



Lorestan University

Faculty of Humanities

Department of English Language and Literature

**A Butlerian Study of Gender Identity Construction with Special Reference to Angela  
Carter's *The Passion of New Eve***

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in English Language and Literature

By

**Tahereh Monfared**

Supervisor

**Nozar Niazi, PhD**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, an analysis of Angela Carter's novel, *The Passion of New Eve* based on Judith Butler's theory on gender identity has been presented. The novel can be defined as a feminist debate on the social construction of femininity and gender roles. It questions the patriarchal power structures that shape people's identities. There are female characters in the novel who are the embodiment of femininity based on patriarchal notions. The analysis is based on some approaches: a presentation of several characters and their impacts on the main protagonist; an investigation of how the main character's gender identity is constructed; the presentation of a subversive performance of gender; and finally Carter's attitude towards myth. The analysis of Carter's work demonstrates that she is against the imposition of gender roles and identities by patriarchal societies. It reflects the contemporary view of gender and sexuality as constructed, complex and fluid categories.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. The Aim of the Study

The present study will explore the postmodern science fiction, *The Passion of New Eve* by Angela Carter, the contemporary British novelist, whose works have had great influence on British fiction with regards to feminism. The novel will be examined carefully within the context of feminism and in particular with theory of Judith Butler regarding gender identities and gender construction.

Angela Carter was born in 1940 and raised in Great Britain. She began publishing fiction in the mid 1960s and produced a number of innovative and challenging works such as *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Nights at the Circus*

(1984) and her last novel, *Wise Children* (1991). She published *The Passion of New Eve* in 1977 which is an exploration into the way in which gender is constructed by society.

Many British novelists in the late 1960s and 1970s were keen to engage in the feminist movement. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published her famous book *The Second Sex* which initiated the second wave feminism which is known for its women's liberation movement and women's fight for equal rights and opportunities with men as well as women's free choice. The central message of Beauvoir's book was the famous line that, "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (cited in *Gender Trouble*, 1999, 3). This claim later was adopted by Judith Butler in her work, *Gender Trouble* (1999). She proposes that "gender identity is not innate, but rather a set of behavior that all members of a culture perform" (61). Therefore gender is a performance that is constructed by the dominant patriarchal society and culture. Butler emphasizes on the instability of notions like gender, sex and sexuality and argues that these notions are the effects of institutions and discourses. She demands for "a genealogy of the category of woman", according to which feminists are required to make inquiries into how the category of woman is produced and restrained by power structures. (9)

The study of gender construction is especially important in works of feminist novelists who try to present the female characters' identity, their relationship with the male characters and the roles which are assigned to them. All of them are dictated by the patriarchal society which always regards women as inferior sex, and the ones that should be subordinated. Carter aims at representing gender construction within her works and how the female characters attempt to counter the 'inscription' of patriarchy. Carter has an anti-essentialist stance in her novels that questions the universality and essentiality of notions such as sex, gender and sexuality.



*The Passion of New Eve* is in some sense about the performance of gender. According to Erla Maria Davidsdottir (2009), the novel “is a feminist debate on the social construction of power, gender and femininity.” (3) It involves the adventure of Evelyn, a misogynist, who starts the novel as a man, but ends it through an enforced sex change as a woman. The title of the book is significant, because it refers to the creation of a new Eve or in other words, a new woman. This creation involves suffering for the main character. Carter uses a biblical myth, which is the creation of Adam and Eve, to tell her story. However, she aims at demythologizing of the original myth since she believes that all myths are the creations of human mind and are rooted in patriarchal culture.

In the course of the novel, the protagonist encounters some grotesque and influential characters that have impact on his/her transformation. This transformation is not only an act of sex change, but rather involves transformation in the protagonist’s identity and gender, suggesting that one’s identity and gender is not natural, but a cultural instruction. Such transformation changes the protagonist from a powerful misogynist (Evelyn) into a powerless female (Eve) who is the subject of oppression at the hand of one of the male characters (Zero).

There are a number of female characters in the novel who are the embodiment of traditional concept of femininity. Leilah, a black prostitute, who is the object of lust and desire for men; the other character is Mother, the leader of a female group, who represents the maternal power and is the one who castrates Evelyn, and Tristessa, the representation of an ideal and untouchable femininity. The protagonist’s confrontation with these socially constructed characters helps him/her in his/her transformation.

Angela Carter tries to present in her novel that one's gender and identity are constructed by society and our roles in society are assigned by the very society in which we live, and not the result of our nature.

