

Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*: A Subversive Cartesian Thought Experiment

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Abstract Carter's novel revolves around two opposing characters and two opposing definitions of truth: Desiderio and Dr Hoffman. Dr Hoffman commits himself to destabilize all the givens in the 'Enlightenment' civilization of Desiderio by breaking the spatial and temporal moulds and demarcations and by destroying all the symmetries in its logocentric thinking. He aims to create a civilization without the chains and structures of reason in an alternative site of existence filled with mirages and elements of phantasy. Against the backdrop of the problematic relation of reason to unreason, he interrogates the nature and function of the rational acts. Proposing another mode of consciousness, Dr Hoffman indulges in a Cartesian thought experiment in a subversive fashion and rethinks a fundamental Cartesian problematic: the ontological status of reality and identity, thus, the disjunction between imaginary and symbolic registers. This essay aims to give a Lacanian hearing to Hoffman's project which makes more sense from a Lacanian vantage point as he tries to open a gap in the symbolic register or create a disastrous disturbance in it, and tries to delete or distort the place of the shared Other, by creating a domain outside symbolization through imaginary distortions.¹

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In *Hoffman* Carter translates ideas into fiction. (Sage, "Savage" 52)

Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* revolves around two opposing characters, two opposing sites of existence and two opposing definitions of truth, which are created around Desiderio and Dr Hoffman. Proposing a different mode of consciousness, Dr Hoffman indulges in a Cartesian thought experiment in a subversive fashion and rethinks a fundamental Cartesian problematic: the ontological status of reality and identity, the disjunction between imaginary and symbolic registers, or the disjunction between pre-discursive and linguistically castrated subjectivities. Dr Hoffman's version of the cogito runs against the Cartesian dictum: he believes that objectified desire is possible and the appearance is organically restructured, as for him, to desire is to be, or he says, I DESIRE THEREFORE I EXIST.

His reality modifying machines which precipitate essence of being generate the germinal molecules of objectified desire, and in this free play of unconscious, time, which is characterized by evanescence, doesn't proceed in a progressive line but is a serial composition of apparently indivisible instants. A world of seductive illusions and images is given priority over essence in traditional sense: so "[e]verything depends on persistence of vision" (*Hoffman* 107) and Hoffman's alternative universe is populated with characters who are the creations of nebulous time with no reality status. Unleashing unconscious, he reverses the traditional hierarchy between the binary polarities; between reason and desire, reality and dream, symmetry and asymmetry, essence and imagery, logical thought and analogical thought, singularity and multiplicity, fixedness and mutability, unity and disunity, order and chaos, totalitarian conformism and liberation of the psyche, the synthetic and the authentic. Based on these binaries, Hoffman tries to create an alternative universe with an alternative mode of consciousness and in this universe he can make the subjects perceive ideas with their senses as he sees no essential difference in the phenomenological bases of the two modes of thought. Hoffman allows ever-changing mirages to inhabit the same dimension as the living.

This is also an experiment of representation as Hoffman problematizes the givens of realism which assumes a correspondence between the word and the world. His attack on realism is best explained by Albertina as follows; the Minister:

decided he could only keep a strict control of his actualities by adjusting their

names to agree with them perfectly. So, you understand, that no shadow would fall between the word and the thing described. For the Minister hypothesized my father worked in that shadowy land between the thinkable and the thing thought of, and, if he destroyed this difference, he would destroy my father. (*Hoffman* 194)

In such a context, Elaine Jordan commands attention as she says:

Angela Carter traces the history of reason and desire in literary and philosophic representation, from the Enlightenment through to psychoanalysis and its post-romantic consciousness of the unconscious- Enlightenment seen from its dark side, its blind spot. *Hoffman's* serial episodes explore our conventions and classificatory myths. (34)

With his project, Dr Hoffman stands for the transgression into the forbidden area, into *jouissance* and the *moi* which imply the dissolution of the reality principle. Through this subversive Cartesian thought experiment Dr Hoffman seems also to probe the possibility of transcending the barrier of ego ideal excluding any form of alienation in the discursive self, whether historically produced or psychically conceived, in so far as it represents a threat to the image of seamless unity of the pre-discursive self. In other words, with a pose of psychic self-query his project holds out the prospect of a return to origins of identity as a seamless continuum, to the pre-discursive self without disruptive effect. His project rests in the untested assumption that such a return is possible and posits an operative psychic continuity between the rational and the irrational by problematizing the very terms within which the question of desire is posed and resolved. This essay aims to give a Lacanian hearing to Hoffman's project which makes more sense from a Lacanian vantage point as he tries to open a gap in the symbolic register or create a disastrous disturbance in it, and tries to delete or distort the place of the shared Other, by creating a domain outside symbolization through imaginary distortions.

The protagonist of the novel speaking in his stable, autonomous self called Desiderio, the desired one, tells what happened in the Great War of defining reality: The Reality War during which Dr Hoffman fills the city with mirages by his reality distorting machines and wages "a massive campaign against human reason itself" (*Hoffman* 11) takes place in the capital city of an unspecified Latin American country, one of the remnants of the humanist civilization based on reason. Dr. Hoffman is in complicity with chaos and plays around the concepts of time and space, and

modifies the nature of reality as his “gigantic generators sent out a series of seismic vibrations which made great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation [they] had informally formulated in order to realize [their] city and, out of these cracks, well- nobody knew what would come next” (*Hoffman* 17).

