

## Gender Subversion in Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve

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### Abstract

*The main purpose of this article is to substantiate the issue of gender roles in Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve. The main character "Evelyn" possesses the diverse sexual orientations both as Evelyn-male and Eve-female in the same body. Yet the issue remains on his/ her gender anxiety and identity crisis. The diverse sexual orientations blur the normative parameters of gender. That's why; the novel centralizes on crisis of gender anxiety and identity. The narrative exposes out by blending the dynamics of cultural and social myth. It limits modern-day society by subverting and examining the social formation of gender roles. Besides, this article exposes the dichotomy of heterosexism and homophobia that create segregation, prejudice, and fear in the society. To examine these issues, this article follows the paradigm of qualitative research with the theoretical lens of gender subversion and construction.*

**Keywords:** *gender, homophobia, identity crisis, misogynist, sex, subversion*

### Introduction

This article examines crisis of gender identity in Angela Carter's novel The Passion of New Eve. The novel focuses on the issue of feminism and subversion of gender roles. The novel is located in the dystopian world. It has point of the departure from usual narratives of traditional fictions. The main character, Eve, performs the diverse gender roles of both male and female. S/he is both a male and female. So, s/he narrates the different feelings and emotions of the same body. These shifting identities of sex and gender-related issues in novel demand a discussion on the social construction of femininity and gender roles. It becomes skeptic on the imposition of power that shapes personal identities. This reveals that the world has people who do

not only possess a penis or vagina, but also they have the aptitude of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI). To centralize these aspects, Carter aims to show gender construction, its deconstruction, and subversion. In this regard, this novel breaks linearity in its sequence of plot and narration, giving rise to the subversion of sex, marriage, life, and death. It ruptures the heterosexual normativity by delineating the characters like Evelyn (both male and female), Tristessa (a transgender woman), and mother who transplants female organ in Evelyn. Thus, it has destabilized the normative value of the real and linear world. The narrator has been lost and trapped in between his past identities as a male, and is unable to cope with his existing identity as a female.

For Angela Carter, gender is not biological; rather a social constructed aspect. Angela Carter is criticizing this gender issue by projecting characters like Zero, Evelyn, Mother (goddess figure) Tristessa, and Leilah. Carter gives touch of novelty to these characters to criticize heterosexual established normativity about the gender roles. The novelist breaks the border line between superiority of male and inferiority of female. The *Passion of New Eve* in this point raises the question about the performance of gender. Rachel Carroll views the novel as the representation of second wave feminism. It preoccupies the gender construction as an ideological characteristic (241). This regards the novel as the replica of gender issue. However, the issue is graver than Carroll has guessed. Maria Aline Seabra Ferreira views the novel as “a feminist debate on the social construction of power, gender and femininity” (3). It involves the experiences of Evelyn, a misogynist, who at first begins the novel as a man, but ends it as a woman after the change in sex. The title of the novel bears the value because it signifies the creation of a new Eve (new woman). This creation radiates the pain and suffering of the main character. To tell the story, Carter exploits a biblical myth that tells the creation of Adam and Eve. However, she intends to demythologize the original myth as she is convinced that all myths are the outcomes of minds rooted in patriarchal culture. Rajaram S. Zirange also highlights that this novel represents the tendencies of feminism during 1970s. It projects the mode of gender acquisition and identity (2). In this sense too, the novel bears the overtones of gender subversion.

L.B. Mittleman vies the novel in a different way. She believes the novel reveals the vengeance and extremity of sex in the love (294) because there is the union of two females—Eve and Tristessa. The revelation of the union between two females is the way of criticizing heterosexual normativity that raises the question upon the roles of gender. Alireza Farahbaksh and Sadaf Dejalood divide Evelyn’s

gender transformation under two major titles “Evelyn, the Possessor of Power and Sex Offender” and “Evelyn/Eve, the Powerless and Abject Sex” (31). The first title refers to the masculinity of Evelyn before he has been transformed into a woman. The later one signifies Evelyn’s life of gender transmission. It is a life of a misogynist who lacks affinity for the feminine sex and so is forced to become a female. In this aspect, the novel blurs the distinction between characters to rupture the social normative values. The novel, in this sense, demythologizes patriarchal hierarchy to criticize heterosexual normativity that centralizes manhood by marginalizing female. Lenora Ledwon consolidates that the novel is essentialism of the ideas of gender construction (26). These issues attract a discussion, examination, and exposition in the novel.

The *Passion of New Eve* breaks established practices of novelistic discourse, regarding the issues of sex, body, marriage, gender, and death and so blurs the boundary line between fiction and science, fantasy and reality. So, this paper investigates on how the gender identity of the main character (Evelyn\Eve) is constructed? What is the presentation of a subversive performance of gender?

