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Selfless: *Buffy’s* Anya and the Problem of Identity

**Victoria Large**

The television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which aired for seven seasons, beginning in 1997 and ending in 2003, was a bona fide pop culture phenomenon that maintains the interest of fans and academics alike today. There are many aspects of the series worthy of discussion and study, not the least of which is its handling of gender roles. The title character, Buffy Summers, is one of many powerful females featured on the show. Also featured is Willow, a powerful witch, who is referred to as a “goddess” during the show’s seventh series finale, “Chosen.” In her essay “Just a Girl: Buffy as Icon,” Anne Millard Daugherty writes, “The French feminists of the twentieth century decry the phallogocentrism of Western culture as limiting women to ‘other.’ Buffy breaks through these traditional representations. She may be a high school girl, but she is a powerful and capable one” (154). Indeed, Buffy is often seen overpowering and defeating male villains, or defending male characters that are not as capable as she is in dealing with vampires or other threats. She is not presented as inferior to men but rather quite the opposite. “Buffy manifests everything to countermand Aristotle’s dismissal of the female as ‘lacking,’” Daugherty writes, “Buffy has everything…Buffy is everything the men would hope to be” (152). While initially under the supervision of the Watcher’s Council, an organization of men who have controlled vampire slayers for centuries, Buffy is never willing to give in to this patriarchal authority, and eventually rejects it entirely, as does her fellow slayer, Faith.

Within this context of powerful women, we are presented with the powerful, but problematic, character of Anya. Anya first appears in the season three *Buffy* episode “The Wish.” A demon in the guise of a high school girl, Anya is a being that grants wishes of revenge to women who have been hurt by unfaithful men. By the end of “The Wish,” Anya has lost her powers and become a mortal woman, and soon thereafter she begins a relationship with Buffy’s friend Xander Harris in the episode “The Prom.” Anya and Xander are eventually engaged to be married, but when their relationship fails, Anya becomes a vengeance demon once more. Thus, Anya allows herself to be defined by her relationship to men in a way that Buffy, Willow, Faith, and other female characters in the series do not. In other words, Anya allows herself to be defined as the Other. As Simone de Beauvoir, one of the “French feminists” that Daugherty refers to, writes in *The Second Sex*, woman becomes “the Other” by being subjected to the man’s will” (80) rather than her own. Melanie Sexton writes in her explanation of the Self/Other dichotomy that “woman’s (experience) is perceived as inessential, alien,
negative...in a patriarchal society, woman is denied full selfhood, alienated from her own subjectivity” (620). Anya's failure to define herself for herself, and forge an identity independent of men and patriarchal assumptions, was never fully addressed on Buffy until the season seven episode “Selfless,” which, as its punning title implies, dealt with Anya's lack of a “self.” In being identified only by her relationship to men, Anya lacked a true “self” and was instead viewed as the Other.

The problematic nature of Anya's character is evident from her first appearance in “The Wish.” She comes to Sunnydale High School posing as a high school student named Anya, which is in fact a shortened version of her demonic name, Anyanka. Cordelia has just ended her relationship with Xander because he was unfaithful to her with Willow, and now Anyanka has arrived to help Cordelia get her revenge. Cordelia comes to blame Buffy, not Xander or Willow, for her failed relationship, and so wishes that Buffy never came to Sunnydale in the first place.

Anya grants the wish, revealing her monstrous, demonic true face as she does so. The image of Anyanka as monster presents a problematic aspect of her character: she is the representative of the woman scorned, but she is an inhuman creature, and she sets off a nightmarish chain of events in granting the wish. The evil, monstrous woman is a fixture in mythology. De Beauvoir writes of those in power viewing “the Other (as) a threat, a danger” and notes that the patriarchal fear of woman is revealed in religion and myth: “Eve, given to Adam to be his companion, worked the ruin of mankind; when they wish to wreak vengeance upon man, the pagan gods invent woman; and it is the first-born of these female creatures, Pandora, who lets loose all the ills of suffering humanity” (de Beauvoir 80). Adding an interesting wrinkle to “The Wish” is that fact that Anyanka “lets loose all the ill of suffering” by eliminating the presence of Buffy, an independent and heroic woman. In Buffy’s absence, the male vampire The Master has taken over Sunnydale, establishing a new society that is inherently evil and, notably, patriarchal. Far from empowering the women to whom she grants wishes, Anyanka’s evil nature creates horrific situations that the wisher will quickly regret. In the alternate universe that Cordelia’s wish creates, Xander and Willow are soulless vampires who feed off of and kill Cordelia. Anyanka and the wishes she grants create a monstrous distortion of woman and her emotions that only strengthen the patriarchal view of woman as Other.