Everything starts to metamorphose in the city which is “the ideological castle” of the Minister of Determination; and for Desiderio, the secretary to the Minister of Determination, this new project carried out by Hoffman is a phantasmagoric redefinition both of reality and the city which becomes the kingdom of the instantaneous. The concrete city in the inhabitants’ memory metamorphoses into a dream. Empirical reality is threatened by unstable and constantly changing, unfixable, un-categorizable, chaotic concretizations of phantasy as Hoffman scientifically literalizes dictates of desire and objectifies it after collecting and channelling the eroto-energy from his set of samples and the lovers who volunteered to spend the rest of their life copulating with their beloved in “love-pens.” His huge machines bombard the city with illusions and mirages, and this nightmarish process involves transmutation of things and concepts and dislocation of everyday life. The previously fixed parameters start to fluctuate and now the polarity between dream and reality determines the course of things in their lives; “the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream” (*Hoffman* 18). They cannot receive any news from the world outside as Hoffman blocks all the radio waves so they get confused about their dream in traditional sense and the dream that invades their city:

By the end of the first year there was no longer any way of guessing what one would see when one opened one’s eyes in the morning for other people’s dreams insidiously invaded the bedroom while one slept and yet it seemed that sleep was our last privacy for, while we slept, at least we knew that we were dreaming although the stuff of our waking hours, so buffeted by phantoms, had grown thin and insubstantial enough to seem itself no more than seeming, or else the fragile marginalia of our dreams. Sheeted teasing memories of the past waited to greet us at the foot of the bed and these were often memories of someone else’s past... Dead children came calling in nightgowns, rubbing the sleep and grave dust from their eyes. Not only the dead returned but also the living. (*Hoffman* 19)

Hoffman orchestrates time and space they live in, certainty and uncertainty, the thinkable and the unthinkable. He acknowledges that time and space have their own

properties, thus he liberates the streets from the tyranny of directions and sets the timepieces free so that the inhabitants of the city can live whatever time they like. He populates the city with analogies dislocating the previous demarcations. He aims to suspend disbelief, to uncover the infinite potentiality of phenomena and to make the world a timeless place outside the world of reason by establishing a world of shadows. Accordingly, he plays games with the objects that regulate time, so when they look at their watch they see that "its hands had been replaced by a healthy growth of ivy or honey-suckle which... writhed impudently all over its face, concealing it" (*Hoffman* 21). They no longer hold a structure of time in common as all the clocks tell a different time and nobody trusts them anyway.

In such a context, the inhabitants of the city are ranged according to their reality ratings and very suitably, Desiderio groups people with regards to whether they retain "some notion of what was real and what was not" (*Hoffman* 21). Amidst these mirages and illusions many people go crazy and the city becomes a place of the irrational coincidences and distortions, insanity and crime. Some of the scientists are somehow invalidated like Dr Drosselmeier who went mad after, Desiderio supposes, he "had unwittingly exposed himself to an overdose of reality and it had destroyed his reason" (*Hoffman* 23). Or in this downward-drooping convoluted spiral of unreality, many commit suicide.

All these cause the Minister of Determination "the gravest concern for he feared that one day a man would impregnate an illusion and then a generation of half-breed ghosts would befoul the city" (*Hoffman* 19). For the Minister, the most ascetic of logicians, all these are nothing more than giving the phantoms a reality status. He refuses the transcendental and wages war on the illusion and mirage that surround them, and aims to return the city back into attitudes of perfect propriety and stasis. His main project is to enforce a strict system of rationing, thus to determine every bit of detail in life and to "formulate a systematic procedure for calculating the verifiable self-consistency of any given object" as he believed "the criterion of reality was that a thing was determinate and the identity of a thing lay only in the extent to which it resembled itself" (*Hoffman* 23). The first thing the Determination Police did for this purpose was to seal off the city to keep more illusion outside and to break the mirrors in the city because of the most seductive phantoms and "the lawless images they were disseminating." Mirrors were dangerous because they offered alternatives, and they "had all turned into fissures or crannies in the hitherto hard-edged world of here and now and through these fissures came slithering sideways all manner of amorphous spooks. And these spooks were Dr Hoffman's guerrillas, his soldiers in disguise who, though absolutely unreal, nevertheless,

were” (*Hoffman* 12). They build a vast wall of wire around the city, “to quarantine unreality.” The Minister forbids any act that involves imagination, a case in point is, he permits only the bicycle as a form of transport as it doesn’t require imagination. With the help of the physicists with “a three-star reality rating” the Minister tries to develop counter weapons like the Determining Radar Apparatus to the weapons and the unreality atom cleverly designed by Hoffman to offend non-substance. However his technological weapons fail in a world where objects change their names, shapes and functions constantly. The Doctor’s research laboratories swiftly restructure their own prototype molecules to invalidate their determination system.

