Amelia is not the Second Sex: Carson McCullers's Rejection of Femininity in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*

Jainab Tabassum Banu

Abstract

In my paper, I argue that the Southern American novelist Carson McCullers degenders Miss Amelia in her novella The Ballad of the Sad Café to intentionally disrupt the traditional gender binary that depicts men as "Subject"–the first and stronger sex and Women as "Other"–the second and weaker sex. By creating a misfit in body, dress, and lifestyle, McCullers refuses to conform to conventional gender attributes. Drawing on insights about conventional women's roles from Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, I explore how McCullers rejects the traditional idea of femininity and creates the character of Miss Amelia who denies being a conventional woman.McCullers presents Amelia as an autonomous, independent and strong woman who refuses to be the second sex in relation to Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon.Towritemy paper, I have followed a text-based qualitative method. I have consulted with a number of secondary materials to inform my argument. I have focused on Beauvoir's definition of women to show how traditionally different the protagonist is portrayed in McCullers' novella.

Keywords: Femininity, Gender, McCullers, Beauvoir, Degendering, Southern American Literature.

Nick Norwood (2017), educator, poet and the Director of the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians, states in an interview with Alex Joyner that the Southern American grotesque novelist Carson McCullers continues to return to the idea of loneliness and inculcates it in her works (part 1). Her loneliness leads her to "spiritual isolation" which eventually becomes one of the central themes of her fictional works (Broughton, 1974, p. 34). In The Ballad of the Sad Café, McCullers portrays a lonely female protagonist in a lonesome, grayish and isolated place set in the deep south of Georgia. The author rejects the idea of traditional femininity which depicts men as the first and women as the second sex in the male-dominated society of the South where "ladies [don't] labor; they [don't] dress like men, and they [don't] act like men" (Jones in Matsui, 2016, p. 158), and then creates a bold, independent and strong female protagonist Miss Amelia Evans, who lives her life in her own terms regardless of the societal pressure of conforming to the traditional gender norms. McCullers herself was a bold and tomboyish woman—unconventional for her time period just like the characters she created in her fictional works.

*PhD Student in Rhetoric, Writing and Culture; Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English, North Dakota State University

Carson McCullers was born as Lula Carson Smith to Lamar Smith and Marguerite Waters in 1917 in Georgia, a place known for its multiracial population and the brutal history of slavery. She is one of the first White writers to create and write elaborately about the Black characters in literature. She is also known for crafting grotesque literature that deals with deformed, freak and queer characters. Although she moved to New York at seventeen, "throughout her career she wrote about Small Town, Goergia" (Presley, 1974, p. 19). While portraying the characters in her notable novels like The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, The Member of the Wedding and The Ballad of the Sad Café, she used her imagination and adolescent experiences that she had while living in Columbus, her hometown. Even when she lived in Brooklyn, McCullers "continued to write about the South even though she did not live there—physically or spiritually" (Persley, 1974, p. 31). Nick Norwood (2017), in his interview with Alex Joyner says that McCullers was both insider and outsider "which allowed her to observe them [the South People] more objectively than most people who are from a place are able to do. That's where Columbus shows up in her work. She was able to see, in Columbus, so many different facets of the human experience in this one place" (part 2).

After getting married to Reeves McCullers, Carson McCullers moved to Paris as soon as the couple saved enough money. Upon being asked about the reason behind moving to Paris by one of her friends, she replied that she moved "because writers live there" (McCullers cited in Persley, 1974, p. 21). She had good affiliations with a few French scholars. She was even invited by the "queen of existentialism" and renowned feminist Simone de Beauvoir, but unfortunately, as John L. Brown (2002) writes in his book review of JosyaneSavigneau'sCarson McCullers: a Life, "the wunderkind of Columbus, Georgia and the queen of the existentialists had nothing to say to each other". However, the invitation itself indicates that Beauvoir and McCullers somehow shared a similar sort of perspective on the idea of women and gender binary in literary and non-literary discourses.

