

Towards a Critique of Gender Narratives: Angela Carter's
The Passion of New Eve

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Abstract

The present article seeks to analyse and evaluate critically the gender-narrative relationship in the light of Angela Carter's famous novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Angela Carter has always believed in the change of mindset of social beings. Being visionary, prophetic and imaginative, Carter transports her readers from the unreal world of dreams and fables to the grim realities of life. The structure of 'gender' thrives on the power of 'narrative'. If say more precisely, the former is performative aspect and the latter ideological. Both to get together set in the programme of exploitation. The narratives are the very breath of 'gender'. In this sense, narrative is political. It naturalizes effectively the expected socio-cultural codes and roles stipulated for the each of 'sex'- male and female. In the novel *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter breaks down the social constructs of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by creating her own model of a woman, bisexual in nature resuscitating herself from the condemned position of a 'sinful Eve' or 'ugly Eve' to the angelic excellence of a liberated 'New Eve'.

Keywords: Gender; narrative; performativity; myth; fantasy.

Introduction

Angela Carter (1940-92) was a great English novelist and story writer. But she was not accorded due recognition and place where she really deserved. She believed in change. She found the real world inconducive for women for its grimness. She saw "immense cracks" (*Several Perceptions* 3) in the very structure of it. To evade the grim reality of the world, Carter revisits and re-narrates ancient myths, dreams and fantasies. She even boldly focussed on the female sexual disruptiveness, discontent and bad manners to endow women positive traits. Angela Carter began her writing career from the very early age as an angry young woman. She wrote a number of novels. Major of them include *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968), *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *Love* (1971), *The War of Dreams* (1972), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *Wise Children* (1991).

Need of the Study

The need for this study arises from the growing critical interest in deconstructing gender narratives and examining how literary texts challenge traditional constructs of identity, particularly in a socio-political landscape where gender roles are increasingly fluid and contested. Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is a seminal work that provocatively interrogates the binaries of gender and the societal norms that sustain them. Through its exploration of transformation, identity, and power, Carter's novel serves as a fertile ground for critiquing the cultural and ideological frameworks that define and confine gender. This study is essential to understand how Carter uses literary devices, mythological allusions, and dystopian settings to subvert patriarchal and heteronormative narratives, offering an alternative discourse on gender fluidity and performativity.

The novel's radical depiction of gender transformation and the grotesque serves as a critique of essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity, making it a pivotal text for feminist and post-structuralist inquiry. By situating *The Passion of New Eve* within contemporary debates on gender and identity politics, the study seeks to highlight its relevance in questioning the intersections of power, body politics, and societal norms. The need for this research is underscored by the text's ability to challenge readers to reconsider fixed categories of identity, providing critical insights into the constructed nature of gender. As gender discourse continues to evolve, this study not only reaffirms Carter's relevance but also contributes to broader academic and cultural conversations about identity, transformation, and liberation.

Literature Review

Akdoğan, Ş. (2021). This study explores the concept of undecidability as a feminist strategy in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Fay Weldon's *Praxis*. Both novels subvert traditional gender norms and challenge patriarchal structures by embracing ambiguity and resisting fixed interpretations of identity, power, and agency. By employing undecidability, Carter and Weldon destabilize binaries such as male/female, nature/culture, and victim/perpetrator, creating narratives that defy definitive categorization. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter critiques the rigidity of gender roles through the protagonist's radical transformation, while Weldon's *Praxis* dismantles societal expectations of women's roles across different life stages. This analysis argues that undecidability serves as a feminist strategy to disrupt hegemonic discourses, enabling a critical rethinking of identity and autonomy. By embracing fluidity and complexity, both texts offer alternative frameworks for feminist resistance and liberation.

GARCÍA, Á. L. (2019). This study examines the transformation of gender and identity in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, exploring how both texts challenge traditional notions of gender through narrative fluidity and character transformation. Woolf's *Orlando* follows a protagonist who transcends binary gender constraints across centuries, celebrating androgyny and the multiplicity of identity, while Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* critiques societal constructs of gender through the grotesque

and radical bodily transformation of its protagonist. Both works use the transformative journeys of their characters to question essentialist views of masculinity and femininity, highlighting the performative and constructed nature of gender. This analysis underscores how these texts contribute to feminist discourse by offering new understandings of identity that embrace complexity, fluidity, and liberation from rigid social norms, reshaping perspectives on gender and power.

