

Deconstruction of Disability Identity in *Peel My Love Like an Onion*

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Abstract

Ana Castillo's novel *Peeling My Love Like an Onion* tells the story of Carmen Santos, a disabled flamenco Chicana dancer and singer, who suffers from an ethnic identity crisis and the internal and external problems of mainstream cultural marginalization during her career. The changing nature of Flamingo dance enables Carmen to overcome both mental and physical barriers, break the internal boundaries between normal and abnormal in the white-dominated American society, and realize the reconstruction of the adaptive and mobile identity of the Chicana people. This paper explores how Carmen uses disability to deconstruct the normal, uses flamenco to challenge the ideal body of traditional dancers, and uses her perseverance to challenge the normative concept of identity and gender, highlighting a mobile and independent identity that is different from the traditional disability identity.

Keywords: disability, normality, flamenco, identity, gender

1. Introduction

Ana Castillo, A Chicana novelist, poet and essayist, has published seven novels, five poetry collections and one play. She has won numerous awards, for example, her *Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), winner of the American Book Award. Her focus on Chicanas has made her a leading figure in the Chicana movement in the United States. Most of her works deal with the struggles of Mexican-American women regarding gender, race and identity. In her works, Castillo attempts to prove the existence of mixed-race women and strives to give a voice to those who have been suppressed by Anglo-American society. She creates female characters, especially disabled women, in her novels and poems, encouraging them to overcome racial, class and gender barriers. Castillo calls on mixed-race women to challenge the obstacles that prevent them from knowing who they are and who they can become. Taking Castillo's novel *Peel My Love Like an Onion* as an example, this paper expounds how the heroine Carmen uses disability to deconstruct normality, and pursues her dancing career to reconstruct her mobile and independent Chicana identity and realize the meaning and value of her life.

2. Challenging Traditional Normative and Healthy Bodies

Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* tells the story of Carmen Santos, a disabled flamenco Chicana dancer and singer, who suffers from an ethnic identity crisis and the internal and external problems of mainstream cultural marginalization during her career. The changing nature of Flamingo dance enables Carmen to overcome both mental and physical barriers, break the internal boundaries between normal and abnormal in the white-dominated American society, and realize the reconstruction of the adaptive and mobile identity of a Chicana.

When Carmen contracted polio at the age of six, she was not admitted to hospital for treatment because her working-class family could not afford the medical expenses. When she recovered, she was crippled. Her left foot was like a limping dead heron that had fallen from its nest. Only her right leg was ideal. As a disabled child, Carmen was sent to a special school where the label of "disabled" was imposed on all kinds of deaf, blind and disabled children who were grouped together because of their handicapped bodies. Fortunately, Carmen met a new teacher, Miss Dorotea, who told her class, "Kids, you can do anything you want to do. Don't let anyone tell you different" (13). Dorotea encouraged Carmen to learn Flamenco which emphasizes the movements of the hands, torso and arms. Thus Carmen was able to showcase her charm through the movements of her upper body, hiding her lame leg under her long dress. Through persistent effort, Carmen became a legendary figure because she was a lame person who could dance, which proves Dorotea's argument that disability is not a disadvantage and that so-called "disabled" children have the same potential and talents as those "normal" children defined by

the hegemony of normal society. This is also consistent with Lennard Davis's view that the "normal" way of construction creates "problems" for people with disabilities (Davis, 1). From this perspective, Carmen's leg disability does not place her at a disadvantage compared to other healthy people, but rather it is the social environment itself that sets up barriers for the disabled.

The concepts of normal, norm and average have come to dominate every aspect of people's lives today. For people with disabilities, they can only be considered as deviating from the normal, marginalized other. And in the current American society, no matter what ethnic group, people with disabilities are the largest ethnic minority in the United States (Fox, 295). In the social context, the combination of power and culture makes it possible to develop a focus on normality into an inherent cognitive model that marginalizes and isolates abnormal or deviant phenomena such as disability, mental loss, etc. The situation is no different even when the independent Carmen is shown in the novel. When Carmen took medication to ease the pain of polio in her left leg, she admitted: "For a long time things that came in pairs held endless fascination for me. Two things identical and equal to each other were the essence of symmetry and the sublime" (13).

Carman demonstrates that vulnerability, passivity, and unpredictability are associated with disabled bodies. Her bones were like broken stones. She worried about whether the medication would allow her to perform onstage for two hours. In addition to the physical pain, Carmen's mental trauma was no less than her polio. "My body went this way while I wanted it to go that way. When I wanted it to do something it did nothing. When I was twelve I took a lot of pain pills" (Castillo, 13). But Carmen did not identify with the pain but always tried to mobilize her body to escape it. She often said that when she started experiencing the pains, she had been trying to find a way to escape them because they kept her in constant agony and that she really didn't like pain and she didn't even like talking about it. Carmen attempted to distance herself from the experience of pain. Fortunately, Carmen could learn to reconcile her disability with the demands of mobility.

