows that its heroes and heroines [...] are mythic abstractions [...]. Any glimpse of a real man or a real woman is absent from these representations of the archetypal male and female" (*SW*, 2006: 6).

One Step Ahead: More Liberal Societies

A wholly different and more liberal society is presented in the form of a travelling fair. As Desiderio points out at the beginning of this episode, “[t]he travelling fair was its own world, [...] creat[ing] a microcosm with as gaudy, circumscribed, rotary and absurd a structure as a roundabout” (*DM*, 2011: 114 f.). As this *microcosm* consists of people from all around the world and some who clearly transcend the border of what is considered *normal* for human beings, the fairground also forms the most diverse and liberal society of the novel, including the disruption of traditional gender binaries. In the following, these disruptions will be closely examined by analysing some of the fairground’s people.

The bearded Frenchwoman “Madame la Barbe was as reticent as a young girl,” rather stout and, without her beard, would probably never have stirred much attention for herself. However, with her beard, as according to Desiderio, “she was immensely handsome, widely travelled and the loneliest woman in the world,” posing for the visitors of the fair in a wedding gown and singing “sentimental songs” (*DM*, 2011: 123). After her parents died and her beard started to grow at thirteen years old, she had nowhere else to go to make a living but the circus. Thus, Desiderio states, “[i]t was not her beard that made her unique; it was the fact that, never, in all her life, had she known a single moment’s happiness” (*DM*, 2011: 124). Although her outward appearance seems to be rather repelling in erotic terms, she feels “all the pangs of defloration,” being “penetrated by [the] eyes” (*DM*, 2011: 124) of the visitors every time she performs her melancholy songs in front of them. Still, it is interesting how it is explicitly emphasized that “of course, she was a virgin” (*DM*, 2011: 124). As “freak shows speak to our desires as well as to our curiosity” (Hallab, 1995: 111), voyeurism and the pleasure associated with it comes into play here. Nevertheless, the pleasure in this case is not an explicitly sexual one, but derives from the freak’s “seeming [...] to cross accepted barriers – of human and animal, of male and female” (Hallab, 1995: 110). This disruption of mainly social barriers appears to be exactly the *theme* of the travelling fair, characterizing it as a liberal and comparatively desirable society.

This also becomes apparent in the character Mamie Buckskin. Where Madame la Barbe is a silent and lonely figure, Mamie is rather outgoing and seems to make the most of her difference. “She was a paradox – a fully phallic female with the bosom of a nursing mother and a gun [...] perpetually at her thigh” (*DM*, 2011: 127). She is presented as a woman fully capable of her own actions and independent from anyone else, as she embodies both femaleness and maleness at the same time. Desiderio notes that he “occasionally caught her glancing at Madame la Barbés beard with a certain envy” (*DM*, 2011: 128), implying she might rather want to be a man, something she acts out so obviously and freely as it is only possible within the fairground society. While “[s]exually, she preferred women [...] [s]he took a great liking to [Desiderio] for she admired passivity in a man more than anything” so that whenever “she could not entice an equestrienne into her fur-lined sleeping bag, she

morosely made do with [him] and these nights were as if spent manning a very small dinghy on a very stormy sea” (*DM*, 2011: 127 f.). This is one of the most prominent disruptions of the active male/passive female dichotomy within the novel. Desiderio’s being overchallenged by “manning” his “virile mistress” (*DM*, 2011: 128) puts Mamie in the position of a “sexual teacher [which] implies that women can be superior to men at employing the phallus and can actually embody more phallic power than men” (Koolen, 2007: 415), which is unique to this episode of the novel.

The fair is ultimately joined by a group of nine Moroccan acrobats, whose performance includes dismembering themselves and juggling with their loose body parts (*DM*, 2011: 133 f.). With their gilded finger and toenails and red-tinted lips their “appearance is tinged with femininity” (Kang, 2016: 146). After their last performance Desiderio is raped by every single one of the acrobats “at least twice” (*DM*, 2011: 138). Their androgyny and ability to dismember themselves and others “certainly calls into question the integrity of the bodily structure and leaves [the recipient ...] no longer certain that the body equals one self, and one self one body” (Hallab, 1995: 112), hinting at the fact that also one’s gender does not have to comply to one’s bodily features. Furthermore, the fact that a man falls victim to a rape “critiques the assumption that males are naturally entitled to sexual subjectivity [... and] noticeable denaturalises the established gender categories” (Kang, 2016: 146) of the female as the passive victim and the male as the active aggressor.

