

The Symbolic Representation of Female Body in the Poems by Bertolt Brecht

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Abstract— The paper deals with the figurative and symbolic representation of the female body – as whole or as part of the body – exemplified by selected poems by the German writer Bertolt Brecht. We focus on the woman as literary subject and analyze its gender identity and integrity, which seems to be determined by sex and social status of the subject. The analysis is based on the comparison of two contradictions – public space versus private space on the one hand and married woman versus prostitute on the other – applying the specific theory of masquerade as methodological background.

Keywords— Body, Brecht, Face, Gender, Identity, Makeup, Masquerade, Performance, Private space, Prostitute, Public space, Representation.

I. PREMISES

TO talk about the difference between the public and private space of being a woman means to acknowledge two facts. First there is a woman as a subject (and a conscious mind) of the scientific research – not a universalized woman as an essentiality or traditional feminineness, but a woman as a pluralistic and manifold concept of postmodern womanliness. Second we have to admit, that the social roles affect the human identity and that the public space creates at least two modalities and representations of the identity – the private one and the public one. Our next premise is the understanding of the subject not as essentially given, but in terms of the theory of poststructuralism as created through specific discourse. The discourse we are focusing on is framed by literature and its figurative speech and by the specific poetic language, culture and aesthetics. We try to analyze the literary figure of the prostitute and the representation of her body, which becomes in the act of prostitution practically public. The question is how fare does this putting into public go and what are the limits of this act. Is there something such as public body? Does the revealing of the body in the public relate to the whole body or only to its parts? What is the relation between the body and the gender identity of the woman? Are they the same or could they be separated from each other? Is it possible to speak of the publicity of the body and the privacy of the identity at the same time? What kinds of bodies or identities represent the female subjects of Brecht's poems? And how do the spheres of privacy and/or publicity influence the identity and integrity of the analyzed subjects.

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II. THE REPRESENTED BODY AND THE FEMALE SUBJECT

The female bodies in the poems by Bertolt Brecht are represented on two different ways. They are explicitly described as body parts or there are metaphoric, symbolic or metonymic expressions for them. There is a set of typical symbols and metaphors in the poetry of Brecht that can be read in the meaning of feminineness, female body or female principle for which of them we can mention the ships, water (rivers, sea, ponds), algae, gravel, fishes, swans, plums, lilies, clouds or angels. To the other group of literary expressions belong the metonymical images such as faces, hands, arms or eyes, the strongly erotic symbols like skin or knees and last but not least the bottom, breast or genitals [4]. The second group expands beyond the main meaning of the words, they are not just simple descriptions of body parts, they transcend their literary meaning and become symbols per se. They aren't derived from the body, they create the body, they're not a part of a subject, but they build the subject and create its identity. Their symbolic substance is at the same moment specified and connoted by gender. While the symbol of skin is by a male subject connected to erotic hedonism and pleasing experience of oneself, the female skin associates among other things with negative feelings. By the reference to their skin women might be degraded to sexual objects of the male desire or to a commodity. A woman becomes skin, which makes her tradable like the skin of an animal, that could be sold or exchanged. This kind of trading can be – public or secret, respectively private.

Christian Henkelmann claims, that only with a few exceptions all female figures by Brecht could be classified into two types of women: into bourgeois women or prostitutes [5], which means into two different social milieus. By both of them the market and social mechanisms have influence on their relationship to the own body in almost identical way. These two literary figures give Brecht the opportunity to deal with the traditional concepts of family, ethics, sexuality, gender identity and social status. His critique addresses the typical bourgeois ethics represented for example by Immanuel Kant.

III. FEMALE IDENTITY AS BEING PHALLUS

In some poems Bertolt Brecht uses allusions to Kant's definition of marriage (for instance *Über Kants Definition der Ehe in der Metaphysik der Sitten*). Brecht tries to point out that this formal union of a man and a woman was degraded, because it is primarily based on a sexual exchange, it is a deal with genitals. The marriage as heterosexual relationship

reduces the identity of a man and a woman to penis and vagina. This desubjectivation can Brecht see in every man–woman relationship. Every sexual relationship includes a loss of identity and paradoxically through the non-personal physicality a loss of one's body. The body becomes fragmented and reduced into phallus and lingam. The female and male figures of Brecht's poems can be seen in the light of Lacanian theory, where the gender identities represent the position of having or being a phallus. The incorporation of the female essence into the phallus is materialized in the institution of marriage. The parodic poem *Ehesong* shows the typical devotion of woman to man:

“Und kommt man heim: das Fleisch steht auf dem Tisch.
Die Frau schenkt schließlich ihre Lilie!” [1]

This process of the voluntary reification comes with losing the prior indefinite identity and getting a new gender identity: “Man ist jetzt Frau. Man hat entsprechend Pflichten” [1]. The gender identity of a woman is carried out by her sexual purpose; the woman becomes phallus in sense of Lacan. “For women to ‘be’ the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to ‘embody’ the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through ‘being’ its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity ... ‘being’ the Phallus is always a ‘being for’ a masculine subject who seeks to reconfirm and augment his identity through the recognition of that ‘being for’” [3]. The Brechtian female figures surrenders to men. The most male figures such as adventurers, seducers and the Baal alike figures are aware of the female body only through the sexual interaction. On the other hand the fact of “being phallus” functions not only as an affirmation of masculinity, but also as a threat for male subjects, how it could be seen for instance in the poems *Orgelt Heigei Gei sein Kyrieleis*, *Jeremiade eines Zwanzigjährigen*, *Lala* or *Das Beschwerdelied*, where the feminineness, the female body and sexuality cause fear and seem to be threatening like the psychoanalytic figure of “vagina dentata” [10].

