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■ GENDERED MASCULINITY: AN ANALYSIS OF CORSO'S *MARRIAGE*

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„Bit generacija“ je termin koji se odnosi na grupu američkih pisaca i pesnika koji su objavljivali radove pedesetih godina XX veka. „Bit“ kultura je ujedno bila posledica, kao i vesnik čitavog niza književnih, kulturnih, političkih, društvenih i intelektualnih fenomena koji su se javili 1950-ih godina i postojali, u nešto izmenjenom obliku, do kasnih 1960-ih. Ono što je činilo suštinu pokreta bit generacije jeste jedinstvena reakcija umetnika i pesnika, uprkos tome što su delovali u različitim poljima. Jedan od najboljih opisa društvenih stega i restrikcija može se naći u pesmi Gregorija Korza „Brak“. U ovoj pesmi data je satirična vizija ustaljenih struktura konzervativizma i tradicija prisutnih u američkom društvu. Cilj ovog rada je da otkrije efekte rodno specifičnih praksi i normi karakterističnih za Ameriku 1950-ih, kao i uticaj na stvaranje revolta bit generacije protiv tih normi i „činjenica“. Istraživanje je sprovedeno na osnovu teorije roda Džudit Batler, američke teoretičarke feminizma i rodnih studija. Cilj istraživača jeste da pokaže dejstvo konzervativnog, pravovernog američkog društva Korzovog doba, perioda bit generacije, na formiranje muškog roda.

Ključne reči: Gregori Korzo, Džudit Batler, formiranje roda, muški rod, brak.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Beat Generation” is a term that refers to the writers and poets of the American society of 1950s. The “Beat” culture was both the outcome as well as the harbinger of a set of the literal, cultural, political, social and intellectual phenomenon that occurred in the 1950s and continued, in a metaphosed form, into the 60s. Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso are among the most distinguished figures of Beat Generation. However, other poets such as, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919-), Neal

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Cassady, (1926-1968), Carl Solomon (1928-1993) and Gary Snyder (1930-) are also considered as major Beat writers. The movement was in essence a reaction toward the values, maxims and life standards being advertised on a large scale in the American society during 1950s including the capitalistic materialism, the nuclear family image, strict gender roles, stringent sexualities, utilization of certain luxurious items which was, in turn, a representation of American Family image, etc.

In order for the present-day reader to decipher the spirit of the American literature in 1950s, a close examination of the social and political ambience of the day is the first requirement. The 50s is in fact a slippery date which spans roughly from 1945 to 1963; a time period starting with the end of the World War II, which was immediately followed by the congealment of the Cold War era; and ended with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Thus, as might be expected, miscellaneous social and political factors contribute to the formation of the discourses and literary heritage of the "long fifties", as it is sometimes referred to. For one thing, the grave events that loomed over the entire decade postulate a conservative atmosphere. The grim years of the Cold War era, with the threat of an atomic war hanging over America, the McCarthyism and the court scandals, and the anti-Communist propaganda machine that was working in all aspects of the society had created a consensus conservatism which is the political hallmark of the decade; a decade which ended with the assassination of John F. Kennedy; one of the most famous acts of assassination in the history of America and the world.

However, on the other hand, the 50s have witnessed one of the most radical decades after the Second World War which served as the initiative to many changes that followed. In fact, the 50s were a link in the nexus of 20th century American history; a bridge between the America before the two World Wars and the one afterwards. The nation had prospered considerably after the end of the WWII and America was becoming the hegemonic superpower it is today and as it was back in the 1980s. Women had been recruited to meet the superfluous needs of America during war. "While older women wished to remain in the work force after the war, large numbers of young women were happy to go home and become mothers. The resulting baby boom reflected the new optimism in postwar America" (Fried 2004: 285) and a certain teenage culture emerged out of it. A number of influential civil movements sprang from the social atmosphere of the time which includes the Peace Activist movement, the Civil Right demonstration, the demonstrations of the supporters of the Cuban Revolution, the Environmental activists and last but not least the Beat movement (ibid.).