As people get older, their resistance weakens, and some diseases they once seemed to cure, such as polio, return. Unfortunately, the odds of recurrence were too great for Carmen. When she was in her 40s, her polio symptoms returned and she had to end her dancing career early. In addition to the medical pain, she had to face the terrible reality of a relapse of the disease - her back gradually stiffened and eventually turned to a stone. Castillo recounts:

My pounding leg has me on pain pills all day now. That means I get around slower than usual. I'm being stubborn about using the new crutches while on the job. I just hobble back and forth behind the counter like a sorority girl with a leg in a cast from a ski accident. But en route I need the crutches. It's just been a few months since my summer power walks but now it's hard to imagine my getting to the bus stop on my own.(75)

The unpredictability of the disease prevented Carmen from performing in her dance studio. To make things worse, she felt completely lost and suffocated as she could barely move without help, so independent Carmen went back to live with her parents for better care. Although the recurrence of the disease prevented her from dancing again, her flamenco teacher, Homero, told her that flamenco was not only about dancing, but also about singing (*cante*), and offered her an audition to recover from her pain. As it turned out, Carmen was also talented in singing, so Carmen found a way back to flamenco.

This disability narrative explores how bodies change and how identities change by crossing boundaries, creating new points of distinction, and new sources of definition. Castillo uses Carmen's disabled body to resist cultural norms and violate what is considered normative body in Western culture. A disabled body cannot be accurately classified as either a healthy or an unhealthy body. In *The Rejected Body*, Susan S. explores how feminist representations of the body focus on rewriting the experience of the body, including pregnancy, sex, and motherhood (Wendell, 167). The body is considered a source of satisfaction and emotional connection, symbolizing the ideal female body experience. Feminists rarely see the body as a source of pain, frustration, and division. Castillo's novel highlights women's experiences of pain, loss, effort and success, challenging the privileged status of women's "healthy" and "ideal" bodies.

3. Challenging the Ideal Body for Traditional Dancers

Historically, performances in Western theaters have been dominated by classical ballet repertoire. The dancer's body is the epitome of art. Prejudice against disability is deeply ingrained in the hearts of Anglo-Americans. Disabled bodies are equated with illness and confined within the scope of treatment. Professional performances do not include disabled dancers. Disability, especially physical disability, is often a congenital disorder for those who want to become dancers. Castillo's fictional heroine challenges the rigid concept of dancers held by Western theater masters. The disability narrative adopted in *Peel My Love Like an Onion* no longer adheres to the

classical norms of the idealized dancing body, offering the possibility for people to re-understand what a compliant dancing body is.

In Carmen's world, disability did not hinder her dance career, as she did not see it as an impassable obstacle - "no one had ever called my leg bad luck" (169). When one of Carmen's fans asked what "la Coja" means, Carmen graciously acknowledged her leg disability and replied that "in y culture people get called by their most evident characteristic" (187). Instead of shying away from social injustice, she chose a positive way to face her flaws. "I was coja, sure. My bad leg was an unfortunate impediment most times, yes, but it did not keep me from doing what I loved to do and what I was sure I did best, which was dance" (20).

Carmen danced not just because of her interest, but to make this dysfunctional society recognize and accept Mexican-American dancers. "In any case, I don't like strangers' attention. At least not the pitying kind. As a dancer, even as a crooked one, I loved the adoration that my public gave me despite my malady" (76). Dance, as a transcendence force, gives Carmen potential and flexibility, and in so doing breaks down the physical boundaries between normal and disabled. Dancing with disability can be more inspiring and motivating. "Sometimes my one-legged teaching helped encourage those with two left feet while for others it was intimidating because they couldn't believe a woman could dance with one leg until they saw it for themselves" (52). Through dance, she chose to reveal her true physical state and turn it into an active force of initiative, thereby transforming the abnormal into the normal and crossing the boundaries of what a disabled person might expect to accomplish (Rose, 397).