Simone de Beauvoir published her book The Second Sex in 1949 in France which was later translated into English and got released in America in the early 1950s. McCullers published her novella The Ballad of the Sad Café in 1951. Beauvoir's book is a theoretical monograph whereas McCullers's The Ballad is a novella—a fictional work which showcases the author's position of rejecting the conventional idea of femininity. Beauvoir (1949) denies conforming to the traditional gender binary that depicts men as the "Subject" and women as the "Other" ("Introduction", p. 16). Historically, a woman has been defined as "an incidental being" who, as Aristotle defines, "is a female by virtue of a certain lack of quality" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 15). However, Beauvoir claims that a female being is a woman when

she finds herself as such. One is not born but becomes a woman. Becoming a woman is more sociocultural than ontological. Beauvoir's idea of "becoming" a woman is, thus, crucial to understand McCullers' rejection of gender norm while portraying the protagonist Miss Amelia Evans—a small town motherless tomboyish girl who dares to stand against the traditional view of gender binary in her society and eventually becomes a tragic heroine.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that "every single female human being is not necessarily a woman, to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity" ("Introduction", p. 13). She also claims that "The attitude of defiance of many American women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity (Beauvoir, "Introduction", 1949, p. 14)". Conventionally, as a woman, Miss Amelia is supposed to be the second sex who is expected to be "truly feminine—that is, frivolous, infantile and irresponsible—the submissive woman" (Beauvoir, "Introduction", 1949, p. 22), but she denies being identified as such. Ontologically, Miss Amelia Evans is a female human. However, culturally, she denies being identified as a weak, meek, mild and submissive woman.

Beauvoir's argument essentially differentiates between the ontological idea of sex as something to be born with and sociocultural construction of gender as one's choice to "become" an identity. Her theory, as Judith Bulter (1986) argues, "entails a reinterpretation of the existential doctrine of choice whereby 'choosing' a gender is understood as the embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms" (p. 37). Miss Amelia chooses not to become a conventional woman, and so she retains her manly attitude. Since gender is a cultural construction, Butler (1986) writes, "Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions" (p. 40). McCullers herself made her own choices of not choosing a hegemonized gender norm for the characterization of her novella.

An eminent American writer Sarah Schulman writes in The Nation in 2000 that "McCullers began a lifelong investigation of Jews, blacks, the physically disabled and homosexuals as reflections of an overly self-aware adolescent girl stepping out of her own traditional gender role." The writer thus creates her female character to reflect how she has been living her life. McCullers suffered from three cerebral strokes and eventually became disabled. The projection of her disabled and ungendered characters in the fictional works is the result of her personal feelings and life experiences. She dressed like a man and thus was labeled as homosexual or "dysfunctionally heterosexual" by many readers and critics (Schulman, 2000).

In The Ballad of the Sad Café(2005), she draws a small town which is "lone

some, sad and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world" (3). There is a house with a "cracked look" where "one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other" (p. 3). After setting an isolated, sad and grotesque plot through the voice of a third person omniscient narrator, the writer introduces the protagonist's face that is "like the terrible dim faces known in dreams—sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes" that hold a "secret gaze of grief" (pp. 3-4). This sexless and lonesome protagonist is Miss Amelia Evans.

The third person omniscient narrator characterizes the protagonist with a tomboyish appearance. Amelia's biological body is a female body which proves to be able to do different conventionally role-defined men's jobs. Her ontological body gets divided from her essential existence which she lives by choice. Butler (1986) argues that "The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one's body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles" (p. 40). Miss Amelia does not conform to the traditional style for women. She, as the narrator describes, "was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman" (p. 4). After going through a "strange and dangerous marriage lasting for only ten days", Miss Amelia lives her life alone in the swamp "always dressed in overalls and gumboots, silently guarding the low fire of the still" (pp. 4-5). Unlike other women in the country, Amelia stays up late, alone, guards the still and protects her house and properties just like the conventional men in her contemporary time would do.

