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# OLYMPIAN MYTH AND GENDER PERFORMITIVITY IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE*

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## **Abstract**

*The Passion of New Eve is an Angela Carter's critical response to the essentialism of the feminism of 1970s. People had assumption that female experience should be white, middle-class and heterosexual. This assumption has been distorted in the novel with the sense that, traditionally, gender is a social and cultural construct, and this has been illustrated in the story by showing how New Eve acquires womanhood through the socio-cultural situation in Zero's harem and also while Eve is in love relationship with Tristessa. In her novel, Carter presents Evelyn as a model of gender transfer and acquisition. Greek myth and Carter's myth have a good blending meta-narrative relationship, a mytho-grand-narrative. Mother is a good example of the Greek myth of Tiresias, a Hermaphrodite. Mother's hermaphrodite body is used as a grotesque and Carnavalesque body similar to that of Tiresias. Evelyn feels horror at the grotesque and Carnavalesque, physical excesses of the body figure of Mother and expresses revulsion at the sight, but later he himself is turned into a mythic and monstrous being, like Greek god Androgynes, with both male and female physical and psychical features, and in case of Evelyn, with the body of a female but the mind of a man. Angela Carter presents a grotesque realism in the novel, and it is postmodernistic in characteristic because it subverts the patriarchal myths of femininity and masculinity and makes a strong debatable argument over essentializing and universalizing tendencies in the feminism of the 1970s, with the allusions to Greek myths and the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The novel confirms de Beauvoir's theory that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. Through New Eve, we learn the postmodernistic fact raised by the feminists that biological sex and culturally determined gendered one are not the same, but two different things.*

**Keywords:** *Olympian Myth, Performativity, Masculinity and Feminism, Ontology*

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## **Introduction**

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is a severe and horrible satire, a meta-narrative, on gender issues- masculinity and feminism. The man, Evelyn, goes through the process of experiencing feministic conditions of life after being changed into a woman with magical surgery. The novel consists of reversal of the biblical story of Adam and Eve, and the story has been deconstructed and defamiliarised in such a way that readers indulge themselves in much pleasure. Postmodernistic sense of distorted masculine and feminine thoughts becomes equivalent with the distorted positions of Greek gods and goddesses. Man becomes a woman and woman exposes to

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be a man and they are rationalized in their new roles with consumption of love and sex in the course of subversion of sex identity. Carter evaluates both gender issues and concludes and confirms de Beauvoir's theory that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. Patriarchal societies are stereotyped and give identity of man and woman by the social and cultural values. They often rationalize their misogynistic tendencies through their scriptures; perhaps most notably we can find such rationalization in the Greek, Hindu, Hebrew and Holy Bibles, and Quran.

## Olympian Myths

Magical and fantastic masculine and feminine roles of gods and goddesses are often reported from the Mount Olympus. Inhabitants of Mount Olympus, i.e. the Olympian gods and goddesses, are cruel and fickle, passionate and vindictive, jealous and insecure, petty and insane (Richard Pallardy). By these gods and goddesses, the ancient Greeks explained the chaos of the universe through human nature. Thus, every god or goddess, invented before and since, presents human characteristics; these gods and goddesses are embodiments of human solipsism, showing self-centeredness and self-existence. There are many stories, myths, of their battles, bickering, and sexual conquests and these myths have indelibly influenced the course of Western literature. *The Passion of New Eve* is also part of the continuation of making gods and goddesses like those of Greek, Roman, Hebraic, etc., but with some postmodernistic differences, with satire on human genders as well as divine genders, satire on humanity as well as divinity.