The minister with his theory of names and functions believes that “[e]ach man was secure in possession of a certain name which also ensured him a certain position in a society seen as a series of interlinking rings which, although continually in movement, were never subjected to change for there were never any disturbances and no usurpation of names or ranks or roles whatsoever” (*Hoffman* 24). The epistemological frame to which the Minister belongs murders “the imagination in the womb” according to Hoffman’s ambassador but the Doctor will reverse this process because he knows how to piece the appearances and to allow real forms to emerge into substantiality from the transparency of immanence (*Hoffman* 37). Next to Hoffman’s, the Minister’s personification in the novel seems to be an assault on the positivist and empiricist thinking as he believed that the city as a microcosm of the universe:

contained a finite set of objects and a finite set of their combinations and therefore a list could be made of all possible distinct forms which were logically viable. These could be counted, organized into a conceptual framework and so form a kind of check list for the verification of all phenomena, instantly available by means of an information retrieval system. So he was engaged in the almost superhuman task of programming computers with factual data concerning everything.... (*Hoffman* 24)

Meanwhile Desiderio is regularly visited by a very beautiful glass woman in his dreams. He cannot make sense of her appearances but he is aware that they are manifestations of a language of signs which he cannot read. She occasionally leaves imperatives like “BE AMOROUS” or “BE MYSTERIOUS,” “DON’T THINK, LOOK,” which haunt him. Later she reveals her name in a Platonic mode in the form of a swan accompanied by an elemental music as Albertina.

Lacan and Hoffman

Lacan transliterates the Freudian Oedipus complex into a linguistic phenomenon and designates it as the subject's discovery of the Name-of-the-Father. So the infant's accession into speech and into the symbolic order overlap as the subject is caught up by the signifier and language; and positioned in culture by the Name of the Father: "[i]t is in the name of the father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of law" (Lacan, *Écrits* 230). Therefore "the law of man has been the law of Language" (Lacan, *Language* 35). The Father makes possible the principle of law, particularly the law of the language system through basic signifiers (phallus being the most important of these signifiers as the object of desire) which pin down the floating mass of reality and sliding signifiers, thus human signification becomes possible. In this process, to go beyond the all-powerful imaginary symbiotic tie with the (m)Other on the way to its constitution as a subject, the infant needs to go through the processes of humanizing castration by the paternal metaphor and to learn to submit its desire to the law. This is also the infant's journey from the imaginary register to the symbolic register. The symbolic sets a limit to and organizes the imaginary and the instinctual energies and gives them direction. Lacan explains the intricate correlation between the paternal metaphor, mother and desire in the following formula in *Écrits* (465):

$$\frac{\text{Name-of-the-Father} \cdot \text{Mother's Desire}}{\text{Mother's Desire} \quad \text{Sogmofoed to the Subject}} \rightarrow \text{Name-of-the-Father} \left(\frac{A}{\text{Phallus}} \right)$$

Phantasy is an important component of the imaginary register and its essence is its impossibility or it is important because in it the subject relates to its object of desire, which is impossible in reality. In a Lacanian context the reality for the subject of desire is phantasmatic and thus the phantasy is "really the 'stuff' of the 'I' that is originally repressed" (Lacan, *Écrits* 314). In other words, the phantasy constitutes the primordial form of narrative and "constitutes our desire" (Žižek, "Seven" 191). It is the realization of desire, however, "not 'realization' in the sense of fulfilling it, but rather 'realization' in the sense of bringing it forth, of providing its coordinates. It is not the case that the subject knows in advance what he wants and then, when he cannot get it in reality, proceeds to obtain a hallucinatory satisfaction in fantasy. Rather, the subject originally doesn't know what he wants, and it is the role of fantasy to tell him that, to 'teach' him to desire" (Žižek, *Interrogating* 304).¹ In such a context, Žižek aptly points out the significance of phantasy in Lacan as follows:

“Lacan rewrote Descartes’ ‘I think therefore I am’ as ‘I am thinking: ‘therefore I am’ - the point being, of course, the non-coincidence of the two verbs ‘am,’ i.e. the fantasmatic nature of the second ‘am’” (Žižek, “Seven” 192).

From a Lacanian vantage point the imaginary eradicates the symbolic when Hoffman tries to objectify desire by unlash the unconscious to underpin symbolization. What the Doctor tries to achieve is very much like what the infant with its specular ego/ideal ego experiences in its imaginary register. He promises to liberate the subject from his/her many layers of consciousness (repressions in Lacanian terms) and to lead into a sensual world, the pre-discursive self in the imaginary register in which the infant perceives the world through images: “[t]he imaginary was then the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined. In this respect, ‘imaginary’ is not simply the opposite of ‘real’: the image certainly belongs to reality...” (Sheridan 279). Hoffman tries to give a reality status to the image and phantasy, the basic components of the imaginary register. Through Desiderio who is superegoized in this “unreal” atmosphere of imaginary massacres, bloody streets and hallucinations, and who is immune to these illusions as he has a high reality rating, the novel seems to give the readers a post-Cartesian hermeneutics of desire. Desiderio survives the war because he doesn’t surrender to the flux of mirages and cannot merge and blend with them (*Hoffman* 11). In Lacanian terms, Hoffman’s illusions cannot eradicate his ego ideal or cannot disconnect him from the reality principle.