IV. THE CONCEPT OF MASQUERADE

Like female body the male body is reduced as well and its identity is based on the premise to “have phallus”. In *The ninth sonnet (Das neunte Sonett)* from the sonnet cycle written for Margarete Steffin (one of Brecht's lovers) can be found a formulation:

“Ich geb nicht mich, ich geb dir einen Schwanz
Er tut dir nicht nur gut, weil's meiner ist.” [2]

The penis (Schwanz) is here not only a part of the male body, it represents the male identity (“weil's meiner ist” = because its mine) and the masculinity per se. The fact of the depersonalization and reduction characterizes every relationship between a man and a woman; they both metamorphose to physical objects. Here we can find an analogy to Sartre's thoughts: “we must recognize that we experience our inapprehensible being-for-others in the form of

a possession. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret- the secret of what I am. He makes me be” [11]. Especially in the sexual relationship man and woman lose their identities and become bodies possessed by the other (for example in the poems *Liebesgewohnheiten*, *Von der Scham beim Weibe*, *Über die Verführung von Engeln* [6]), but the female body is often not aware of its sexual identity, because it realizes the own identity only in the unconscious state of mind.

The reduction to body objects also might be a comical one. The poem *Sonett über einen durchschnittlichen Beischlaf* shows the absurdity of the depersonalization:

“Ach, du verglichst mich schon mit einem Pferde
Vor fünf Minuten! Wie ich darauf scheiße!
Dieweil ich sinne, wie ich fertig werde
Nennst du mich Emil, der ich nicht so heiße!” [2]

Brecht's verses correspond with Lacan, who claims that “the intervention of a seeming that replaces the having in order to protect it, in one case, and to mask the lack thereof, in the other, and whose effect is to completely project the ideal or typical manifestations of each of the sexes' behavior, including the act of copulation itself, into the realm of comedy” [7]. The irony of the poem is in the act of signification that fails, the terms and names given to the man are comedic and are not really what they seem to be. This unreal fiction, this intervention of seeming or appearing is in fact theatrical. Such play-acting appertains to both genders, whereby the male and female actors take both part in the masquerade.

In the masquerade women give up their own desire and womanliness, to be phallus, to establish through the being-for-other the identity, to mean something for the other, to be accepted and beloved. Joan Riviere even believes that womanliness itself is a mimicry or masquerade [3].

After analyzing Brecht's female figures we could say that the married bourgeois woman and the prostitute are both strategies of masquerade, they are the masks of womanliness, they differ from each other only on the basis of social context, social role and social status.

V. PUBLIC MASQUE OR PRIVATE MASQUE?

The question is, what does the mask of a married woman or the mask of a prostitute mean? What should it cover? Does it construct the identity or is it there in order to mask it? What relationship exists between the mask, the body and the womanliness?

We try to answer the questions and illustrate the answers by analyzing the poem *Über die Notwendigkeit der Schminke*, which belongs to the cycle of Augsburg sonnettes dated between 1925 and 1927:

Über die Notwendigkeit der Schminke

Die Frauen, welche ihren Schoß verstecken

Vor aller Aug, gleich einem faulen Fisch
Und zeigen ihr Gesicht entblößt bei Tisch
Das ihre Herren öffentlich belecken.

Sie geben schnell den Leib dem, der mit rauher
Hand lässig ihnen an den Busen kam
Schließend die Augen, stehend an der Mauer
Sehen sie schauernd nicht, welcher sie nahm.

Wie anders jene, die mit leicht bemaltem Munde
Und stummem Auge aus dem Fenster winkt
Dem, der vorübergeht, und sei es einem Hunde.

Wie wenig lag doch ihr Gesicht am Tage!
Wie höflich war sie doch, von der ich sage
Sie muß gestorben sein: sie ist nicht mehr geschminkt! [1]

The sonnet tells us about female identity in the mask of a bourgeois woman and a prostitute. There could be seen some similarities, matches and contradictions between them. Both women correspond with the Lacanian “being phallus”. The bourgeois woman “sells” her body to her husband privately and in return her husband provides for her, because it is a part of the so-called marriage contract. The man creates the social position of the woman, makes her being into “being-for”, what gives her the sense and meaning. The prostitute sells her body in the public, but with the same intent – to assure her livelihood. In both cases the female body functions as a good, which is exchanged – economically and existentially. The actual commodity is the womb; it symbolizes the gendered body, which is the opposite of the personal identity represented by the face. According to the poem are gender and identity different and could be separated from each other. The body controls and determines the wife and prostitute in the same way – as female they are at the beginning of the 20th century forced by the economic conditions to sell their bodies, to be phallus and to give up their own desire in order to not lose the identity. On the other hand the identity gives them the freedom of being their own custodians and of making their own moral decisions.