In a patriarchal society, a woman is primarily defined to be a woman by her feminine body. Whether she chooses to "become" a woman by conforming to the traditional gender norm is still a matter of subjectivity. Therefore, "The body becomes a peculiar nexus of culture and choice, and 'existing' one's body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms" (Butler, 1986, p. 45). McCullers portrays Amelia by creating a gender-conflict in her own body which eventually gives birth to an existential 'Other' pointed by critiques as "queer". In fact, the writer herself uses the word "queer" in many places of the novella.

Rachel Adams (1999) points out Amelia's queerness as she does not conform to social norms. Her emergence in "The Half-Man Half-Woman's clothing creates the appearance of freakishness, while warding off the more dangerous indeterminacy of a third sex in which the difference between "man" and "woman" would be blurred and hybridized" (p. 559). Miss Amelia's sexuality is not determined by the strict binary oppositions. The misfit between Amelia's body and dress symbolizes the failure of conventional gender attributes.

Besides possessing a masculine appearance, Miss Amelia also utilizes her body, not in the traditional feminine way such as taking care of the household, but independently by making money in so many ways, i.e., carpentering, building houses and practicing medicine— "with all things which could be made by the hands Amelia prospered" (p. 5). She is physically a hard-working woman who does not just seek a room of her own, rather practically "built the brick privy behind her store in only two weeks and was skilled in carpentering" (p. 5). González (1994) states, "many of her psychic features conform to the traditional patterns of masculinity. She is the strongest personality in the rural community in which she dominates people and things" (p. 143). This unconventional woman eventually turns into the richest woman in the town. She proves that her body is a body with strength and her mind is a mind with intelligence. She inherits her father's properties and can make profits. She becomes an independent woman physically, economically and mentally.

Miss Amelia's difference to other women in her community seems visible and prominent because of her background for which her town people also see her differently. When they see Miss Amelia, they remember that "Miss Amelia had been born dark and somewhat queer of face, raised motherless by her father who was a solitary man, that early in youth she had grown to be six feet two inches tall which in itself is not natural for a woman" (p. 14). The concept of gender role is restrictive in the society Miss Amelia lives in. In her case, however, the town people think of her differently. Since she is raised by her solitary father, people think that she has not learned feminine manners. Not having an example of a feminine person like a mother or an elder sister, she has not developed any prominent feminine traits in her. When Miss Amelia receives a marriage proposal from Marvin Macy, they think that she should accept it "to tone down Miss Amelia's temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her at last into a calculable woman" (p. 30). Marriage becomes a tool to feminize an unconventional woman and "a destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 415). With this tool, the society draws a demarcation line between a man and woman and confines her in the traditional trap of femininity.

Beauvoir (1949) mentions in the "Introduction to Book Two"of The Second Sex that the contemporary women (in the 1950s) were "in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity" (29). However, "Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practical subordination to men" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 28). She goes on explaining that in a marriage, "a man is a socially independent and complete individual" whereas a woman as "slave or vassal, is integrated within families by fathers and brother" (p. 416). Marriage assures a man having a regular sexual life and prosperity and turns a woman into a reproductive slave who is to serve the community by being a reproductive machine of her

husband. In Miss Amelia's case, interestingly, she does not show any sign of being subdued by the patriarchal choices. She has nothing that is expected from women in a male-dominated society. She is not sexually active despite being an adult, even after her "queer marriage" (p. 5) to Marvin Macy—a "normal" masculine man desired by "many females in the region" (p. 26) who chooses "that solitary, gangling, queer-eyed girl" not "because of her money, but solely out of love" (p. 27). Although Marvin Macy grows "to be bold and fearless and cruel" (p. 29), he is a changed man after falling in love with Amelia. He loves her for two years and learns good manners to win her love.

Miss Amelia, however, does not feel any feminine carnal desire for Marvin Macy. González (1994) claims, "Left motherless at birth, Amelia was raised by a solitary father who called her "Little" which, I think, for some reason, has stopped her normal psychological development as a sexual being" (p. 144). In everyone's anticipation of her marriage, the writer shows how traditionally restrictive town people are in their perception of gender norms in a community. However, still, Amelia does not conform to the idea of being a submissive housewife, and thus, rejects to be subdued by her husband even sexually.