The Minister sends him on an undercover journey to assassinate Dr Hoffman. Through different communities he encounters on his journey, the reader is introduced to a variety of modes of existence and consciousness, thus different modes of desire. On the way to his first destination he first meets the Doctor’s former physics professor who is now blind and who works for the traveling fair as the peep-show proprietor. He acts as the mouthpiece for the Doctor as he introduces Desiderio to Hoffman’s scientific principles; and through his magic samples with many graphic scenes of eroticism that challenge sexual taboos, Desiderio is given access to what he is going to live through in future. Desiderio reaches the first stop in his destination; this is a city whose Mayor had mysteriously disappeared. Under the guise of a government inspector he goes to the Mayor’s house where he has a sexual intercourse with the somnambulist daughter of the Mayor, who dies mysteriously later on and with whose death he is held responsible. While escaping from the Kafkaesque Determination Police he takes refuge among the Amerindian River people, with a “womb-like family” (Sage, *Angela* 35). He feels at home among these people who cannot think in straight lines. They can think only in subtle and intricate inter-

locking circles and conceive only the basic polarities like light and darkness, birth and death. As they cannot comprehend linearity in Desiderio's logic they cannot learn the alphabet, which signifies nothing in their world. Their family system is matrilinear and two centuries of inbreeding produced a generation of webbed hands, ingrowing eyelashes, lobeless ears and other deformities.

Then he joins the traveling fair as the nephew of the peep-show proprietor. The fair in which all the hierarchies are shattered is a microcosm for a carnivalesque mode of existence where all the taboos are violated. It is a microcosm which has people from all over the world and which acknowledges no geographical location or temporal situation. The workers of the fair cannot acknowledge any other nationality and cannot imagine any other home for themselves. Theirs is "a drab world of the here and now inhabited by those who came to gape" at them. They make their living out of the "grotesque" and their bread is "deformity" (*Hoffman* 99) and they are permanently in hiding from the real world. They transcend the commonplace and their language is made up of grunt, bark and gesture. In the absence of a dominant symbolic order they don't have anything complicated to say to one another and thus they communicate through non-verbal expressions. Their world where there is no hidden unity is shaped by the Doctor's principles as it is regulated by the implicit awareness of a lack of rules.

The peep-show proprietor has a handful of figures or samples which offer a microcosm of the universe Hoffman sets out to create, with paradigms of the things that might possibly exist in it. They embody the symbolic representations of the basic constituents of this universe to negate the rational reality: "The symbols serve as patterns or templates from which physical objects and real events may be evolved by the process [Dr Hoffman] calls 'effective evolving'" (*Hoffman* 96). These samples produce the energy that is necessary to maintain and change mirages, which are in essence, the objectifications of phantasies. The client's phantasies are objectified after the proprietor throws the handful of magic samples in the air and lets them fall randomly.

Dr Hoffman's methodology is based on Phenomenal Dynamics whose first theory is based on the idea that the "universe has no fixed substratum of fixed substances and its only reality lies in its phenomena" (*Hoffman* 96). Its second and third theories are: only change is invariable and the difference between a symbol and an object is quantitative, not qualitative. His main principle is based on fluidity of structure and on the assumption that everything is possible to imagine can also exist. With his theories he offers an alternative to the positivist science of the western world based on reason. He moved out of the realm of pure science and "resurrected

all manner of antique pseudo-sciences, alchemy, geomancy and the empirical investigation of those essences the ancient Chinese claimed created phenomena through an interplay of elemental aspects of maleness and femaleness” (*Hoffman* 97).

After being raped by the nine Moroccan acrobats of desire and after a tragic earthquake in which everything is destroyed, Desiderio joins the Lithuanian Count, who flies from the wrath of the black pimp. This law breaker calls himself the “volcanic enigma, phallic aspiration, unfallen Icarus” (*Hoffman* 134) or the Black Prometheus (*Hoffman* 146). The Count seeks perverse gratification no matter what and is very much self-centred; and he needs others only to glorify himself. The idea of narcissistic indulgence is foregrounded in the Count who easily relapses into narcissistic identification as he easily finds an ideal ego or “a double” in his own words: the chief of the pirates, the black pimp, the chief of the African tribe etc. Their common point is their cruelty. The Count cannot feel any pain as it is obvious in his words: “I feel no pain. Only anguish. Unless anguish is the name of my pain. I wish I could learn to name my pain” (*Hoffman* 147). He is trapped in his solipsism: “I am entirely alone. I and my shadow fill the universe” (*Hoffman* 148). His narcissistic inclinations reach a climax when he says: “I want to learn the savour of my flesh. I wish to taste myself. For you must know I am a great gourmet” (*Hoffman* 162). He learns to suffer when he is boiled to be eaten by the African tribesmen and he feels as a fully liberated man for the first time.

Desiderio and the Count go to the House of Anonymity, a place beyond the Law of the Father where all the Laws are permanently violated and where all the phantasies are realized. They lose their sense of social responsibility in this house. The Count indulges in sado-masochistic fulfilments in the galleries full of instruments of torture and the apparatus of fetishism. Desiderio meets Albertina there but their paradisaical experiences do not last long; the place is invaded by the Police as both of them are wanted for murder.

When they are on the way to Europe to escape from the black pimp, they are captured by the Pirates of Death, and then by cannibal African tribesmen who attempt to eat them. Only Desiderio and the Count’s vale (who turns out to be Albertina herself) can escape but the Count is boiled by the cannibal chieftain, a tragic event which teaches the Count how to suffer as mentioned above. This African tribe is important as in their world moral and humanistic values of the mainstream Western community are subverted. A case in point is the image of the mother which is dehumanized: “Vengeful as nature herself, she loves her children only in order to devour them better and if she herself rips her own veils of self-deceit, Mother perceives in herself untold abysses of cruelty as subtle as it is refined” (*Hoffman* 160).