Among the many types and varieties of dance, Carmen chose flamenco as her dance career, because it is a symbol of the changing and fluid status of the Spanish Gypsy culture. The Gypsies themselves are always dangerous others who defy the norms of the West and the influence of their civilization, and the Gypsy flamenco gives Carmen the potential to break the permanent marginalization of the Chicano/Chicana ethnic group. On the difference between flamenco and American pop, Castillo comments:

Flamenco is not Broadway. It is not just a dance. It is how you sleep, eat, dream, think. You don't have to be svelte or even young to be a flamenco dancer. You don't have to have all your teeth or shiny hair. You just have to feel what you are doing, to keep up with the rhythm, to lead and follow your musicians. (39)

Flamenco, which gained fame in the 18th century, is a distinguished Spanish art combining dance, singing and Musical Instruments that originated in traditional gypsy places such as Cadiz and Andalusia. Its singing (cante), guitar playing (toque), dancing and clapping (palmas) combine magic, passion and energy, making it a famous art form of Spanish identity and expression. Because of the freedom and movement of the Spanish people, flamenco reflects the flamenco spirit and gypsy sentimentality of diasporic identity, displacement, national hybridness (Bahl, 4).

Flamenco is the embodiment of self-reliance and boundary crossing in Spanish culture and art. Although Carmen is not considered a true gypsy, her flamenco moves reveal the Spanish culture inherited from her Mexican ancestors, and she lived the life of a gypsy girl, moving from place to place, seeking her independence and mobility. Her residence during her dance career was also constantly changing, and like Flamenco dance, she shows the Bohemian image of an exiled, wandering gypsy. Flamenco is an expression of liberation from primitive bondage, and flamenco dancers express their essence through mobility rather than "belonging" to a particular place (Bost, 168).

At first, Carmen's mother did not support her choice of a career as a dancer because it was widely believed that disabled people could not be good dancers. After learning what flamenco meant to her daughter, she changed her mind and encouraged Carmen to continue dancing as long as she could physically. Flamenco, as a cultural vehicle different from the mainstream culture and art in the United States, is a unique way to express the identity of Chicana. In the world of flamenco, Carmen was a symbol of elegance and beauty, and she could enjoy her freedom to be who she dreamed of being.

Thus it can be seen that Carmen, a disabled woman in Castillo's novel, used flamenco dance to break down the boundary between normal and disabled, to change the stereotype of dancers in the white-dominated American culture, and to reconstruct her independent and flexible identity as a Chicana.

4. Challenging Normative Notions of Identity and Gender

If we cannot transcend our bodies, we can change our perception and movement. Gloria Anzaldua says that if people can find meaning in the most painful experiences, they can be more truly themselves (Anzaldua, 46). Joining flamenco dance provided Carmen with a way to gain mobility, income and social respect. Her asymmetrical steps challenged the conventional notions of the body and gender. Castillo emphasizes Carmen's

“rejected” body, which, although not conforming to the ideal of a dancer, created a miracle for a disabled dancer. Carmen attempted to overcome psychological and physical pain by using methods of psychotherapy and yoga. Dancing flamenco helped Carmen find her place on the stage. Her health improved with the economic income from public performances. She also won social respect and dignity by teaching flamenco courses to yuppies. Carmen transformed her identity from a girl who needed the help of a coach and prosthetic devices to an independent dancer.

Susan Wendell regards disability as a valid way of living, compelling non-disabled people to think differently about their own lifestyles and expectations of others’ bodies. (Wendell, 64). Ann Folwell Stanford has studied how Chicano/a and Latina literature, particularly that of women of color, represents disability and illness. Bonnie Smith, in her book *Gendering Disability*, argues that disability studies challenges normative notions of gender and the body (Smith, 3). Masculine bodies are perceived as strong and powerful, whereas disabled women are too fragile to truly exist. A character’s femininity and disability often imply a losing situation. Carmen symbolizes effective control over difficulties. Her physical or physical experience enables her to overcome her disability. Tobin Siebers expresses a concern that society is in danger of shifting to a culture of ableism. Those disabled heroes may win more recognition and wealth, but they cannot change the existing system of social privilege (Siebers, 19).

By creating a disability persona, Ana Castillo seeks to intervene with the conventional discourse that dominates women and bodies. Carmen’s dance was not a denial of disability. Carmen did not choose one identity over another. The changes in her body offered the possibility of challenging a single identity. With the help of Miss Dorotea, Carmen gained confidence in an environment that does not suit her needs. Although the sum of Carmen’s education and knowledge may be only high school level, she mastered the skills of dancing and made a living as a gypsy flamenco dancer. In addition, Carmen had the opportunity to teach dance lessons to some wealthy white women. “The dozen or so women in their assorted costumes and dress also turned ...and began to follow my movements.” She saw several students look frustrated at her. Carmen thought that maybe students thought that a disabled girl was not good enough to be their teacher. Carmen finally yelled, “Don’t watch me! ... Don’t worry about my brace!... Listen to music” (50). Even though Carmen didn’t know why rich women took flamenco lessons, she managed to gain dignity, which she believed is the sexiest thing a woman can learn. Carmen transformed this objectified gaze into an interactive gaze. As a dancer with a disability, Carmen redefined the relationship between the dancer and the audience. She fundamentally questioned the ideal image of the dancer’s body.