It is appropriate, then, that when the character reappears a few episodes later in “Doppelgangland,” having lost her powers and continued living life as Anya, the twelfth grader, she is pleading with a male demon, D’Hoffryn, for him to return her powers to her. The monstrous figure Anyanka is in service of a male, not a female, and certainly not herself. D’Hoffryn refuses to restore Anyanka’s power, and so she remains the mortal woman Anya.

Ironically, Anya becomes romantically involved with Xander, the man she came to Sunnydale to punish. She invites him to senior prom, telling him, “You’re not quite as obnoxious as most of the alpha males around here.” It is true that Xander is a man who is not threatened by the presence of powerful women – his best friends are the independent and more physically adept Buffy and the intelligent and supernaturally gifted Willow, and he has only just gotten out of a relationship with Cordelia, who is of higher social standing and more forceful personality than Xander. At the same time, however, there are patriarchal overtones in Anya’s phrasing when she calls Xander an “alpha male.” The fact that the former vengeance demon now wants to go to the prom with a young man is played for laughs in the episode, but it is the first indication of how Anya will use her relationship with Xander to create her identity. The other women on the show are not defined solely by their relationships, but Anya’s life as a mortal woman seems to begin with her adoption of the new identity of girlfriend. That we have seen Anya only as Xander’s girlfriend or as an aberrant demon presents a problem both for the character of Anya and for a series that ostensibly views strong and independent women in a positive light.

After a fairly tentative start, Anya and Xander’s relationship becomes a major part of both character’s lives, but more so for Anya than Xander, who clearly has other concerns outside of the relationship. Unlike Buffy and Willow, Xander does not enter college after high school, instead struggling to establish himself in the adult world, combating fears of being left behind by his old friends. Yet Xander does not get left behind, and eventually finds his niche. On the other hand, Anya relies on Xander and his already-established friendships as a means of finding her way, eventually getting a job at The Magic Box, a magic shop owned and operated by Buffy’s onetime watcher, Giles, and frequented by Xander and his demon-battling friends.

Anya’s reliance on Xander in creating her own identity is notably evident in the fifth season episode “Triangle.” The episode opens with Anya and Xander lying in bed, and Anya expressing her fear that Xander might leave her one day:

Xander, if you ever decide to go, I want a warning. You know - big, flashing red lights and one of those clocks that counts down, like a bomb in a movie? And there’s a whole bunch of colored wires, and I’m not sure which is the right one to cut, but I guess the green one. And then at the last second, no, the red one and then click, it stops with three-tenths of a second left, and then you don’t leave.

This moment establishes Anya’s reliance on her relationship with Xander. It seems she can’t even fathom coping with the possibility of him leaving her.
The rest of “Triangle” affirms Anya’s insecurity. The episode centers on Anya’s jealousy of Xander’s relationship with Willow. Willow has been Xander’s best friend since childhood, and their brief romance was the cause of Cordelia and Xander’s break-up. Anya is concerned despite the fact that Willow has since made a discovery regarding her own sexuality and is now happily dating another woman, Tara. Bickering with one another while casting a spell, Willow and Anya inadvertently unleash the troll Olaf. There is a revelation regarding Anya’s past: she and Olaf were both human once, and they used to date. Anya cast a spell that transformed Olaf into a troll, and this led to D’Hoffryn’s recruiting of Anya as a vengeance demon. The revelation makes it clear that Anya’s identity as vengeance demon was the result of her reaction to the males in her life.