While, of course, rape could never be seen as positive, the overall notion of this fairground society is nevertheless a positive one, an outlook “that is hoped-for, but not yet attainable” (Constantini, 2002: 25) during the time of the novel’s composition. Still, out of the members of the fair’s refusal “to be engaged into ideological frameworks” and their “anti-hierarchical energy [...] comes a positive idea of the body as a site where borders can be blurred” (Constantini, 2002: 24), a step towards a more open-minded view on gender as performance rather than a culturally determined fact. Within the parodical framework of the whole novel and the notion of deconstruction of established patterns that is present at all time, ascribing this liberal way of thinking to the *freaks* furthermore forms a critique of society’s “desire [...] to re-imagine others on the basis of some sort of myth or illusion of perfection – or even of ‘normality’ – rather than to accept them as they are” (Hallab, 1995: 113). In a world of binary gender distinctions and patriarchal practices, “they iconically subvert the notion of a fixed psycho-physical identity” (Constantini, 2002: 24), which harshly disrupts traditional and established views. After all, this more liberal and non-conformist society is presented as being more desirable in the end, as it develops “a new, liberated model of the individual” (Constantini, 2002: 25), demythologizing it instead of reinscribing any artificial notions of perfection or normality often deemed necessary in order to deserve a place in a society.

Another more liberal society, albeit not as desirable as the fairground, is presented through a tribe of cannibals. The most prominent feature of this

tribe is that its whole army is comprised of women, although “they are often held to be the gentler sex” (DM, 2011: 192). The cannibal chief informs the protagonists that this assumption stems solely from their experience of their gentle and caring mothers and he calls out to them to “rid [their] hearts of prejudice and [...] [t]ear this notion of the mother from [their] hearts” (DM, 2011: 192) in order to find out about the true nature of women.

As always within this narrative, the women of this tribe are cruelly mutilated, degraded and in an obviously miserable position (DM, 2011: 193). There are, nevertheless, positive messages embedded into this depiction. First of all, the chief directly hints at the artificiality of gender construction, as he states that it is based on prejudices. This becomes even more apparent and is elaborated upon when he explains that he has, furthermore, erased every trace of history from his tribe (DM, 2011: 194). As Carter states, “[f]lesh comes to us from history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh” (SW, 2006: 12), which again means that everything about our perception of what is adequate for men or women to do is constructed. By *freeing* his society from history, the cannibal chief has thus also freed it from gender prejudices, only to impose his own cruel ideas on how to *liberate* the women of his tribe. Desiderio as the narrator also reflects on this, comparing nature to man-made institutions:

Ocean, forest, mountain, weather – these are the inflexible institutions of that world of *unquestionable reality which is so far removed from the social institutions which make up our own world* that we men must always, whatever our difference, conspire to ignore them. For otherwise we would be forced to acknowledge our incomparable insignificance [...] (DM, 2011: 194; emphasis added)

as well as the insignificance of culturally determined gender distinctions. This episode, thus, reveals that nearly everything about our societies is artificially constructed and has near to nothing to do with natural circumstances or the occurrence of naturally given differences.

Furthermore, the tribe’s dealings with their women can also be read as an example of the “refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function, a refusal as unusual in the late eighteenth century as it is now” (SW, 2006: 1), as Carter stated in 1979 and which is sometimes still seen as unusual today. In accordance with that, mothers are conspicuously absent from the novel, most of those being mentioned having died before the start of the plot.

Conclusion

My reading has shown that *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is an important feminist work that is as topical as ever. I have argued that the narrative criticizes the various ways in which women are mutilated and suppressed

in a phallogentric society, without them ever noticing the miserable situation they are in, as they grow up with misogynist beliefs from a young age on and thus internalize them themselves and come to represent them accordingly. Via exaggerated depictions, hyperbole and an overall parodic tone, the novel effectively puts a mirror up to society, creating unease towards such obsolete practices and behaviour and ultimately asks for realization of unbearable circumstances women are put in, aiming for a change of thinking in the long run.

While the diversity of women and their respective sufferings depicted during the narrative offer a vast field of identification possibilities for all kinds of readers, I have also argued that the different episodes criticize religious suppression of women and even women themselves, particularly those who actively support patriarchal practices without ever asking twice, thus succumbing to their presumed fate without considering a way out. At the same time, I outlined how the novel already offers steps towards a positive solution by depicting societies like the cannibal's, who no longer reduce women to their reproductive function, or the fairground society that stands out as the most liberal and progressive in terms of gender equality. The overall negative depiction of sexuality within the novel caters to the notion that without a change in the power relations within a society, mutual exchange cannot exist.

At the same time, the novel effectively demonstrates how gender binaries and archetypes are culturally and historically constructed and therefore purely artificial instead of a natural given. The peep-show, the prostitutes in the House of Anonymity, and main female protagonist Albertina were shown to be examples of this artificiality that proved to be undesirable in the end.

This is why *Desire Machines* and other comparable writings are as important today as they were in the 1970s. Even with many feminist goals, like female suffrage or relative economic independence, having been achieved years ago, the issue of inequalities between sexes and genders still has issues left to be tackled. By unveiling the artificiality of all the prejudices imposed on all members of society, prejudices which are not even recognized as such, the novel offers a first step towards a better society and life within it for everyone.

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