As the Greek myths say, Aphrodite is the goddess of love, sex, and beauty (*Aphrodite or Venus* p1). Though she is a love goddess, she is said to have born from the foam generated from the severed testicles of her father, Uranus. These testicles were thrown into the sea by Uranus's son, the Titan Cronus. New forms were invented magically with mystical power. Such magical creation is shown in the novel – Evelyn is changed into New Eve, man is transformed into woman by Mother, a self-stylised goddess. In painting *Birth of Venus*, Botticelli depicts Aphrodite's Roman counterpart Venus emerged from the waves. The underworld God Hades kidnapped Persephone to make her his bride. Eve falls in trap of Zero, who marries her, eighth wife of the misogynist. The queen goddess of Olympus, Hera, was both sister and wife to Zeus (66). Evelyn is to give birth to a child from his own sperm through Eve- father and mother being the same person. In myths, the queen goddess of Olympus, Hera is often depicted as reserved and austere, but she is mercilessly vindictive when it comes to her husband's [many] extramarital adventures. Unfortunately, for the objects of Zeus's godly affections, Hera torments the "other women" and of course also their offspring, for example Heracles. She does not torment Zeus but others. Evelyn torments Leilah, by consisting sex pleasure, but later, in turn, Eve, in feminine status of the man Evelyn, gets consistent raping from the misogynist Zero. With the help of Hades and Poseidon, Zeus overthrew his father, Cronus, king of the Titans, and he became the chief god in the Olympus. He became king god among the Olympian gods and goddesses, mostly his siblings and children. The myths report that Zeus was notorious for his infidelity to his sister-wife, Hera. Zeus was involved in sensual pleasure not only with goddesses but also comely mortal women like Helen of Troy. The criminal chief Zero enjoys sex, having eight wives, including Eve, and it suggests that there is no difference between divine power and mortal power.

While the goddess of love, Aphrodite, is not identified prominently as lesbian herself, the Greek poet Sappho has mentioned many homoerotic tales of this goddess. She named Aphrodite as

the greatest patron and ally of lesbians and homosexuals within the Greek pantheon of gods (*Hymn to Aphrodite* line 5-20). Mother from the feminine city of Beulah and Aphrodite from the Olympia are not the same in this sense but they are patrons of their empire. Myths say that, the twin sister to Apollo, **Artemis** the goddess was a nearly asexual virgin or a lesbian and she had many nymph lovers, including Cyrene, Atalanta, Anticleia and also moon goddess Dictynna (Sappho Fragments 5-8). It is also said that **Artemis** was Callisto's lover before the nymph Callisto was raped by Zeus in disguise of Artemis. Lesbian and gay devotees worshipped her as Artemis Orthia, and that lesbian port Pamphilia referred to the goddess in hymn as Artemis Pergaea. Lesbian issues are not raised in the novel and all the situations are after all heterosexual (Evelyn- Leilah, Mother-Evelyn, Zero-Eve, Tristessa-Eve), but characters of gods and goddesses can be realized with the sense of human solipsism.

According to the Greek myth, the intersex person **Hermaphroditus** was the child of Hermes and love goddess Aphrodite. The youth **Hermaphroditus** was seduced by the nymph Naiad Salmacis, and she asked the gods that their forms should be permanently joined. **Hermaphroditus's body** was merged with that of the Naiad Salmacis and the creature formed was of half male and half female. The creature is often presented as a figure with womanly breasts but with male genitalia (25-26).

Hesiod writes that the blind prophet of Apollo, Teiresias, was a most famous character in Greek myth. Zeus transformed him into a female role for seven years. During this period, Teiresias worked as a priestess of Hera. He got married, and even he had children. Teiresias was first and very original mythic transgender character. After he came back to his male form, Zeus asked him- who enjoyed sex more, men or women? Teiresias said that the women had it roughly 10 times better than the men. As he reported this to Zeus, he was blinded by Hera. The amount of agency and power awarded to women in Greek myth is disputed. The women of Greek mythology are often described with a host of negative emotions: anger, jealousy, promiscuity, and even male subversion (Hesiod, Fragment 3).