At one point in “Triangle,” Olaf threatens to kill Xander. “Choose me!” Anya pleads with the troll, “Don’t take him! Don’t take Xander!” While it is clear by now that Anya and Xander do have genuine feelings for one another, this moment, coupled with Anya’s earlier speech about Xander not leaving her, gives the distinct impression that Anya fears losing Xander because he is what defines her. Her phrasing of the plea – “Don’t take Xander!” – implies a certain possessiveness or ownership. While the cry stems partly from love and concern, there is also an implication that Anya views Xander as something of hers (an essential part of her identity), and she would sooner die than have him taken from her. Olaf spares Xander, but scoffs that he and Anya’s love will never last, insisting that Xander is “ludicrous, and far too breakable.” Olaf’s description of Xander as “breakable” is notable because it paints him as vulnerable in a way that few women ever would – no one would describe Buffy as “breakable.” However, the moment also serves as foreshadowing for Anya’s character. In pointing out Xander’s fragility, Olaf highlights the fragility of Anya’s identity as a woman. She has based her identity on one very breakable, very human man and her imperfect, possibly impermanent relationship with him.

The possible impermanence of Xander and Anya’s relationship ironically becomes clearer after they become engaged. It is obvious that Xander is having second thoughts almost immediately after he proposes to Anya. At the same time, Anya becomes obsessed about her wedding plans and her new identity as wife.

The season six episode “Once More, With Feeling!” sees all of Sunnydale falling under a spell that makes them sing about their problems and secrets, and Xander and Anya perform a song that reveals both of their insecurities about the union. Anya begins the song: “This is the man that I plan to entangle/ Isn’t he fine?/ My claim to fame was to maim and to mangle/Vengeance was mine/Now I’m out of the biz/The name I made I’ll trade for his.” Anya’s desire to trade the “name (she) made” for that of her fiancé is quite revealing and problematic. Anya is willing to sacrifice her identity of centuries past, that of a vengeance demon, and take on the role of wife. The problem is that Anya has never developed her identity as a woman or really, as a human being. De Beauvoir writes that “marriage should be a combining of two whole, independent existences, not a retreat, an annexation, a flight, a remedy” (de Beauvoir 478). Referencing Henrik Ibsen’s seminal play A Doll’s House, de Beauvoir continues: “Ibsen’s Nora understands this when she makes up her mind that before she can be a wife and mother she must first become a complete person” (de Beauvoir 478-479). Unfortunately for Anya, she has failed to recognize what Nora did, and leaps into her marriage to Xander as a way of defining herself without becoming the “complete person” that de Beauvoir describes. It is not surprising then, that when Xander leaves Anya waiting at the altar and the wedding is called off in the sixth season episode “Hell’s Bells,” Anya accepts D’Hoffryn’s offer to revert to her life as a vengeance demon. Having failed to define herself outside of her relationship with Xander, Anya does not consider the possibility of living life as an “ordinary” single woman, a human being with her own unique identity.

The seventh season episode “Selfless” is the first time that struggle for identity is explicitly acknowledged and actually made the focus of the hour. It could be argued that prior to this episode, the producers and writers of Buffy are guilty of characterizing Anya in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes. The early incarnation of the character as Anyanka in “The Wish” (an episode penned by eventual co-executive producer Marti Noxon) depicts the destructive power of a monstrous woman in a way that harks back to some of the oldest patriarchal myths and stories. When Anya becomes human she is mainly a source of comic relief, typically identified either with her status as Xander’s girlfriend or her formerly demonic nature. “Selfless” finally places the character in fitting perspective. More is revealed about her past than ever before, and as a result, Anya’s need to forge her own identity at last comes to the fore.