This study will be an attempt to explore gender construction in Angela Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve* and how the characters within the novel may counter such construction with deploying theories of Judith Butler on gender construction.

## **1.2. Statement of Problem**

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* which heralded the second wave feminism. Her famous line "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (12) has had a great impact on many feminist novelists such as Angela Carter. This claim was later adopted by the feminist theorist, Judith Butler who claims that gender is not natural, but the product of a patriarchal society and culture. As Nick Bentley (2008) states, "Butler extends de Beauvoir's famous insight to suggest that woman is something we do rather than something we are." (10) Such claims are presented by Angela Carter in her novel *The Passion of New Eve*. The novel is about the creation of a woman and how society affects this creation. A number of characters, both female and male, are presented as well that suggest the role of society in their construction and how the society expects them to behave.

Butler claims that because our gender identity is constructed, therefore it is possible to reconstruct it and to subvert the existing power structure.

This project will explore the role of power structure in constructing gender identities, how individuals are expected to behave according to society and how they can question, trouble and subvert such structure that support gender hierarchy within the novel.

### **1.3. Review of Literature**

*The Passion of New Eve* was published in 1977 by Angela Carter in which her presentation of sexuality and the relationship between men and women attracted criticism from some feminists.

According to Nick Bentley(2008), “ the period since the second world war has seen a paradigm shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality...*The Passion of New Eve* is an innovative and experimental exploration into the way in which gender is constructed in contemporary society”( 96).

The publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and the famous line that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”, laid the foundations for much of the feminist theory during the 1960s in Europe and America. Many feminist novelists were keen to engage in feminist issues. Erla Maria Davidsdottir (2009) notes that “Carter lays a heavy emphasis on the proclamation generally associated with the twentieth century feminist Simone de Beauvoir concerning the formation of gender identity” (1).

Later Judith Butler published her most important book in the field of gender studies named *Gender Trouble* (1999). According to Butler what we call gender is not natural or innate, but a performance, “a cultural performance.” She argues that the very

category of woman is no longer stable; it is a category produced by power structures and intersects intimately with race, class, politics and culture.

Daividsdottir (2009) states that, “the work (*The Passion of New Eve*) deals with shifting identities where sex-and-gender-related issues are constantly put to question” (6). Somewhere else she claims that “Carter takes a clear standpoint with feminist such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva,; namely that to belong to a given sex is inevitable, but possessing s given gender is a learned behavior, a social construction”(29).

In her novels, Carter presents women trying to find their identities in the society, but on this way they confront many obstacles. One of the main obstacles they face is their treatment as objects. Dee Goertz (2000) notes that “Carter’s female characters are treated as objects, as things for men to look at, manipulate and possess” (213). Being an object of desire for men to enjoy and/or to possess are the roles which are assigned by society. Carter discusses these issues in her essay on the Marquis de Sade, *The Sadian Woman* (1979): “to be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case...to exist in the passive case is to die in passive case, is to be killed” (cited in the *British Women Writing Fiction*, 213).

Margaret Walters (2005) states that “*women* is always and archetypally other. She is seen by and for men, always the object and never the subject...what she represents is more important than what she is” (98). Therefore women do not have their own identity; this identity is constructed for them. They have to behave in a way that is acceptable and desired by the patriarchal society in order that the society preserves its order and stability. Jeff VanderMeer (2001) states that, “Beauty is an ephemeral and highly subjective quality. The beauty that most men desire is of the female as dependent, as

masochist submitting to the male's will; that what men find sexy is their domination of women". In the article 'The Alchemy of the Self in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (2007), Perez-Gil notes that the characters in the novel "function as material projections sprung from the patriarchal collective unconscious, which identifies the feminine with darkness, nothingness, the void, the bottomless pit and hell". These female characters are constructed by patriarchal power structures, and reflects the society's expectation of them.

In her dissertation, Fran Desmet looks at the novel as a dystopian one and indicates that "recent dystopian works have picked up on the growing interest in the position of women in society from the 1960s and 1970s onwards" (*Female Perspective in the Dystopian Novel*, 2010, 5). She also argues that the dystopian novels written by women are often "subversive, satirical and iconoclastic" (31); and the qualities she mentions are presented by Carter in her novel. She believes that "the feminist critical dystopia is not only constructed as a reaction against social and political realities, but that it also involves an element of self-criticism" (33). Indeed Carter criticizes both the patriarchal culture for the construction of stereotypical presentation of femininity, and women themselves for accepting and submitting to it.