Among Olympian inhabitants, both gods and goddesses are largely colored with the words of "rape," "murder," and "possession." Greek myth shows the instability of family relationships among the inhabitants of the Olympians: men can kill fathers, siblings can rival, and wives can cheat on their husbands. Married couples are ill-matched and deceptive. Sex relationship is without fair consent. Beautiful women are married to apparently ugly men. The beautiful, love goddess Aphrodite got married to the lame craftsman god Hephaestus. She did not accept her fate; rather she built a new family within the old — with Ares. Homer mentions in *The Odyssey* (Book 8.299–410) that they begot children, including Phobos (Fear), Eros, and Harmonia.

Similar family situation is with Hera and Zeus. Both are not fair in dealings with each other. The goddess Hera is responsible for her family, but paradoxically she is never happy in her own marriage. She often tricks her husband, Zeus, in order to receive sexual attention (*The Iliad* Book 14). Her husband also plays tricks with her without any remorse. They do not have a healthy marriage; they always have a row. It suggests that even gods and goddesses are not happy in their family life. Naturally, we cannot expect good from them because, like human beings, anger, jealousy, promiscuity, male subversion, rape, murder, possession, sex craze, etc. were common features among the Olympian inhabitants.

In Greek mythology, lust is exhibited in both genders: lust in Aphrodite and Ares, era and Zeus, Hermes and Aphrodite, **Hermaphroditus** and nymph Naiad Salmacis, etc. Indeed, one of the children of Aphrodite and Ares is Eros (Lust) and the same is, in Roman myth, Cupid, who is known for shooting morals and immortals alike with a fiery passion of love and sex.

### **Mythic, Surrealistic Atmosphere in *The Passion of New Eve***

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter represents the same kind of mythic, surrealistic atmosphere of the Olympians. The novel begins with very lurid description of New York in turmoil: the Blacks are in revolt; the gangs of women liberationists are blowing up wedding shops; the most arid desert, matriarchal kingdom, is inhabited by Mother, who is like a science-fictional character Dr. Hoffman, presented in Carter's novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972); Zero, is a male-monster; and finally there is an exquisite glass-house of the beautiful transvestite Tristessa, who is a screen-goddess of Hollywood. *The Passion of New Eve* is a psychological excursion of the protagonist through the weirdest experience of sex change.

In her *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter says:

“... there is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioural modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals” (4).

Carter means gender is, even today, a social/cultural construct, and this has been evidentially proved in her story, showing how Eve acquires womanhood in Zero's harem, among other women who teach her feminine behaviours, in that socio-cultural situation, and also from the events in which Eve and Tristessa are in love affairs.

Buttler proposes a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame ( Preface xxxi). She says, if gender is performative, it shows that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. Thus, it shows that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures (Preface xv). It is an “act” that founds the identity as a performative accomplishment of sexuality (162).

Buttler mentions that gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (180)

In *Passion of New Eve*, Evelyn, a British citizen and professor, arrives in New York to teach in a university, but he finds himself in an American turmoil, a civil war. He has a fascination for the Hollywood heroine Tristessa, a glamorous actress. He feels sexual arousal from this fascination. He meets Boroslov, an alchemist, who presents him an ingot of gold, which Boroslov made in his domestic lab. Boroslov tells Evelyn, with ironic meaning, that ‘the age of reason is over’ (13) and this refers to the chaotic state of New York. Evelyn lives with a Black American girl, Leilah, who seduces him but he treats her very harshly. Leilah is here a male sexual fantasy, and she purposefully presents herself as desirable from the masculine point of view. She becomes pregnant but Evelyn leaves her to her fate in the hospital. Evelyn then wanders off to the desert of in his car. He is captured and abducted by the women-soldiers of ‘Mother’ from a matriarchal city of Beulah. Mother, like Greek Artemis, has made herself artificially a many-breasted goddess. She has a grotesque body. She rapes Evelyn and preserves his sperm for fertilizing New Eve, transgendered from Evelyn, turned into New Eve by an elaborate and magical surgical operation by Mother.