In this tribe women are literally castrated as a precaution to reduce their capacity for feeling as they believe that “the extent of a woman’s feelings was directly related to her capacity for feeling during the sexual act” (*Hoffman* 160). In this tribe Man has a distorted form too, as the chief of the tribe says: “In these regions, you may observe Man in his constitutionally vicious, instinctively evil and studiously ferocious form- in a word, in the closest possible harmony with the natural world” (*Hoffman* 161).

Then Albertina (who has revealed her true identity now) and Desiderio set on a journey to meet the community of the centaurs. They experience the verifiable activities of beasts with no reality status as these creatures live in the imaginary substratum of time. This is the zone of terranebuloso, the anteriority of all times or “the womb of time” (*Hoffman* 189). As Dr Hoffman loses his models/images in the earthquake he cannot work without them and cannot manipulate people’s desires any more in his castle, and his laboratories cannot produce enough eroto-energy. Still, in terranebuloso the aerial spots detect growths of unimaginable flora and herds of biologically dubious fauna inhabiting hitherto unformulated territory: “In this forest, it seemed that nature had absolved her creations from an adherence to the formal divisions so biology and botany were quite overthrown and the only animals we saw, green-fleshed, marsupial, one-eyed, crawling things, seemed more an ambulant vegetable than anything else. Roasted on a spit, they tasted like barbecued celery” (*Hoffman* 171).

In the world of the centaurs the reader is presented with alternatives to human language, human religion and morality, in fact, to human civilization in general. These creatures with their distorted shapes are extra-linguistic beings and their site of being is beyond the reason of any master signifier. Their language consists primarily of sound clusters and intuition. They are ungendered as Desiderio says: “Though they were men, they did not know what a man was” (*Hoffman* 174) and “[b]ecause they were far more magnificent than man, they did not know what a man was. They did not have a word for shame and nothing human was alien to them because they were alien to everything human” (*Hoffman* 175). They have difficulty in comprehending that there might be other communicable creatures who are not mostly horse; and they possess such a deep conviction the universe is a horse that it is impossible for them to imagine that things might be otherwise. Their human shapes are threatening to the centaurs, accordingly, they come to believe that these strange creatures (human beings) were sent “into the world to show [Sacred Stallion’s] flock what fearful shapes they might all still come to if they did not adhere even more strictly than before to his dogmas” (*Hoffman* 190). And these “hippolators be-

lieved their god revealed himself to them in the droppings excreted by the horse part of themselves since this manifested the purest essence of their equine natures, and it was quite as logical an idol as a loaf of bread or a glass of wine...” (*Hoffman* 175). Therefore “[t]he twice daily movement of their bowels was at once a form of prayer and a divine communion” (*Hoffman* 175-6). They are freed from the human binaries like death and birth, end and beginning, man and woman. Their time works according to circular principles and sexual act is a duty for them not a source of pleasure. Desiderio has difficulty in grasping the reality status of these creatures, yet, he says:

we ate the bread of the centaurs and were nourished by it. ... these phantoms were not in the last insignificant for the existence of the methodological actuality on whose beds of straw we slept, whose language we were forced to learn, this complex reality with its fires, its cheeses, its complicated theology and its magnificent handwriting, this concrete, authentic, self-consistent world was begotten from phenomenal dynamics alone, the product of a random becoming, the first of the wonderful flowers that would bloom in the earth her father had prepared for them by means she, as yet, refused to so much as hint at, except to say they had to do with desire, and radiant energy, and persistence of vision. We were living, then, according to the self-determined laws of a group of synthetically authentic phenomena. (*Hoffman* 186)

When they are about to be sacrificed by the centaurs to their god, they are saved by Dr Hoffman’s men in a helicopter and are taken to his castle. From Hoffman’s men they learn that after Hoffman’s sets of samples were accidentally destroyed, his calculations went awry and the nebulous time arrived instantaneously rather than in the course of a programmed dissolution in time itself. When the Minister employed some logical positivists to construct a philosophy of identity, he was temporarily victorious in the war. That is, only when he turned to “philosophic weapons- or, as he would probably prefer to call them, ideological weapons” (*Hoffman* 194) he could defeat the Doctor.

In his laboratories “deep in the burning bowels of the earth” that reminds one of unconscious, Hoffman achieves mutations of events through certain loopholes in metaphysics and he is able “to base a meta-technology upon metaphysics only by the most scrupulous observance of and adherence to the laws of empirical research” (*Hoffman* 212). He has put a hundred of the best matched lovers into coffins and feeds them hormones intravenously. They come from every race in the world and form “a pictorial lexicon of all the things a man and a woman might do together