Kirca, M., & Erkiş, S. (2023) This study explores gender performance and transitivity in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, highlighting how the novel destabilizes fixed notions of gender identity. Drawing on theories of performativity, particularly Judith Butler's concept of gender as a socially constructed performance, the analysis examines how Carter's protagonist undergoes a forced transformation from man to woman, symbolizing the fluidity and artificiality of gender roles. The novel's use of grotesque imagery and dystopian settings further critiques societal norms, exposing the power dynamics embedded in the construction of gender. Transitivity- both as a thematic and narrative device- reveals the instability of binary oppositions and underscores the transformative potential of challenging hegemonic norms. By blending myth, satire, and speculative fiction, Carter's work offers a radical feminist critique of identity, suggesting possibilities for liberation through the rejection of fixed gender binaries.

Discussion

In her novels, women are seen commonly suffering too much. Her novels are all histories of tragic women. Carter brilliantly, caters to the needs of such suffering guys. She had strong emotions of displeasure for such women. She didn't like to feel pity for them. She tries to inculcate into such women that to be a woman is not a matter of shame and disgust rather; 'it is glorious' (*The Passion of New Eve* 152). Angela Carter does not like creating mythical nonsenses to glorify women and then allow them to be subjugated by men, instead she wants to put an iron- heart and an iron-will into every woman. She touches the very quintessence of feminism when she dwells elaborately on women's construction and their liberation.

During 70s of twentieth century, essentializing and universalizing notions about sex, gender and sexuality were being focussed in England. Being inspired by Judith Butler's theory of performativity, many female activists working for female rights turned to reviewing and re-reading essentializing notions prevalent in male dominated societies. Judith Butler was to say that gender is no way related to essence instead it is to be performed and re-performed to meet the expectations of patriarchal leaders. For such thinkers, performativity constructs one's identity. They critique every text that has even slightest concern with female identity. Contrary to constructionists, essentialist feminists believe that women are women. They are possessed of unique essential features that cannot be screened off. Any amount of enculturation cannot do away with essential unique female virtues. They argue that essentiality of female is not to be felt shameful instead it is the matter of celebration. Constructionists find differences between male and female of socio-cultural origin. They do not imagine any natural intervention. They criticise essentialists because they think that

essentialists are again heading towards entrapping themselves as they were entrapped by patriarchy.

Angela Carter took steps against such tendencies and re-read several patriarchal myths to subvert prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity. Idea of Sex and gender are traditionally considered to be the same whereas the former refers to biology and the latter socially and culturally developed narratives and point of views. Likewise, sexuality is also clubbed with sex. Like gender, idea of sexuality is too socio-cultural. By the patriarchal codes, there are heterosexuality which is supported and promoted and homosexuality which is considered to be the other of the heterosexuality. Narratives of gender ascertain separate and quite distinct roles for each sex and men and women are supposed to perform those stipulated roles and activities. Patriarchy propagates heterosexuality and abnegates homosexuality. She agrees to the view of Simon De Beauvoir that 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman' (Beauvoir 273).

Angela Carter wrote *The Passion of New Eve* in 1977 after she was divorced. She wrote this novel being inspired from chaos and corruption in New York. It is a picaresque novel as the narrator Evelyn undergoes a number of risky events. Evelyn was a male chauvinist in beginning and tells the story in retrospection. It is a bitter commentary on patriarchal perceptions of masculinity and femininity. The novel was partly inspired by the Greek myth of Tiresias who was punished by the goddess Hera and consequently turned into a woman. In the novel, Carter pictures how an arrogant man, stranded in the Arizona desert, encounters sophisticated Amazons who with their advanced technology change him into a woman in order that he may experience rape and unwanted pregnancy and understand the implications of callous exploitation of women.

The story of the novel is set in New York city. Evelyn is a male British citizen and professor of English at a university in New York. At the outset of the novel, we see New York facing a number of agitations and demonstrations. A civil war was under way. The bands of women liberationists were exploding shops dealing in marriage articles. Evelyn arrives in New York to serve a university in such a chaotic atmosphere.

Evelyn was a great admirer of Tristessa, the old Hollywood movie heroine. He imagines New York city as 'hard, bright city' and 'a dying city'. The dying city is possessed by blacks, radical women and numberless rats. Here, he encounters a black American prostitute named Leilah. Evelyn had savage desires of rape. His rape instincts were awakened at the mere flash of Leilah's body. Evelyn sexually abuses her very much and gets tired when he comes to know that Leilah has conceived. He leaves her a hospital to her fate. He flees off the city to a desert in his car in search of fresh atmosphere. The Arizona was the most arid desert and it was inhabited by Mother, an expert in plastic surgery.