Regarding the own body both types of women act different. Wives hide and protect their wombs, whereas their faces come to light – in this way they (maybe unconsciously) release their whole identity to the men. Their husbands become their masters (the German word “Herren” is here very appropriate), what evokes the Hegelian relationship between master and slave. Wives as slaves in this relationship lose their subjectivity and desire, what makes them to search for it outside the marriage. Thereby Brecht unmasks – like in many other poems – the hypocrisy and hidden amorality of bourgeoisie and of narrow-minded people of the middle class.

Paradoxically the wife is not able to fulfill her desire in this way, because she participates in the sexual act not as an individuality, but only as a body, she closes her eyes, so that she has not to be aware of what she is doing right now – she doesn't realize that she's actually affirming the gender identity of the man. She's unconscious and she doesn't see that offering her womb makes her in the sense of Lacanian

symbolism to phallus, but being phallus means for her to lose the face and the identity.

Otherwise the womanliness and the gendered body are for prostitute a kind of mask. She's aware of the masquerade play and she demonstrates this awareness through the use of makeup – the womanliness is for her only a form of appearance, she is like an actress that appears in her role and hides her true identity behind the mask. In the act of prostitution somehow the body differs and alienates from the identity. This understanding of prostitution is quite modern and based on thoughts similar to the philosophy of Sibyl Schwarzbach, a feminist scholar that tries to decriminalize the prostitution. According to her every person has the right to make his/her own choice how to live and what to do with the own body, if the person considers it right (on condition that no one will be hurt or harmed). Finally the body is the “private property” of the prostitute, she sells it like any other performing artist, for example a professional dancer. She presents and offers only alienations from her I (the Hegelian “Entäußerung”) in a short time period, but she never stops to be the custodian of herself [12].

Likewise Schwarzbach Brecht finds the parallel between prostitute and dancer in his poems *Gedanken eines Revuemädchens während des Entkleidungsaktes* and *Gesänge vom VR*, he compares the visit of a theater show or cabaret to a violation act, where the admission charge functions as the instrument of violation (“man hat die Sängerin mit dem Eintrittsgeld vergewaltigt”) [2]. Brecht and Schwarzbach demonstrate how different the female body could be seen and judged in the same culture and at the same time, so that general moral judgment on prostitution might be questionable. The acknowledgment of prostitution is based on cultural relativity, in the same way in which the revealing of face is seen as amoral in some cultures.

Brecht's prostitute willingly hides her face behind the makeup in order to protect her identity. Using makeup underlines her gender identity – her womanliness and not her identity is what she is offering to her male customers. One could say, that she becomes phallus and that she loses her identity as the bourgeois wife does. The opposite is true – putting a part of her body into the public only means selling the alienation from her body as “Entäußerung” in order to prevent the complete alienation from her identity in the sense of Hegelian enstrangement (“Entfremdung”). Her act is a labor, which gives her the possibility to acknowledge her role and to aware herself. The self-awareness rehabilitates her, because she is able to see and to discover the true of the cultural power that determines the male-female-relationships and the true of cultural exogamy. This makes her equal to men. She still doesn't have the symbolic fetish – the phallus, but she does have consciousness. Behind the mask she has not to be complete phallus, she doesn't appear as being-for-other anymore. She offers her body to the man and approves his gendered identity, but she becomes more sophisticated. She participates in the comedy of copulation not only as a made up actress but also as a director. This new role shows also the figure of the poem *Ratschläge einer älteren Fose an die jüngere* inspired by the Italian writer Pietro Aretino.

Despite this state of mind the prostitutes stays captured in her gendered bodies. To leave the body and the gendered identity isn't possible, the prostitute cannot take off the mask or her womanliness. Doing this would cause social death for her, how the end of the poem indicates: she seems to be dead, she has no makeup on her face ("Sie muß gestorben sein: sie ist nicht mehr geschminkt!"). This can be interpreted as fact, that the prostitute get married and became a bourgeois wife.

According to Sara Lenox "Brecht was unable to see real women in their full dimensions, and was particularly unable to acknowledge their sexual power" [8], but this cannot be applied to the figure of prostitute. Her power could be demonstrated by her relationship to the own body, to the own sexuality and further by the revealing of her body in the public and by the conscious act of masquerade. This women are different – they are different to the men, but through their domestication of the public space they're become public women, what makes them different to the "private" bourgeois women too. It approves, that the female figures in Brecht's work are variable. Laureen Nussbaum compares them to the drawings of M.C. Escher, "in which the spectator first observes, for example, a regular pattern of white fish before a shift of focus brings out complementary rows of black frogs" [9].

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