Flamenco changed Carmen’s economic situation. Carmen could rent a hotel apartment for herself. The key was seen by Carmen as a symbol of independent femininity. Muscular movements derived from flamenco allowed Carmen to move around for periods of time without crutches and leg support. The income from performing flamenco in nightclubs enabled her to obtain better insurance and better housing. Her financial success as a disabled dancer has improved her health. Flamenco did lift Carmen out of her struggling working-class family. The fluidity of her identity stemmed from her mutilated body. The term lame dancer was transformed from an imposed judgment to a source of empowerment.

Rather than being confined to a specific space, Carmen had the courage to reject the stereotype of disabled people and chose dance as her profession. Her bad leg is an unfortunate obstacle, but it does not prevent the heroine from pursuing her dream of dancing. She was incarnated as a hoofed deer, a cripple on medicine, a jazz radio singer. Carmen is not just a person trying to transcend her disability. Her experience demonstrates the plasticity of the body. On the one hand, Carmen shows her personal strength and challenges the constraints of femininity and disability. On the other hand, she has to contend with frustration, disappointment, and vulnerability. Carmen once described her inner conflict: “I was born in Chicago but my first language was not English. My first language was Spanish but I am not really Mexican. I guess I am a Chicago-Mexican” (30). Carmen’s inner boundaries were breaking down. She couldn’t identify with Mexican cultural traditions. Carmen turned to a psychologist to discuss her identity crisis. The psychologist suggested that she join a support group for people with polio. Carmen used creative forms such as pottery to resolve her identity crisis. She spent a year in the desert with several Spanish Catholic artists. The next winter, with the winds howling, she returned to the city of her birth. She said, “I only knew dance” (5). Carmen began to realize that her identity was not defined by ethnicity, race and sex, but by dance. Carmen’s shift in Gypsy identity is based on her reliance on the public transport system. A link between personal travel and public transport is established in the novel. In addition to dancing flamenco, Carmen took the train to work at a pizza place at the Chicago airport. The Gypsy identity tended to open up in order to reconstruct the world she inhabited. Carmen’s free movement was not only a control of the common experience of women of color, but also a question about the restrictions on immigration.

She put on her sneakers and strolled down the city streets at sunset. Carmen constantly readjusted her body to the new environment.

Castillo has studied disability and pain experiences related to the bodies of women of color. When performing flamenco, Carmen was beautiful and able to use her right leg, her upper body and confidence to cover up what her left leg could not do. At times the polio condition worsened and she was unable to function. At this time she was a poor Chicana. She worked at a movie theater for minimum wage. Disability is intertwined with racism, sexism and class discrimination. However, Carmen did not lose her vigour because she could no longer dance flamenco. “Never mind!” she said, “I can’t dance anymore so now I’m singing!” (188). Carmen started recording her own album and became a popular singer.

The disability narrative in *Peeling My Love Like an Onion* provides a way of constructing identity that exists outside the norm. Carmen could fly in and gave concerts in every city; Carmen’s body has not atrophied due to poliomyelitis, and metamorphopsia can change the identity form without abandoning the body. A new metaphor appeared on Carmen’s fortieth birthday. When it touches the light, A New life unfolds (197). Every day, the lotus is reborn. Castillo uses the metaphor of the onion and the lotus to show the multiple incarnations of the heroine. Carmen’s identity unfolds in layers, always in flux. *Peeling My Love Like an Onion* gives up the search for a fixed home. Crippled bodies have no need for physical boundaries and no emphasis on stable identities and homes. The main problem with traditional identity politics is the emphasis on a single way of being, while disability narratives question the term “physical disability” because the term “physical disability” isolates individuals from others on the basis of physical attributes.

5. Conclusion

Carmen, a disabled woman in Castillo’s *Peeling My Love Like an Onion*, uses flamenco dance to break down the internal boundaries between normal (white supremacy) and disabled (marginalized Chicanas), change the ethnic stereotype of Chicanas in the white-dominated culture of the United States, and reconstruct the Chicana identity that is permeated and flexible between the American and Mexican cultures. Through this story, Castillo deconstructs disability identity, changes the stereotypes of disability identity, and tries to reveal that physical disability is caused by both spatial and social environment, while the physical experience of pain, disease and disability can break down the boundaries between identities and challenge the integrity and predictability of individual identities. Disability can transcend the limits of “mainstream” identity defined by race, gender and class, forming identity instability, permeability, hybridity and diversity. Disability is a shadow of the supreme order of sanity, an echo that cannot be ignored. Unpredictable disabilities, a diaschic gypsy culture, and a vibrant and changing flamenco have shaken the entrenched solid foundations of the dominant paradigm in white American culture.

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