What formed the "The Beat Generation" movement was in fact the distinctive reaction that individual artists and poets demonstrated, albeit separately, on different terms. As Klein asserts, "The Beat Generation served as a cultural bridge between the politically aware and jazz-inspired "hipsters" of the Post Second World War period" (Klein 1997: 137). In order to have a coherent understanding of the social setting and background from which the Beat movement aroused, one needs to be reminded again of a number of characteristics of the American society of the time. As it was previously mentioned America had turned into an affluent country; a fact that brought about an alteration in the details of the lives of the American families. The culture of consumerism was being heralded as the standard life style. In retrospect, the culture of consumerism

was dismissed "as a device that promotes false consciousness, to lull toilers who ought to be more restive" (ibid: 81). Fried describes the representative American individuals as

frequently chided as timid conformists, non-rockers of the boat, privatists, and members of a "silent generation." Yet for an age allegedly so complacent and cowed, the volume and profundity of such criticism are surprising (Fried 2004: 75).

Thus, the American individual had turned into a passive receiver of certain codes according to which his/her identity was shaped: an average conformist consumer.

The other essential factor contributing to the image of the ideal American citizen was the degree to which men and women were involved (happily) in a lasting marital relationship, each performing the expected role as assigned by the society. In this regard, the issue of gender role was brought forth and was fore-grounded with great emphasis being placed on the distinct male/female social and sexual function. The dichotomy was strictly observed by the individual men and women. In a polarized society as this,

men's roles, too, were fraught with tension [...]. Such oft-remarked trends as the shift from "inner-directed" to "other-directed" behavior, the entombment of the "organization man" in "conformity," and an ever-more bureaucratic way of life levied a spiritual and physical cost. The role of the dutifully married, uncomplaining breadwinner imposed many contradictions, constraints, and even hardships (Fried 2004: 80).

Thus, in a syllogistic society as this, men and women were equally subject to presupposed notions of masculinity and femininity. The stereotype male figure was something of a macho which was gradually declining into bathos. The physical, material, and intellectual properties that were taken for granted for the average American male caused "men to succumb to growing and much-decried health hazards, including frequent heart attacks" (ibid 2004: 80).

It was into such a social climate that the Beat movement emerged. They began to practice an entirely different set of codes and behavioral patterns. They initiated the revolt against the congealed cultural, economical, literal and sexual concepts. The keyword of Beat artists can be best pinpointed as "experiment"; experiment with literary writing, experiment in life style, religious experimentation (in the form of a quest for Eastern religions), sexual experimentation, experiment with drug, etc. They encouraged both in theory and practice, an unrestrained liberty that they thought applicable to all arenas of man's life. One of the most prominent features of this revolt was practiced in their dress code and in their appearance in general. They began to let their beard grow long and they formed their own nude circle which resided in certain areas of the city. They assumed, and rightly for their own time, that individual human beings were being restricted and bound by all social institutes which made up their identity. In return, what they proposed was an abandonment of the entire cultural structures that tied individuals to orthodox context of the society.

One of the best depictions of the effect of such social conformity and restriction can be found in Gregory Corso's poem "Marriage". In this poem, a satiric vision of the

hackneyed structures of conservatism and traditions prevalent in American society has been delivered. The reason for choosing this poem is that in "Marriage", Corso has penetrated into the most private moments of an average American individual psyche and through this lens, has provided us with the details of American family life in the 1950s. The purpose of this research paper holds an analysis of the poem based on the gender theories of Judith Butler, an American theoretician in feminist field as well as in gender studies. The researcher aims to demonstrate the effects of the conservative orthodox American society of Corso's time, typically the Beat generation period, on the masculine gender formation.