within the confines of a bed of wire six feet long by three feet wide" (*Hoffman* 214). Hoffman uses the energy they release- eroto-energy, "the simplest yet most powerful form of radiant energy in the entire universe" and their plentiful secretion falling through the wire to put his project into practice. Desiderio realizes that he himself is one of these love slaves in Hoffman's eyes and their long delayed but "longed-for conjunction would spurt such a charge of energy [their] infinity would fill the world and, in this experiential void, the Doctor would descend on the city and his liberation would begin" (*Hoffman* 215). Now Desiderio has the uncanny feeling that he too has been manipulated by Hoffman as what he has experienced so far was hinted at by the magic samples of the peep-show proprietor or these magic samples offered him a simulation of his desire in a cryptic fashion. That is, these fantasy machines narrated for him the fundamentals of desire as the visitant lover of the somnambulist girl Mary Anne, with whose death he was held responsible and, thus who disconnected him from the world of the Minister (the signifier of the paternal metaphor in Lacanian terms); the compliant member of the Amerindian River People; the peep-show proprietor's nephew; the companion to the Count, the erotic traveller; the brave killer of the chieftain of the cannibal African tribe; and the prize lover that Hoffman is after to produce the greatest amount of eroto-energy. On these adventures, Albertina, his lover to be, secretly accompanied Desiderio assuming different identities. Desiderio feels uneasy about Hoffman's future plans about himself, and one part of him wants to stay and experience the eternal fulfilment of desire with Albertina while another part feels the impossibility of this project. When he gets closer to achieving the desired end, it loses its grasp on him.

Desiderio cannot feel sympathy for Dr Hoffman as he feels that Hoffman is another totalitarian figure with his pervert wish to be in the place of the Father rather than submit himself to his authority: he wants to establish a dictatorship of desire. In other words, the Doctor's system too has its own authoritative principles which operate on a will to power and which create an alternative domain that cannot go beyond the master and slave discourse. As a result, he re-establishes another world whose operative systems echo the previous one. Before Desiderio makes love to Albertina, Hoffman makes him listen to the recorded speech of the Minister which brings back all the dimly remembered certitudes and Desiderio comes back to the world of reason and the forgotten harmonies in it. After hearing the Minister's speech, Desiderio cannot fall under Hoffman's spell: "Yet there was still that duplicity in my heart's core.... Reason was stamped into me as if it were a chromosome, even if I loved the high priestess of passion" (*Hoffman* 195).

Dr Hoffman offers Desiderio his heart's desire but he chooses a lifetime's

contentment. He kills Dr Hoffman and Albertina and ends the nebulous time. By denying the object of his desire he experiences a self-inflicted castration and becomes a traveller “who had denied his proper destination.” He says: “I saw no colours anywhere around me.... I knew I was condemned to disillusionment in perpetuity. My punishment had been my crime” (*Hoffman* 220). He sees himself as the “check, the impulse of restraint” and once more, time “lay more thickly about me than the mists” (*Hoffman* 221) exerting great pressure on his blood vessels and eardrums. He leaves the nebulous time behind, thus for him the impossible remains as impossible. While leaving the castle Desiderio burns the bridge to the castle in case he might go back, an act which implies that he is still under Albertina’s spell and acts against his desire. Interestingly, even in old age when he closes his eyes, Albertina comes unbidden. That is, when she becomes impossible, she once more assumes the place of the object of his desire.

When Desiderio refuses the final consummation with Albertina, which means an irreversible immersion into the imaginary register and dying to the symbolic, he chooses to stay with the symbolic Father of his previous discourse as a castrated subject. Thus, the previous balance in the city seems to be restored, the son (Desiderio) chooses to enable the Father of reason (the Minister) to win but this victory underlines the constructedness of identity which becomes a matter of choice. In other words, he resumes the previous symmetries in his identity because he chooses to do so. With this choice he also refuses the Cartesian dictum which reduces the subject to the status of a signifier of a self-knowing, and stable entity. The subject is more than this categorisable Cartesian signifier with a site of a certain excess. Thus one can say that the previous status quo is re-established after its operative mechanisms are demystified. Or as in Sarah Gamble’s words: “Such master narratives as time, truth, identity and historical causation are systematically, deliberately, mangled in *Hoffman*, and although the ending apparently sees them restored, it is not to their former state. They may only have been dismantled once, but once is enough to see that they are not incontrovertible, but chosen” (111).

The Ideal Ego, Desire, Love and the Imaginary Register in *Hoffman*

Desire and phantasy have an intersubjective quality: “One should always bear in mind that the desire which is ‘realized’ (staged) in fantasy is not the subject’s own, but the Other’s desire” and fantasy “renders the subject’s primordial, constitutive position. The original questioning of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?’ but ‘What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for the others?’” (Žižek, “Seven” 194-5). As one’s object of love is correlative of the image of one’s

desire, to objectify desire, the subject needs others: "In the human subject, desire is realized in the other, by the other- *in* the other" (Lacan, *Freud's paper* 177). This process involves alienation from one's self into an image:

The subject originally locates and recognizes desire through the intermediary, not only of his own image, but of the body of his fellow being. It's exactly at that moment that the human being's consciousness, in the form of consciousness of self, distinguishes itself. It is in so far as he recognizes his desire in the body of the other that the exchange takes place. It is in so far as his desire had gone over to the other side that he assimilates himself to the body of the other and recognizes himself as body. (Lacan, *Freud's paper* 147)