On their wedding day, Amelia's cook Jeff prepares a grand supper for everyone. Usually, women, at their wedding, feel vulnerable and shy to eat meals in front of the invitees. Amelia, on the contrary, takes "second servings of everything" and goes about "her ordinary business—reading the newspaper, finishing an inventory of the stock in the store, and so forth" (p. 30). On their nuptial night, when everyone leaves the newly married couple alone together, Amelia comes down the stairs "in breeches and a khaki jacket" (p. 31) –quite nontraditional attire for a new bride. Then she has "a smoke with her father's pipe. Her face was hard, stern, and had now whitened to its natural color" (p. 31). The natural color refers to "sexless and white" (p. 3) manly Amelia who is alone, but dominant in her own way.

When Marvin Macy keeps trying to possess her sexually, she rejects him because she knows that it will diminish her individuality. Beauvoir (1949) writes that in a marriage, "woman's function is to satisfy a male's sexual needs and to take care of his households" (p. 416). The duties of being a sexual partner and a caregiver is placed upon woman by society "as service rendered to her spouse" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 416). Nonetheless, Marvin Macy is "unable to bring his well-beloved bride to bed with him" (McCullers, p. 31). The whole town then knows that Amelia is incapable of being dominated by a man. The marriage goes on sexless for three days. To win her body and mind, Marvin Macy does what a husband is traditionally expected to do. He brings his lawyer and signs over to her "the whole of his worldly goods" (p. 32). Despite giving away all his properties, Marvin Macy cannot

convince the strong-willed Amelia to behave wifely with him. His assumption of winning her in exchange of materialistic goods is based on conventional idea of marriage that in return for his wife's duties, a husband "is supposed to give her presents, or marriage settlement, or to support her" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 417). Unexpectedly, she gets all his property, "turns his gifts into profit" (Broughton, 1974, p. 39) and throws him out of the house. Miss Amelia is left "with everything that Marvin Macy had ever owned—his timberwood, his gilt watch, every one of his possessions" (p. 33).

The household, money and everything materialistic wholly belong to Miss Amelia till the arrival of Cousin Lymon who comes from an unknown place with an unknown motif and mysterious story. Lymon is a "hunchback, scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, dusty coat that reached only to his knees" (p. 6). His miserable appearance seems unthreatening to Miss Amelia. So, she lets him stay at her house and take some time to get better. Since the town people do not see Lymon after the night he meets Amelia, they start spreading rumors about her. A few of them assume that Miss Amelia has killed Lymon. Others think that "Miss Amelia, being rich, would not go out of her way to murder a vagabond for a few trifles of junk" (p. 14). The town people's assumption degenders Amelia and portrays her as a potential murderer—a trait that is unlikely to women.

However, Miss Amelia takes care of Lymon in her hidden motherly manner. Being raised motherless by a father, Amelia unconsciously craved motherly care. Her caring nature comes out when she cares for the children in her community. Cousin Lymon's age, at this point, is unreleased. However, his physical features, especially his height, make him appear like a child compared to the taller and bigger body of Miss Amelia. She takes care of him the way a mother would take care of his child by concealing the wounds from the entire world and letting it take time to get healed. After Lymon recovers from his past wounds, he inspires Miss Amelia to rebuild her café. When he addresses Amelia with her bare name without a title, she feels different. The name opens a new possibility of feminizing her. She gradually falls in love with this hunchbacked man, and her love for Lymon causes a partial "feminization". The partial and temporary feminization then turns the mother into a lover as she rarely knows how to handle motherly affection for a grown-up yet hunchbacked man. As a result, She, on Sundays, "discards her overalls in favor of a red dress" (González, 1994, 145). When she is mesmerized by Lymon, she feels that "she is required to fit into the gender code" (Matsui, 2016, p. 165). However, she does not show her change to the world as the narrator states, "Outwardly she did not seem changed at all. But there were many who noticed her face. She watched all that went on, but most of the time her eyes were fastened lonesomely on the hunchback" (p. 23). The lonesome look is the look of the lover. It

is not love but the duality in her gender that leaves Miss Amelia in her spiritual alienation.