2. DISCUSSION

As the title of the poem suggests, Gregory Corso's "Marriage" has often been cited as an instance of Beat Generation practitioners' frustration and disappointment with one of the norms and practices of their immediate society: marriage. Certain subsets of the critiques of the poem has been allocated to locating the complaints that the speaker, as the representative American youth, makes about one of the most controversial as well as constitutional social rites. The fact that the poetic persona is intolerant and unsympathetic towards the concept of marriage is an unquestionable given. Since a great deal of the interpretation of the poem has been focused on the role of the society, its conventions and limitation on the speaker, at least, a Butlerian analysis of the poem seems relevant here.

At the time when Judith Butler first published her essays and other writings, the discourse of feminism had already been initiated for approximately a century (1890s), however, it was taken a step further by the introduction of the theories of Judith Butler into its domain. It was primarily out of the sex/gender argument that Butler's ideas emerged. Judith Butler's main distinction and departing point from feminism was her rejection of the natural basis for the notion of "sex". According to Lloyd:

When feminists first began to theorize the sex/gender relation, the underlying assumption was that sex was both logically and chronologically prior to gender. Culturally determined gender norms, in other words, were conceptualized as secondary to natural sex. Gender was thus what was inscribed onto sex in some way. It is the priority of the relation between sex and gender that Butler problematizes. (Lloyd 2007: 32)

The shift Butler made in the existing theories of the time regarding the creation of the identity of individual men and women reversed the dominant feminist discourse in their essential prioritizing in the sex/gender dichotomies. Following her basic rejection of the origins of the two, she introduces the concept of gender performativity which assumes, as the name suggests, a performative nature of gendered and sexed identities. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) which was later revised and rewritten in 2007, Butler develops her theory of gender performativity. The notion of gender performativity holds that "sex and gender are the *effects* rather than

the causes of institutions, discourses and practices; in other words, you as a subject do not create or cause institutions, discourses and practices, but they create or cause you by determining your sex, sexuality and gender" (Salih 2002: 10).

The link between Butler's dual notions of performativity and subjectivity lies in her argument that subjects do not *become* – as in de Beauvoir's term – men or women as a natural consequence of their sex. As Salih (2002: 10) states 'woman' is something we 'do' rather than something we 'are'. However, unlike the lucid appearance of the term, Butler is not suggesting that gender identity is a performance. Instead, she proposes that the performance pre-exists the performer. In fact, she borrows Nietzsche's original assumption which was expounded in his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In that book, Nietzsche (1998: 29) states that "there is no "being" behind doing, acting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything". Believing so, Butler is removing any possibility of sexed or gendered identity as it was expounded in the former context of feminism. "When she articulates her own theory it is one in which sex, sexuality, desire, gender and body are all regarded as discursively constituted; where, in other words, none of these features is treated as a natural fact of human existence" (Lloyd 2007: 30).

Her pivotal point, which relates to the present reading of "Marriage", is that identity is constructed through language and discourse. Butler asserts that the very language that is used to describe the body in fact constitutes it. The theory entailing such an assumption is the aforementioned theory of gender performativity with its stress on the role of society and social constructs in the formation of gender which in its own turn leads to the creation of sex.

So far, an explanation of the methodology of the research has been expounded. As it can be inferred from the above mentioned points, societal discourses, conventions and cultural practices of the society establish the gender of individuals long before their sex is determined at birth. Thus, in a society in which individuals are target of the numerous social, cultural and political factors, creation of gender-specific constructs are more likely to happen. The "Marriage", is in fact, a portrait of culturally-congealed identity constructs which are applied to almost all members of the society regardless of their unique existence or their dispositions as individuals. The speaker of Corso's poem is confronted with an ironic situation in which he supposedly has a number of options with regard to what to do and what not to do in an act of marriage, but when he sets out a catalogue of these choices, he (and we as readers simultaneously) realizes the extent to which they are socially bound. There are no real choices in real life. As a male adult, he is faced with a number of possible scenarios to choose from and these possibilities are already tailored for him. There exist certain fixed patterns which are previously determined and devised by the society and if he decides to act out his masculinity (we should not forget, however, that the basic argument of the narrative, marriage, entails by its nature sexual involvement), it would be one of the previously-granted circumstances. The possibilities of his identity as a man, as well as the scope of his sexuality are already prescribed by the society. As a male figure, if he ever desires to practice his sexuality in the form of getting married, it would be one or the other of the arranged proposals.