### **Methodology**

The present study applies the paradigm of qualitative because “postmodernism have argued that the era of big narratives and theories is over” (Flick 22). The pluralization and situational debates are favoured. In this aspect, the study explores the issue of gender subversion in Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* as the new social issue because according to Creswell qualitative approach explores the social problem (4). The evidences regarding the gender subversion by the protagonist (Evelyn\Eve) in *Passion of the New Eve* have become sources of primary concepts. Theory of gender has become the perspective to reveal these issues. Related criticism, reviews have been considered as the sources of secondary data to explore the new concept of gender subversion while analyzing from the lens of Judith Butler and gender perspective.

### **Subversion of Evelyn into New Eve**

When Tristessa and Eve take a helicopter to escape, it unfortunately dives towards the desert. They find themselves in a confusing situation. Even they spend the night in the desert, making love to each other. When dawn breaks, they are separated as Tristessa and Eve are handcuffed by an army of children. They beat Tristessa in her knees and then cut her hair. Tristessa laughs mockingly. So, one of the officers shoots her and she dies on the spots. Eve, on the other hand, stays with the rest of the soldiers. She suffers from grief of Tristessa’s death. Eve ceases to be afraid of

the band of army because she starts experiencing something unique about maternal feelings for those children. At night, the Colonel of the band of army children comes to Eve's sleeping bag, and seeks for comfort. He solaces himself to sleep. Eve comes out of the tent because she plans to get to Tristessa's grave and dies there. This shows that she is more and more violently interpolated as a feminine subject. However, Eve leaves her desire to die at Tristessa's side. Eve runs from the desert to an abandoned highway. There, she meets Leilah and they talk about what has happened since they last meet each other. In their talk, Eve rejects Evelyn and her past. He even wants to remember the day of sexual relation between them. Now after being a woman, Eve has realized how horrible Evelyn was. Evelyn as the Eve in the past she did not want to fall in love with a woman and became misogynist. So, he was not a male in this sense. Butler claims, "Sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect or express sex" (142). Butler suggests the action and gender requires a performance is repeated through character. Evelyn fails to perform this role. Doesn't this break the normative value of sex and gender? Of course, it does. Evelyn details his experiences while having of being a misogynist. He explains:

Just before she touched me, just as she touched me with the enameled blades of her fingertips, just as I crossed the filthy threshold of that gaunt, lightless, vertical, extinguished apartment block . . . my senses were eclipsed in absolute panic . . . I felt all the ghastly attraction of the fall. Like a man upon a precipice, irresistibly lured by gravity, I succumbed at once. I took the quickest way down, I plunged. I could not resist the impulsion of vertigo. (24-25).

He is biased with his superiority of misogynistic sex thoughts. So, he acts according to his perceptions. He does not just establish physical relation with her. He also punishes her after the relationship. For him, women are not more than a body of flesh.

Despite his misogynistic character, he is forced to bow down in front of Mother at Beulah, and is raped by Mother. He does not get any pleasure when Mother rapes him. After the gender transformation, "he" fails to perceive the feelings of becoming "she." He expresses his feeling, "Waking just before she tore the orgasm from me, I would, in my astonishment, remember the myth of the succubus, the devils in female form that come by night to seduce the saints. Then, to punish her for scaring me so, I would tie her to the iron bed with my belt" (27). What is he then? His gender cannot understand the gender. After that, he becomes unfit to find out his existence in the women's world.

Eve as a woman cannot get enjoyment from Zero's rape. Instead of realizing

and perceiving the feelings of "she" as Eve, she remembers the previous feelings of "he" as Evelyn. It shows how rude, egoistic, and misogynistic he was in Zero's face! Eve's situation matches with matches Butler's definition:

If gender differentiation follows upon the incest taboo and the prior taboo on homosexuality, then "becoming" a gender is a laborious process of becoming naturalized, which requires a differentiation of bodily pleasures and parts on the basis of gendered meanings. Pleasures are said to reside in the penis, the vagina, and the breasts or to emanate from them, but such descriptions correspond to a body which has already been constructed or naturalized as gender-specific. (70)

One cannot enjoy just simply by the connection of body. Evelyn has undergone through this situation while having physical relationship with Mother and after being Eve with Zero. In both cases, while being a male and female, s\he cannot enjoy the sex. Butler describes this situation by analyzing Beauvoir because "being sexed and being human are coextensive and simultaneous; sex is an analytic attribute of the human; there is no human who is not sexed; sex qualifies the human as a necessary attribute" (111). Eve/Evelyn fails to secure his/ her position in the world. Eve has lost her real identity and just is trying to figure out that. At last, she realizes the genuine feelings of sex with Tristessa being in the veil of womanhood. Only at that point, she gets maximum pleasure. As a man, Evelyn got the pleasure of sex with Leilah, and he received the equal pleasure as a woman with Tristessa. But, during the process of male and female, he just proved to be the victim of rape as a male and female by Mother and Zero. At this juncture, Carroll delineates that the novel centralizes on the issue of gender crossing that anticipates the issue of queer theory (241). It focuses on the dichotomy between privileged and marginalized groups.