Miss Amelia Evans starts living in gender duality. She crosses her clothes between masculine and feminine as she still "wore swamp boots and overalls, but on Sunday she put on a dark red dress that hung on her in a most peculiar fashion" (p. 24). Her manners change too. When she starts becoming feminine, she becomes more vulnerable which is visible to her male counterparts. Matsui (2016) argues, "the men interpret the women's feminine appearance, whether it is adult or virginal, as acquiescence to a sexual relationship and try to have sex with them" (p. 165). Amelia's feminine attire degrades her to the position of an object to the male's gaze. The duality emasculates Miss Amelia and makes her develop a co-dependency with Lymon for he "alone had access to her bankbook and the key to the cabinet of curios" (p. 37). Amelia, by letting Lymoninvade her private world—a world of her own—proves her love for him. Together they build a café and continue to live together. The café itself becomes a symbol of unity that diminishes the separateness of the town and the individuality of Miss Amelia.

Although Miss Amelia has been a manly woman, she has a tender heart which humanely thinks of other human beings around her. She not only takes care of Lymon but also successfully applies her secret remedies to the poor sick children of her community. She is a businesswoman, a profit maker, but with a humanitarian heart to do good to poor people. González (1994) indicates that Miss Amelia "partly compensates the community for what she takes from it through litigations and commercial transactions" (p. 144). However, when a female issue shows up, she simply denies treating it which implies her incapacity of relating her abilities to any form of femaleness. She has been "physically and psychically excluded" from internalizing femininity (González, 1994, p. 144). She identifies herself with the masculinity she has been surrounded by since her childhood. Even in the process of sharing her life with Lymon, Amelia keeps the authority in her hands. When Henry Macy, Marvin Macy's brother, comes with a letter, he delivers it to her as "all sorts of business letters and catalogues came addressed to her" (p. 42). She even "walked around giving orders and soon most of the work was done" (p. 45). Miss Amelia's partial feminization cannot turn her entirely co-dependent on any male counterpart. After receiving a letter from Henry Macy, she comes to know that Marvin Macy is coming back to take revenge. She, getting out of her temporary feminine maze, waits for his arrival furiously.

González (1994) comments, "This town's concept of gender roles is so restrictive that if a man ever shows feelings of fear or anxiety, or weeps, he is known as a Morris Finestein" (p. 145). Men like Marvin Macy who "dried and salted ear of

a man he killed in a razor fight, chopped off the tails of squirrels in a pinewood" is considered normal for a masculine person. Men are expected to be bold and wild unlike women. Nonetheless, in Amelia's case, she is expected to be wild and merciless as the narrator says, "everyone waited to see her burst into a terrible holler, snatch up some dangerous object and chase him altogether out of town" (p. 48). They even think "if Miss Amelia had split open Marvin Macy's head with the ax on the back porch no one would have been surprised" (p. 49). Since Cousin Lymon is attracted to Marvin Macy, Miss Amelia tends to protect him from Macy's villainous maze. She does not commit any explicit crime, but secretly offers poison to Marvin Macy.