New Eve next falls in the trap of Zero, a misogynist, who has a harem of seven wives, and New Eve becomes his eighth wife. Zero repeatedly rapes New Eve while his other wives teach her the feminine ways of behaviour. Zero also has a revengeful fascination for Tristessa who goes to destroy her glass-house. Zero and his people, to their surprise discover Tristessa actually to be a man only masquerading as a woman. In anger, Zero puts New Eve in a man; dress and gets Tristessa married with her. Tristessa protests Zero for the forced marriage but Zero compels both Tristessa and Eve, Eve in dress of man and Tristessa in woman: “So he made us man and wife although it was a double wedding ... both were the bride, both the groom in this ceremony” (113). This marriage ceremony looks like a puppet show with man and woman in reversed positions.

Tristessa destroys Zero and his people and escape with New Eve in Zero’s helicopter. They are further captured by the boy-soldiers, who kill Tristessa but release New Eve. New Eve meets Leilah in the city, who is now called Lilith, who is acting as a part of the militia. She has no grudge against New Eve. Rather she exposes the truth of her role and plan of migrating Evelyn to the desert, to Beulah and his transformation. New Eve, who is now pregnant, takes a boat from the seashore and goes back to start a new life. She does not wish to transfer herself to her earlier gender- man.

## Sex/Phallic Imagery

The story has rape scenes reversed. The novel displays the female body as the site of interaction. Excited by “savage desire” (22), Evelyn is immediately enticed by Leilah’s body and his own rapist instincts are also awakened by such an intensive display of female flesh:

I was nothing but cock and I dropped down upon her like, I suppose, a bird of prey... My full-fleshed and voracious beak tore open the poisoned wound of love between her thighs. (23)

Probably, this savage desire of rape is again in Zero’s harem, but this time in opposite way- Eve as a woman and Zero as a masculine power. Zero repeatedly rapes and tortures Eve in the same way as he did in the case of Leilah. Eve details:

He raped me 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. (73)

Eve received the treatment worse than that Evelyn had done with Leilah. Zero was much more savage than Evelyn, because Eve describes Zero's phallic power similar to "the vandals attacking Rome".

He entered me like the vandals attacking Rome. (78)

The misogynist, savage rapist Zero shows his brutality not only during the rape but also before and after that, with his masculine physical power.

Zero flung me to the floor and took me from the rear, in the anal orifice, with extraordinary brutality, to show me how much he despised me, the pig lover. (115)

Zero has severe dislike towards women and that is expressed from rape and brutality. When transvestite Tristessa is discovered to be a male and Zero cannot satisfy his sex desire, Zero is mad, very disturbed, and wishes to destroy Tristessa and her glass-house house. Zero's fear and suspicion of the female body were always presented in the form of rape and other forms of physical humiliation.

## Performativity of a Gender

In her *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273). Angela Carter, like Simone de Beauvoir, believes on performativity of a gender. Essentially and naturally, gender identity of masculinity and femininity are based on performance, not with social and cultural tags. Angela Carter possibly makes distinction between bodily sex and gender. For her, gender acquisition is a part of performativity, like an actor playing a role. Evelyn, a man, is surgically and magically transformed into New Eve, a woman, psychologically still Evelyn, only by body a female. Evelyn and Mother both know about the transfer of the gender. However, it is also known to them that Eve is not complete woman because mind is of a man yet. Man or woman cannot be complete by just bringing about a change in sex. Mother mutates his genitals and leaves him "with a wound that would, in future, bleed once a month, at the bidding of the moon" (61). This assumption is natural for woman, but very unnatural for a man even after mutations of his genitals because it does not say about other feminine parts, like uterus, that cause bleeding as menstruation. For literary point of view, this assumption is admirable for transgender, which the major issue of the text.