One of the most significant characteristics of this poem which in fact reveals much about the social atmosphere of Beat writers is the narrative voice. Similar to almost

all other Beat poems and writings, the poem is narrated from a male perspective. The reason behind the extensive male-dominated monophonic literary production of the beat writers and poets can be fruitfully located in the extent to which American male individuals were under social, intellectual and cultural pressure. As mentioned earlier², the typical male American figure was supposed to be a conformist in many ways; he was supposed to be a supportive and consistent breadwinner of the household and at some points was supposed to have some or most of the qualities of a macho. These, plus a host of other political and cultural conditions brought about the rage of the youth in various forms. A great number of Beat writers and poets were involved in either lifelong or occasional homosexual relationship, among them Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, and William S. Burroughs. The reason underlying a radical shift as this in the moralist and conformist context of the American society of the 50s can be found in the extreme pressure that was felt on the men's side regarding the prototype of the masculine image constructed and embedded within the multiple layers of society.

Similarly, there was an equal, or even at times more complicated, situation for the heterosexual men. The existing discourse confined men to adhere to certain pre-determined routines which had defined their gender in Butlerian sense of the word. As a man under such circumstance, they had no other choice but to follow the discourse that was supposed to be applied to all individuals there.

In a satiric and ironic manner and in order to transfer the extreme measure of his disappointment, the speaker of "Marriage" singles out, among other forms, three possible forms of a marriage structure well recognizable to his audience: the conventions of marriage in the working, the middle and the upper class families. The first image with which he opens the poem is the description of a middle class family, the courtship process and the reference to the couple's sexual desires. The "girl next door" and her family stand for the middle class values. It can be conferred from the minute explanation and elucidations that the speaker catalogues for the reader. The courtship scene at the graveyard ends with the repressed desires of both the boy and the girl so as the morality codes are not violated, but instead they are staring dully at the sky. The out-of-context speeches about "werewolf bathtubs and forked clarinets" (line 4)³ unveils the man's troubled psyche under the pressure of the moment. At the girl's house, the constant interrupting and disturbing thought of "where's bathroom?" bestows upon the situation a sense of urgency and rush which, in fact, stems from the uneasiness and distress he feels regarding the fact that he is about to be engaged in a form of social practice which may not necessarily be his desired choice, as if he is on the verge of being targeted by the things which are going to be imposed upon him. He is anguished and tortured at the thought of getting involved in a mediocre relationship that would attach him to more confinements and certain bonds.

The comic picture he delivers in describing the wedding ceremony and the honeymoon trip emphasizes the dichotomy between his inert and outward life. The contrast that exists in these lines verges on a certain level of anger, leading the speaker to a deliberate violation of social norms:

² See Introduction.

³ Line numbers from Corso (2012) here and the remainder of the article.

"I'd be almost inclined not to do anything!
 Stay up all night! Stare that hotel clerk in the eye!
 Screaming: I deny honeymoon! I deny honeymoon!" (42-4)

In the following lines, the speaker of Corso's poem turns into a frenzied state of mind in which he retreats entirely from the society and imagines his life inside a cave:

Running rampant in to those almost climatic suites
 yelling Radio belly! Cat shovel!
 O I'd live in Niagara forever! in a dark cave beneath the Falls (44-6).