As “Selfless” begins, Buffy’s younger sister Dawn is seen advising Willow about how to fit in by conforming. A parallel can easily be drawn to Anya’s situation. By conforming to the societal pressures placed on women to find a man and get married, Anya has failed to become the “complete person” of de Beauvoir’s writings. Driving this concept home is Buffy and Xander’s conversation upon entering the room. In discussing his current relationship (or lack thereof) with Anya, Xander tells Buffy that while he is enjoying the single life as a “strong successful male,” he worries about Anya because she “seems so sad.” In this moment, Xander inadvertently given voice to society’s double standard for single men and women. Notably referring to his own gender when defining himself as strong and successful, Xander touches on the fact that society more easily accepts the idea of the “strong...
successful male” while still often viewing the solitary woman as “so sad.” In the context of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, of course, viewers have long been made conscious of the fact that women can be strong on their own. One notable (non-supernatural) example of the strong successful female on the series is Buffy’s single mother, Joyce Summers, whose identity is clearly separate from that of Buffy’s rarely seen or mentioned father. In this context then, it is clear that Anya’s failure to be “strong and successful” instead of “sad” is a result of her internalization of society’s expectations of her gender, and no actual shortcoming of her gender.

As the episode continues, Anya’s struggle for identity takes center stage. Since the breakup of her relationship with Xander, Anya has become a vengeance demon once more, but she has begun to feel remorse for committing acts of vengeance. Most recently, Anya has horrifically murdered an entire college fraternity by way of granting a brokenhearted young woman’s wish. The young woman of course regrets the wish and wants to see the act undone, and in fact, so does Anya. Anya no longer wants to hurt people, but nonetheless tries to defend her actions to Willow by reminding her that horrific scenes such as the one at the fraternity house are what vengeance demons are meant to create. Here lies the problem – as Xander states, Anya “was hurt, and she went back to what she knew” – Anya is only acting out the role of the monstrous woman because she does not see any other option.

Throughout the episode, Anya is consistently being told who she is by other characters. In a flashback scene, Anya and Olaf are both human, and it is revealed that Anya’s original name was Aud. As Aud dotes on him, Olaf tells her, “You are my perfect Aud.” Olaf’s referring to Aud as his defines her as the object, instead of the subject – she is made to be the Other. “I could not live without you,” Aud tells Olaf in a moment reminiscent of how Anya views Xander in “Triangle.” With no identity of her own, the man in Aud/Anya’s life becomes her life. Upon meeting D’Hoffryn, Aud is told by the demon: “I’m afraid you don’t know your true self. You are Anyanka.” D’Hoffryn’s naming of Anyanka brings to mind that lyric from “Once More, With Feeling!” in which Anya sings: “The name I made I’ll trade for his.” The point being that whether becoming a demon or becoming a wife, Anya is allowing herself to be identified as the Other, defined by her relationship with men. Willow stands as a counterpoint to Aud/Anya’s decision to become a demon. The powerful witch is also propositioned by D’Hoffryn, but because she has a strong sense of her own identity, Willow refuses the demon.

Throughout the episode, Anya’s willingness to accept the labels that the patriarchal society places on her are what prevent her from defining herself as an individual. “Vengeance is what I am,” she tells a fellow vengeance demon Halfrek during one flashback.

A separate flashback returns to a year prior, when Anya and Xander were still engaged and Sunnydale was under the spell that causes its citizens to sing. In the flashback, Anya’s hair and clothing suggest an exaggerated version of the idealized wife. Her hair is long and very blonde, and she wears a pink dress (that Anya did not appear this way in the original “Once More, With Feeling!” suggests that *Buffy’s* creative team made her up in this way to drive home a point). After construction worker Xander falls asleep in his chair, Anya cheerfully covers him with a blanket and tidies up the apartment. She begins to sing:

Mr. Xander Harris, that’s what he is to the world outside
That’s the name he carries with pride
I’m just lately Anya, not very much to the world I know.

All these years with nothing to show:
I’ve boned a troll; I’ve wreaked some wrath,
But on the whole I’ve had no path,
I like to bowl; I’m good with math,
But who am I? Now I reply:
I’m the missus, I will be his missus.