In the desert, Evelyn is caught by a woman Sophia, the woman soldier of Mother and is taken to Beulah, a society of Amazons. The emblem of the society is a broken phallus. Mother is the living goddess and surgeon of the society. She has artificially grown multiple breasts. She rapes and castrates Evelyn and preserves his sperm and thereafter operates on

him and removes genitals and implants fully operational vagina, augmented breasts and ovaries. In this way, Mother transforms him into a woman known as New Eve, a biological woman. The change of a man into a woman seems to be complete however New Eve seems to be struggling with new womanly behaviours. New Eve had yet to learn them. When Mother plans to impregnate Eve with the sperm of Evelyn collected before the rape and castration, Eve escapes into the desert but falls prey to Zero, a cruel one eyed and one leg poet. Zero is a male sex-monster. He is a misogynist and keeps a harem of seven wives. Eve was his eighth wife. She was unceremoniously and brutally raped by him to make her realise the extremity of women exploitation and oppression. As Evelyn had treated Leilah so Zero treated New Eve. However, Zero was more savage and brutal than Evelyn. New Eve recalls the humiliating occasion she was raped by Zero who was passionate about making a display of his phallic power:

He [Zero] raped me [New Eve] unceremoniously in the sand in front of his ranch-house after he dragged me from the helicopter, while his seven wives stood round in a circle, giggling and applauding. (*The Passion of New Eve* 73)

The way Evelyn is transformed into an absolute woman and thereafter acquirement of womanhood in the harem of Zero and learning of feminine tricks and behaviours in the guidance of fellow sisters, is the testimonial to Angela Carter's faith in the view that gender is socially-culturally constructed structure. There is no point to accept essentialist interpretation of 'gender'.

Zero wants to take Eve to Tristessa whom he hates very much for he believes that she has sterilized him. He wants to destroy the magical glass palace of Tristessa. Zero like Evelyn too was once in love with Tristessa. Zero had dreams to rape Tristessa. When Zero along with his wives arrives at her glass mansion, she was in her room surrounded by effigies in coffin made of wax. They cut the thong, Tristessa had put on to discover the real sexual identity of Tristessa. Tristessa was found a male to their utter surprise. Zero felt very frustrated and disturb to know Tristessa a male. He always has expressed his misogynistic attitude in the form of rape and brutality.

Now, Tristessa the male is asked by Zero and his wives to marry New. Tristessa opposes Zero. Zero forces them to marry. Eve in the apparel of man and Tristessa in woman got married. Thus, 'both were the bride, both the groom in this ceremony' (*The Passion of New Eve* 113). The occasion was almost like the puppet show. Tristessa kills Zero and his wives and escape with New Eve in the helicopter of Zero. For the shortage of fuel, they landed into the desert. They fell in love with each other's newly found identity. Eve gets pregnant with Tristessa. The new relationship of Tristessa and Eve verifies the stand point unquestioningly that 'gender' is socio-cultural issue. There is no essence. It is to performed only. It is manufactured and sustained through narratives that is 'gendered stylization of body' (Butler 45).

Tristessa is caught by a band of boy-soldiers in the desert. They shoot him down but releases New Eve. New Eve leaves the desert but meets Leilah in the city as Lilith a leader of

vagabonds in California. Lilith once again wants to take Eve to Mother for bringing her back into the former self- masculine but New Eve who is pregnant does not like the transfer and wants to start a new life having cast off former male arrogance. In the process of unmasking symbols of femininity created by the male desires, Angela Carter seems to be belonging to negative feminist school of thought (Ricarda Schimdt 64). The way she demythologizes patriarchy, many critics found unsatisfactory. Robert Clark opines, “Carter’s insight into the patriarchal construction of femininity has a way of being her blindness: her writing is often a feminism in male chauvinist drag...” (Clark 158).

Conclusion

To the conclusion, the character of Evelyn/New Eve that Angela Carter drew is to deconstruct the essential notions of gender. The “gender identity of masculinity and femininity are based on performance, not with social and cultural tags” (Raj Kishor Singh 162). Angela Carter thus in the novel made an attempt at proving the point of view that masculinity and femininity both are subjected to performativity. Tristessa who was taken for a glamorous heroine of Hollywood and an object and target of many masculinists such as Zero, Evelyn etc. turns out to be a male. In this way, we see Evelyn and Tristessa changing their gender roles. The latter who had been a female in male gaze ultimately returns to the genuine self but the former was happy with the transformed self. In the novel, Angela Carter emerges as a feminist under certain conditions. She revisits many Biblical stories to prove her belief that there is no difference between divine and mortal powers.

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