As a woman, Eve enjoys love. She observes, "the destination of all journey is their beginning" (186). It presupposes that she will resurrect as a man. These experiences open the ways to realize how women feel regarding the behavior of men. The New Eve will inscribe historicity, and will re-define the notion of femininity because she embodies both masculine and feminine attributes in the body. It justifies Butler's idea that "sex is immutably factice, but gender acquired, and whereas sex cannot be changed-or so she thought-gender is the variable cultural construction of sex" (111). In this way, Carter's female characters transcend the parameters of history and normative value of gender construction. They fly in the new paradigm of gender construction and experience.

The women plan to convert Evelyn into a woman. They also plan to impregnate him with his own sperm. When he is courted to the mother's room, he is raped

by Mother. What a wonderful case that a male is raped by a female in the presence of other women! This raping incident breaks the normal course of sexual intercourse. A man is helplessly adjusting with his own rape in the presence of other women.

Mother has changed the existing gender notion by subverting it. It breaks the heterosexual normativity. Evelyn elaborates:

Her flesh seemed to me molten, burning. I caught one glimpse of her gaping vagina as I went down; it looked like the crater of a volcano on the point of eruption. Her head reared up to kiss me and, for a hallucinatory instant, I thought I saw the sun in her mouth so that I was momentarily blinded and retain no memory of the texture of her tongue, although it seemed to be the size of a sodden bath towel. Then her Virginia-smoked ham of a fist grasped my shrinking sex; when it went all the way in, Mother howled and so did I. (64)

The scene, in a real sense, falls in the domain of raping a woman by man. However, there is just the opposite as a man is explaining how he is being raped by a woman. The heterosexual prejudice against the homosexuality has been completely dismantled here. Crater breaks the tendency of homophobia which “means dislike or prejudice against non-heterosexual people. . . . Homophobia is rooted in people’s irrational fear about non-heterosexual behavior, and lack of information about non-heterosexual people”(Bhattarai et al. 505). He performed the sexual act like a man, after that Evelyn undergoes the operation of change in sex.

After the sexual transformation, Evelyn is renamed as Eve. Eve is then guided to watch films and paintings that might teach and help her how to be a woman. He is unable to accept himself as “she”. Although they have transformed his gender and body, his mind remains untouched and unaffected. He says, “They had turned me into the Playboy centerfold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my head. I had become my masturbatory fantasy. And – how can I put it – the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (75). He has created confusion because he is living within that confusion.

His role as a male has been transformed into the role of a female as he is adjusting to become a woman. Physical transformation is not only enough to become a woman. To become a total and whole woman, one should feel all emotions in reality. One should realize womanhood. In Butler’s point of view, “Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender” (22). This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relationship between sex, gender, and desire. It clarifies that desire reflects or



expresses gender and vice versa. Sex determines the gender role.

### Conclusion

Carter has projected various characters to bridge the status of women in the novel and the society. She shows the stereotypical replica of femininity and gender identities. She subverts and transforms the gender roles in the fiction. The novel discusses about the socially constructed gender roles within the framework that gender performance bases on the domain of the sex. By subverting the sex/gender issues and roles, she has centralized a new debate in this part. The case of gender transformation in *The Passion of New Eve* poses a process of gender acquisition. It also reveals how a person can acquire and adjust to become a woman. It shows the rejection and subverting of innate gender identity. It unveils the journey of young a man, Evelyn, transforming from a powerful man to a powerless woman, Eve. The novel shows concepts of gender identities and identity crisis that follow the transformation in gender roles. Evelyn faces various characters that have some inclinations in his changes. Evelyn is a single person. Interestingly, he faces four different gender experiences. Firstly, as misogynistic man who enjoys the suffering of a girl. Secondly, he faces gender experience as a helpless man who is seduced by a woman. Thirdly, he acts as a powerless woman raped by a misogynistic man. Finally, he faces the gender transformation as a complete woman who enjoys the natural sex with a man and becomes pregnant. By projecting such transformations, the novel has constructed, deconstructed, diverted, and subverted the entire gender experiences and discourse by breaking the traditional normativity of gender notions. Likewise, *New Eve* also stands for centralizing the elements of oppositions between male and female. She reveals that existence of gender is the psychological and sociological categories of masculinity and femininity that opposes the biological maleness and femaleness. The “gendering” of a person is an arbitrary process; it is just cultural and social. In this regard, the problem of subversion and gender roles becomes crucial in *The Passion of New Eve*. In the construction of gender, patriarchal hegemony makes a clear dichotomy between the sexual orientation that a male generally prefers sex and construct gender to marginalize the female. However, Carter ruptures this concept of natural gender identity. By showing the issue of gender subversion, the novel expands a new debate on the idea that gender is the aspect that depends on performance, and is not fixed. This idea clearly dominates the paradigm of gender subversion in different relations of the protagonist as s|he show his\her gender experiences in different contexts.

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