The song makes Anya’s problem explicit – she has consistently bent to what others have told her she is, whether it be Anyanka the vengeance demon or very nearly, Mrs. Xander Harris. During the song, Anya sings “Here comes the bride” and is instantly seen in a long white wedding gown. As she holds the final note of the song, the episode cuts to an image of Anya with a sword lodged in her chest (the result of a battle with Buffy) and a tear running down her face. It’s a sharp comment on what Anya’s lack of an individual identity has done to her.

Of course, being an immortal vengeance demon, Anya dislodges the sword from her chest and the battle over what to do about Anya, and the deaths of young men in the fraternity, continues. D’Hoffryn, Xander, and Buffy argue, and D’Hoffryn at last notes: “I’m not sure if anyone’s bothered to find out what Anyanka herself wants.” “Her name is Anya!” Xander counters, not realizing that her name was originally neither Anyanka nor Anya. Both names were taken on by the woman originally known as Aud as a means of fulfilling the stereotypical identities that were thrust upon her. Anya agrees to sacrifice herself to restore the lives of the boys, brushing aside Xander’s attempt to sacrifice himself in her place.

“Xander, you can’t help me,” Anya tells him, “I’m not even sure there’s a me to help.” The moment offers another interesting parallel between “Selfless” and “Triangle.” As in that episode, Xander stands to sacrifice himself for love, while Anya is willing to sacrifice herself because she has not found an identity of her own. The sacrifice is willingly made because Anya has no real “self.” Maliciously, D’Hoffryn sacrifices Anya’s demonic friend Halfrek in Anya’s place. “But she was yours,” Anya protests after Halfrek’s death. D’Hoffryn reminds Anya that she too was his, and the problematic language again makes explicit that Anya’s
life as a vengeance demon was a life controlled by males, by D’Hoffryn and by her obligation to punish men in a way that did not empower women.

As the episode concludes, Anya has become a mortal once again, permanently, and she may at last be ready to begin building an identity of her own. When Xander follows her out of the fraternity house, she tells Xander that she should be alone. “My whole life, I’ve just clung to whatever came along,” Anya tells him. In admitting this, Anya is at last ready to make a change, but she’s still fearful of what she might discover. A meaningful exchange with Xander follows:

Anya: Xander, what if I’m really nobody?
Xander: Don’t be a dope.
Anya: I’m a dope.
Xander: Sometimes.
Anya: That’s a start.

Anya then watches Xander walk away, and bracing herself, walks off in the other direction. At last she realizes that she must define her own identity before she can enter into a relationship with another person. De Beauvoir illuminates the issue, writing that within a couple “each individual should be integrated into society at large, where each (whether male or female) could flourish without aid,” thus the “attachments” between the couple “would be founded upon the acknowledgement that both are free” (De Beauvoir 479). Buffy expresses the same idea in another way when explaining to Angel why she isn’t ready for a relationship in the episode “Chosen.” “I’m cookie dough,” Buffy tells him, “I’m not done baking. I’m not finished becoming whoever the hell it is I’m gonna turn out to be.” Anya might have said the same thing to Xander in “Selfless.”

Anya may be the product of a patriarchal society, but she is surrounded by women who prove that there is no reason to bend to that society’s expectations. Buffy, Willow, Faith and Joyce are all women with their own talents and identities who do not rely on men to define them. There is no reason that Anya could not be the same. As Virginia Woolf admonished female readers in A Room of One’s Own, “the excuse of a lack of opportunity, training, encouragement, leisure and money no longer holds good” (Woolf 113). In Buffy’s world, and in ours, women do have the power to reject patriarchal expectations and reject the label of the Other.

As a female character whose existence has been defined by men, Anya is uniquely problematic within the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. It is clear that she did, as she says in “Selfless,” cling to whatever came along, and in her life, what came along was an identity defined by males – first Olaf, then D’Hoffryn, and then Xander. Her sex is not what has limited her, but rather her failure to reject the harmful expectations that society puts forth for her sex.

After centuries of conforming to debilitating stereotypes, Anya at last realizes that she must reject these same stereotypes and discover who she really is, despite her fears.
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