Transforming into a woman further needs social and cultural training which is processed by Mother by making her listen to old Hollywood nursery tales. Eve is exposed to all the pain that a woman experiences in life. This psychotherapy after gender surgery continues with the playing of three videotapes that consist of reproduction of a virgin and child theme. There is a sound track of "gurgling of babies and the murmuring of contented mothers" (62), which is for preparing the mind-set of New Eve to accept womanhood. Mother shows her cats with kittens, vixen with cubs and other images for that purpose. She shows her images of the horrors and tortures perpetrated on woman in the ancient Chinese and Indian communities. These are yet not enough for the gender-change, a social construct. Still she had female body but mind was of a man, of Evelyn.

Eve says, “when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself” (63). Evelyn’s conscience did not let him acknowledge this new existence, feminine role of New Eve. He was still in his “masturbatory fantasy”, but says, “the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (64).

## Myth Demythologized

Mother is a fantastic, many-breasted fertility goddess; she is like the Olympian goddess Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility. Feminine city of Beulah is dedicated to this artificial goddess. Mother tells Evelyn, “I can give life, I can accomplish miracles” (54), and her sacred miraculous powers are like those of a goddess. Evelyn is transformed into New Eve by “the Castratrix of the Phallogocentric Universe” (58) and this process is significant because it has the dissolution of hierarchical opposition between man and woman. This opposition is removed by miraculous act of the Mother. She works for artificial fertilization by the process of transgender. She rapes Evelyn and preserves the sperm for fertilization in New Eve, transformed from Evelyn by the process of mutations of his genitals. All this is a magical realism to prove Carter’s view that man and woman both should assimilate each other’s status with direct biological and sexual experiences, not with social and cultural experiences which can’t shape gender roles any way. Mother, on the path of Artemis, would live to perpetuate as a cult of femaleness. The myth of Oedipus is also worth to be mentioned here when Mother in Beulah interprets this myth in favour of matriarchy, analyzing the story as:

Oedipus wanted to live backwards. He had a sensible desire to murder his father, who dragged him from the womb in complicity with historicity. His father wanted to send little Oedipus forward on a phallic projecting ... (46)

But Oedipus stopped the phallic project and blinded himself, for walking out in search of reconciliation (46), but Mother does not wish to seek reconciliation any way. Oedipus kills his father, only to marry his mother, though unknowingly, and give birth to children, his children-brothers/sisters, through the woman, his mother-wife. Evelyn is projected to be father and also mother of his children. Father (Evelyn) will be killed (transformed) and mother (New Eve), with Evelyn’s sperm, will give birth to children. Mother wants Evelyn live backwards into mother’s womb to receive phallic projection and experience.

The Olympian myths have exemplary in other parts of the novel as well. While they are taking Evelyn through winding corridors of Beulah, deep into the earth, he finds himself like “Ariadne in the maze-mazes, spider-webs, but all progressing downwards ...” (49). Mythical characters such as Danae, Alphito, Demeter, and others in chorus sing “a strange kind of litany in the praise of the Mother-goddess” (53). With the help of the magical Olympian myths, Carter demythologized the real postmodern masculine and feminine issues, with equal weight of thoughts and story lines, suggesting the essentials that gender roles must be determined on the basis of performativity, and biological sex, not on the basis of social and cultural dimensions.

## Conclusion

Carter's *The Passion for New Eve* has many myths very common with the Olympian myths. The inhabitants of the Olympia and those of the novel have many things common, suggesting that Evelyn and Eve's stories justify the incompleteness of gods and goddesses of ancient Greek myths. Like many goddesses of the Olympia, Eve is incomplete, with mind of a man and body of a woman. As a male prototype and misogynist, Evelyn has a savage forceful intercourse with Leilah, without any concern that she was a woman and a black. As a male prototype and misogynist, Zero has the same, rather worse than that of Evelyn, with New Eve. In transgendered condition, with female gender, Evelyn, who has still a male mind or conscience, has experienced life of feminine gender. Once he has phallic experience in case of Leilah but later he has pelvic experience in case of Zero. He was a man in beginning and so he had masculine performativity. He was transgendered later and turned to be a woman, and so she (he) had now feminine performativity. Therefore, gender should be determined on the basis of performativity.

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