It is interesting to see how the town people can imagine Amelia to be someone unconventional to femininity. This thought develops throughout the years due to her lifestyle and her terrible marriage experience. She beats him off and kicks him out of the place on the tenth day of their marriage. It is, therefore, normal for the town people to expect her to be overtly hostile towards Marvin Macy. This time, she keeps it covert and prepares herself for the big fight. She makes a "punching bag" which she "would box with it out in her yard every morning" (p. 60). Everyone knows that "she was a fine fighter—a little heavy on her feet" (p. 60). McCullers here disrupts the tradition that depicts women as the weaker sex. She sets up the fight between Amelia and Marvin Macy where Amelia is one inch taller than Marvin Macy. Since Amelia has a successful fighting history, the town people start "betting on Miss Amelia, scarcely a person would put up money on Marvin Macy" (p. 60). She is expected to fight because she has created her image as a fine fighter. Interestingly, the fight takes place in a public domain—in front of the café. Amelia acts nothing like a woman. She shows herself at the head of the stairs wearing her old overalls which are "rolled up to the knees" (p. 65). She appears barefooted with "an iron strengthband around her right wrist" (p. 65) in front of everyone in her masculine spirit like Marvin Macy who also rolls up his trousers but wears heavy shoes. They fight equally strong and fierce. They have fought for a long time since "Wrestling is the natural way of fighting in this country—as boxing is too quick and requires much thinking and concentration" (p. 66). After a while, when Amelia's overalls are drenched, the real test begins. Miss Amelia, between the two of them, is "the stronger. Marvin Macy was greased and slippery, tricky to grasp, but she was stronger" (p. 66). She is about to win the fight till Cousin Lymon suddenly springs forward and sails through the air and clutches at her neck just when she grasps Marvin Macy's throat. The fight is supposed to be between Amelia and Marvin Macy. However, the sudden interference of Lymon whom Amelia loves becomes the cause of her defeat. González (1994) writes that "Amelia is not defeated directly by masculine potency, or by a social environment which has never subjugated her, but rather by Lymon's deceit, betrayal and perfidy, weapons which traditional male

discourse has often attributed to the female" (p. 146). Till the moment of her defeat, she does not accept submission to male supremacy. She gives a tough fight. It is her love for Lymon, a reason for her partial feminization, that makes her vulnerable and weak and emasculates her from her core self.

When the fight ends, Miss Amelia is left alone at her place since this "was not a fight to hash over and talk about afterwards; people went home and pulled the covers up over their heads" (p. 67). The town people remain in gender restrictive idea and leave Miss Amelia in her confinement: alone, fragile and wounded. She, after losing the fight, loses her love Cousin Lymon and all the people around her. She is now alienated from both masculine and feminine worlds. McCullers portrays a manly woman, who lives her life in her own terms when she remains masculine but meets destiny in the inevitable confinement as soon as she experiences a temporary feminization. Her community does not feel empathy for her because stereotypical society believes in women's confinement. When Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon loot her and leave her alone, people think that she deserves to be fragile and alone without men. They think that Miss Amelia has received her punishment for transgressing her role in traditional gender and sexuality.

Miss Amelia Evans grows old and loses her sanity. Her more crossed gray eyes "exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition. She was not pleasant to listen to; her tongue had sharpened terribly" (p. 69). But she still survives. She still expresses her anger when anyone mentions the hunchback. She says, "Ho! If I could lay hand to him, I would rip out his gizzard and throw it to the cat!" (p. 69). No one returns—neither Marvin Macy nor Cousin Lymon. She remains all with herself for herself by herself. González (1994) writes, "Carson McCullers could not get free from the deeply rooted fear that the independent female who resists gender conventions is trespassing on forbidden territory and may even become a freak" (p. 147). Broughton argues that "rejecting those characteristics labeled as exclusively feminine bounces back on the rejector and renders men and women alike incapable of loving and thereby escaping the prisons of their own spiritual isolation" (p. 42). However, I claim, as Matsui (2016) interprets the novella "as a white woman resisting white male dominance" (p. 158). McCullers portrays a strong and independent female protagonist to stand strongly against white patriarchy. The tragedy she meets in the end is not the consequences of the choices she has made but the fragility of the male-dominated society which betrays her love, steals her property and labels her as freak and queer. Beauvoir (1949) argues that "woman has always been man's dependent; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" ("Introduction", p. 19). Nevertheless, Miss Amelia has never been just a male's wife or partner. She has been a rich independent and strong woman. Miss Amelia Evans is anything but the second sex.

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