The narcissistic component of man who sees himself in the other is foregrounded by Lacan especially in his chapter "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Écrits*. Love is the capture of the *moi* by another in an imaginary relationship, in a trap or in Freudian terms, introjection of the ideal ego. Imaginary register is a narcissistic or *kaleidoscopic* structure (Lacan, *Écrits* 99) and the ideal ego which constitutes itself in the this register is a projected image with which the subject identifies itself and is an ideal of narcissistic omnipotence constructed on the model of narcissism (therefore it is also possible to call it as the specular ego): "Love is a phenomenon which takes place on the imaginary level, and which provokes a veritable subduction of the symbolic, a sort of annihilation, of perturbation of the function of the ego-ideal. Love reopens the door... to perfection" (Lacan, *Freud's paper* 142). It is the self-image in which the subject is wrapped by the other, it is a form of narcissistic illusion: "That's what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (Lacan, *Freud's paper* 142). Lacan gives the intricate correlation among desire, imaginary register and the ideal ego as follows: Desire "alienated, is perpetually reintegrated anew, reprojecting *the Idealich* outside. It is in this way that desire is verbalized. Here there is a game of see-saw between two inverted relations. The specular relation of the *ego*, which the subject assumes and realizes, and projection, which is always ready to be renewed, in the *Idealich*" (Lacan, *Freud's paper* 174).

If one's object of love gives us the image of one's desire, then narration seems to fictionalize Lacanian theory of Mirror Stage identification when Albertina says: "Ours is a supreme encounter, Desiderio. We are two such disseminating mirrors" (*Hoffman* 202). Then Desiderio adds: "In the looking glasses of her eyes, I saw reflected my entire being whirl apart and reassemble itself innumerable times" (*Hoff-*

man 202). Love for Albertina is an exchange of reflections which “can neither be exhausted nor destroyed” and “[i]t is a direct durationless, locationless progression towards an ultimate state of ecstatic annihilation” (*Hoffman* 202).

In the end Desiderio reveals that he is physically a mirror image of Albertina and in his youth Desiderio looked like Albertina whom he calls “my Platonic other” (*Hoffman* 215), a detail which sounds like an aftershadowing element to imply that this was a narcissistic search: “Now I was entirely Albertina in the male aspect. That is why I know I was beautiful when I was a young man. Because I know I looked like Albertina” (*Hoffman* 199).

Desire Being Insatiable

Almost everything is given from Desiderio’s perspective. Narrative tells the story of a world which is ruled by the dialectics of desire. Sexual gratification is abundant in almost each section of the novel and one can even go so far as to call the text as pansexist (finding sexual discourse everywhere) but this desire is a male desire. It is filled with female images without names, as Desiderio states: “for they had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of Woman; when I examined them more closely, I saw that none of them were any longer, or might never have been, woman” (*Hoffman* 132). As they are not positioned within a defined symbolic Order they are ungendered female beings. They are there to fulfil the desires of their customers, as in the case of the girl who “must have come straight from the whipping parlour for her neck was a ravelled palimpsest of wound upon wound- she was neither animal nor vegetable nor technological; this torn and bleeding she was the most dramatic revelation of the nature of the meat that I have ever seen” (*Hoffman* 133). Among these girls they act like the primordial father, whose murder “is the fertile moment of the debt by which the subject binds himself for life to the Law...” (Lacan, *Écrits* 464) and through whose death Freud demonstrates the origin of universal Law in the primal crime. Women function to objectify the male phantasy through pornographic tropes and obsessive and erotic images which might entail violation, mutilation, rape or any other type of torture exercised on their bodies. Sexual politics of inequality is a fundamental feature of these male voyeuristic phantasies as women are there only to complement their gratification, most of the time at the cost of horrendous humiliation, degradation and violation of themselves. However, from another perspective one can say that abundance of pornographic tropes deconstruct and demystify the male voyeuristic phantasy and break it systematically into smallest particles, and in

the process rob it of its pornographic elements.

These women remind the reader of the Lacanian idea that "...in fact *woman* does not exist, *woman is not whole (pas toute)*- woman's sexual organ is of no interest (*ne lui dit rien*) except via the body's *jouissance*" (Lacan, *Encore* 7). For Lacan woman is a masquerade as it is defined always against the backdrop of what man is. As Soler states Lacan's formulations to "specify the place of 'woman' make her a partner of the masculine subject." These formulations of 'woman' as category are: "(1) being the phallus, that is, the representative of what man is missing; (2) being the object that serves as the cause of his desire; and (3) being his symptom upon which his *jouissance* is fixated" (102). As can be seen here the woman is the "unravished bride of quietness" as she, as a category, stands for the absence that helps to define what man is or does. She is taken as the symptom of man's desire, or she relates man to the site of *jouissance*. In this context she is no more than a function to define a status for man. She is in the site of quietness where there is no Word (Logos) /origin; and where one can find only extra-linguistic elements, which defy the masculine logic. Thus she is unravishable by man because she is beyond definition. In other words, as the signifier for Lack and absence, she transcends the patriarchal site of being because she is "at odds with phallicism" (Lacan, *Écrits* 688).

For Lacan the subject is castrated and deprived of the phallus which is imaginary "though not necessarily hallucinated" and which is related "to (unconscious) desire and to (conscious) demand" (Wilden 187) and which has no signified (Lacan, *Encore* 81). Therefore, man's desire is never insatiable as it is what the Other wants and one can never know what the Other wants due to the primary repression. It is for a lack. It is a desire whose text is repressed: Desire is "the leftover or residue of the fact that something- the Other- has been repressed. In Lacan's dialectical context Desire emanates first from the moi's thrust toward recognition of/from/about/to the Other (A) is, therefore, Desire, a space that widens throughout life." (Ragland-Sullivan 77). Because of this reason, "...there is a radical difference between the satisfaction of a desire and the pursuit of the fulfilment of desire- desire is essentially a negativity..." (Lacan, *Freud's paper* 147). Lacanian definition of desire, then, problematizes the notion of happiness which "relies on the subject's inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire" (Žižek, *Welcome* 59).