However, this frenzied illusion does not end here. The imagined scenario that the speaker delivers tells us that he repeats his weird habits as a father, too. His mind is split into two separate spheres between his role as a committed and devoted father putting his child to sleep and the unrequited desires and ambitions he had had as a man, as an independent individual who is unrestrained by the social obligations. The following lines show the extent to which the images are muddled inside his mind in

[...] A trembling man
 knowledgeable with responsibility not twig-smear not Roman coin soup—
 O what would that be like!
 Surely I'd give it for a nipple a rubber Tacitus
 For a rattle bag of broken Bach records
 Tack Della Francesca all over its crib
 Sew the Greek alphabet on its bib
 And build for its playpen a roofless Parthenon (73-80)

The speaker suffers from perplexed masculine covets. In reality, he has fathered a child and is the husband to his wife; while inside his psyche, he cannot identify with the exteriorly-imposed gender patterns that are accepted as norms. That is why his unconscious oscillates between the dual images; one being the routine requirements of babysitting and the other "Bach record", "Greek alphabet", "roofless Parthenon".

This is, however, the end of the first case scenario where Corso moves to the next image of marriage which takes place in a working class with its particular setting of a cramped apartment on the seventh floor of a New York building. The speaker is now married to "a fat Reichian wife" (88) who condemns him for his idleness. His life is replete with everyday concerns of the working class members such as the intrusive neighbors, distracting landlord, five children, etc.. However, he immediately contrasts it to a third version of marriage in which he is married to a "tall and pale", "sophisticated" (97-8), rich woman. However, in neither of the two, the speaker feels he is fit for that situation. He cannot cope with the economically turbulent working class life. He similarly cannot adjust himself with the economically-secure upper class marriage in which he is considered inferior to the "tall pale woman". The ontological crisis lies in the fact that all these three patterns are merely being programmed and embedded onto him by the social discourse which requires him to be one or the other. He is obliged to perform the

performative patterns of his gender according to the congealed dogmas. In this view, he is merely the *doer of the doings* – in Nietzschean terminology.

3. CONCLUSION

The “Discussion” argument takes us back to the original thesis of this research which aimed at tracing the effects of performative gender-specific practices and norms in America of the 1950s and its impact on the formation of the Beat Generation revolt against those norms and “facts”. The speaker of Corso’s “The Marriage” stands as the representative of the Beat practitioners who, in their own turn, epitomized the revolting spirit of the (male) American individuals particularly during the 1950s.

The discursive pressures and the influences of the society have been portrayed in a quasi-satiric form in order to deliver a justification for the Beat revolt. Half a century later, with the introduction of the theories of Judith Butler in the field of gender studies, we can have a truer grasp of the social conventions of the Beat’s time and can associate the etiology for their revolt against the performative nature of their gender. The narrative of the poem demonstrates the limited scope of the individuals in acting out their identity, and consequently their gender, due to the pre-determined gender constructs which define for them the performative pattern of their masculine identity.

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SUMMARY

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“Beat Generation” is a term that refers to the writers and poets of the American society of 1950s. The “Beat” culture was both the outcome as well as the harbinger of a set of the literal, cultural, political, social and intellectual phenomenon that occurred in the 1950s and continued, in a metaphosed form, into the 60s. What formed the

'The Beat Generation' movement was in fact the distinctive reaction that individual artists and poets demonstrated, albeit separately, on different terms. One of the best depictions of the effect of such social conformity and restriction can be found in Gregory Corso's poem "Marriage". In this poem, a satiric vision of the hackneyed structures of conservatism and traditions prevalent in American society has been delivered. This paper aims at tracing the effects of performative gender-specific practices and norms in America of the 1950s and its impact on the formation of the Beat Generation revolt against those norms and "facts". The research has been carried out on the basis of the gender theories of Judith Butler, an American theoretician in feminist field as well as in gender studies. The researcher aims to demonstrate the effects of the conservative orthodox American society of Corso's time, typically Beat generation period, on the masculine gender formation.

KEYWORDS: Gregory Corso, Judith Butler, Gender formation, Masculinity, Marriage.

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