When the subject gets too close to the desired object, "erotic fascination turns into disgust at the Real of the bare flesh" (Žižek, *Welcome* 6) as in the case of the Count and Desiderio. The Count is in a vicious circle of constantly fulfilling his desire, which seems to be a hopeless task as he moves from one project into another

to capture this sense of complete fulfilment. Desire is something like a drop of quicksilver which evades any form of capturing and the Count had set himself up the impossible task of capturing this drop. Albertina says that the Count's desires were beyond the capacity of worldly restrictions and insatiable: "... the real world fell so far short of his desires. But he did what he could to bring it up to his own level, even if his will exceeded his self-knowledge" (*Hoffman* 167). Again in the case of Desiderio when he guarantees a lifetime of fulfilment of his desire with Albertina, the idea becomes unbearable to him and loses its magnetic force. When Desiderio sees the Castle which looked like a place of incomprehensible logic to him he feels disappointed. He says: "once liberated, those desires it seemed to me he cheapened..." (*Hoffman* 213). Albertina can no more occupy the status of the object of desire for him but diminishes from the zone of *jouissance* [which is the psychic feeling of wholeness, "the ecstatic sense of unity which preceded an infant's knowledge of separation from the mother, a metaphorical Garden of Eden before the dividing term" (Ragland-Sullivan 75)] into the zone of pleasure.

It is Dr Hoffman's desire to define this unsatisfied and unsatisfiable desire by reversing the constitutional phases of the subject as in the cases of the Count and Desiderio. According to Dr Hoffman's theories, all these are their desire let loose so it is they who caused all these things. Albertina explains the mystery of what has happened to them as follows: "all the subjects and objects we had encountered in the loose grammar of Nebulous Time were derived from a similar source- my desires; or hers; or the Count's. At first, especially, the Count's, for he had lived on closer terms with his own unconscious than we" (*Hoffman* 186).

Depending on the intensity of their passion the characters themselves invent the characters they meet. Albertina says to Desiderio: "I've been maintained in my various appearances only by the power of your desire" (*Hoffman* 204). Albertina as the object of his desire appears in different forms to him, as the Doctor's assistant, in his dream, as the Madame at the brothel (the House of Anonymity), as the face of the gypsy girl, as the valet of the Count. And the Cannibal chief was brought into existence because of the Count's desire for self-destruction. Accordingly, Desiderio lived in a world of his own making and the Count died because he wanted to, as Albertina says: "He acted the tyrant to his passions. However convulsive the grand guignol in his bed, he had always planned it well beforehand and rehearsed it soften in his brain that his performance perfectly simulated an improvisation. His desire became authentic because it was so absolutely synthetic" (*Hoffman* 168). He wills his own desires and "his lusts always blinded him completely to anything but his own sensations" and his fatal error was "to mistake his will for his desire" (*Hoffman*

168).

It might be interesting to give a Lacanian hearing to Hoffman's relation to desire and sense of lack that stimulates this desire: Suffering from what Lacan calls as "failed Oedipal identification" (Lacan, *Écrits* 96), dominated by a psychotic drive to eradicate the previous Father's place and acting like the primordial father who positions himself as the master signifier in his future universe, he seems to have killed his desire which is constituted during the humanizing castration. Very suitably, Desiderio says "I did not think he knew what desire was" (*Hoffman* 213). Ironically, the man who does not have desire manipulates the desire of the others.

Conclusion

Hoffman wants to liberate the unconscious, and thus man; afterwards, he says: "the naked man will walk in and out of everybody's senses" (*Hoffman* 208). Here one feels obliged to underline a paradox in the Doctor's project: on the one hand he claims that he aims to put into practice what he calls the liberation of consciousness but on the other hand he uses love slaves to produce the necessary energy. Liberation of the community's consciousness depends on the slavery of the others (even if they are volunteers). The Doctor also objectifies desire through Desiderio himself and to some extent, through the Lithuanian Count, the two figures who are unwittingly caught up in the mechanism of desire as the flow of narrative is based on the kaleidoscope of what these two characters become in keeping with their internal fiction.

Through Hoffman's dispute with consciousness and rationality, one can say that *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* fictionalizes the irrational. In his project, the contradictions between the rational and the irrational elements are not easily resolved by the subjugation of the former to the latter or vice versa. With his project, he aims at the alchemical transmutations of desire into material manifestation and thus threatens the limits of the conceivable (Punter 29-30). By disrupting human consciousness, by unleashing unconscious and by precipitating essence of being in his laboratories, he wants to reduce human civilization to its most basic form, to take it apart and create a new one. However, in this process, he fails because he puts reason to the service of representing and systematizing irrationality as the psychic substratum. Thus Hoffman makes the grave mistake of taking the subject as an objectively knowable thing and runs counter to Lacan, who says, "the subject cannot be reduced to scientific objectification" (Lacan, *Écrits* 122). As a result, he cannot depart from the positivist scientific thought. He ends up creating alternative binaries to the ones he rejected in the previous epistemology

rather than go into a plane of existence where they do not exist.

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