Nicoletta Vallorani discusses the novel as a science fiction and interprets it by looking at different spaces and their significance in the protagonist's identity formation. She notes: "*The Passion of New Eve* is therefore, literally, a gender novel, in that gender is the still center of a circular journey through three sexed utopian spaces that alternately host and reject the protagonist and determine his/her physical and psychological metamorphosis" ('The Body of City: Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*', 1994). She argues that three different types of community, which are New York, Beulah and

Zero's town, are described in the novel and "each of them embedding a specific side of the female stereotype".

As Walters quotes from de Beauvoir "women have been denied full humanity, denied the human right to create, to invent, to go beyond mere living to find a meaning for life in projects of ever-widening scope"(98). The female characters in Carter's novels try to challenge the power structures and change their lives. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the main protagonist comes to know the role of society in her/his identity construction and is hopeful in creating a new woman that is not based on stereotypical assumption of gender. "Once she (Eve) is out, circumstances force her to rethink her former (male) identity and start a search for a new self...when a man embarks on the process of individuation, he needs to confront the feminine and come to terms with it" (Perez-Gil, 2007).

*The Passion of New Eve* has been discussed by Emma Pi-tai Peng from a Gothic perspective as well. She discusses "Carter's postmodern feminism and some of the recurrent Gothic motifs in her writing, such as the automaton, the monstrous feminine, the haunted house and the play of the double" ("Angela Carter's Postmodern Feminism and the Gothic Uncanny", 2004, 104).

In her book, *Lies that Tell the Truth* (2005), Anne C. Hegerfeldt examines magic realism in the contemporary British fictions including Angela Carter's. She notes:

Angela Carter speaks of the exuberance and variety of the imaginary life that characterizes the fantastic secondary reality generated by the media, and a number of critics have found that magic realism bestows a freshness upon the world by presenting it in a marvelous manner. However, there is a darker,

more distressing side to the experience as well, for magic realist fiction also presents the world as a chaotic, merciless, and inhumanely cruel place. (60)

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter depicts a dark, chaotic world in which everything is on the edge of collapse. She presents a country (the U.S) with a civil war among its inhabitants: Blacks, Mexis, Reds, Militant Lesbians and Gays. Carter comments on the historical contexts of the novel:

The novel was sparked off by a visit to the USA in 1969. It was the height of the Vietnam War, with violent public demos and piles of garbage in New York streets. If you remember, it was the year of the gay riots in Greenwich village, when they even chucked rocks; so my scenario of uprisings isn't all that far-fetched.

(*Contemporary British Fiction*, 2008, 98)

In *Dimension of Monstrosity in Contemporary Fictions*, Andrew Hock-Soon studies several contemporary fictions in which monstrous characters and spaces are introduced. He wants to demonstrate that “some narratives foreground monsters to problematize the notion of ‘reality’ constructed as the ‘Symbolic order’ – an ideological construction which largely dictates the way society and culture operate” (1). *The Passion of New Eve* is a novel with several grotesque characters and bizarre places that aims at:

Enhancing female power and countering the inscription of patriarchy... It is these encounters with such hopeful monsters that enable Eve/Evelyn to finally understand what it truly means to be emancipated from ideological construction

of any kind, whether gender, social or sexual. (169-170)

Lidia Curti (1998) finds the novel as a mixed genre and states that *The Passion of New Eve* “mixes gothic tale, metropolitan fantasy, science fiction and mythology, oneiric presentation and feminist pamphlet, all played against the sexual ambiguity” (48). She notes that Carter uses genre to help her answer questions that she is asking herself about the nature of certain styles of writing. Curti observes that “strange unfamiliar shapes, freakish bodies, disquieting forms and hybrid creatures have been creeping into women’s narratives, putting in question the frontier between foulness and loveliness, the human and the animal, me and you, female and male” (107).

Rosemary white states Angela Carter’s works “have an abiding concern with gender, sexuality and identity” (cited in *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text*, p.12). Susanne Guss (2009) claims that “ *The Passion of New Eve* is Carter’s most complex mediation on questions of gender in terms of its countless variations on the construction, fluidity and performativity of gender” (p.172)

#### **1.4. Significance of Study**

Many modern theorists have argued that western philosophy is based on binary oppositions including male/female, mind/body, subject/object, self /other and rational/irrational with the preference given to the first part, for instance in male/female category, the male is superior to the female. “Feminists challenge binary oppositions because they imply hierarchy, since hierarchies imply control or dominance” cited in the *Encyclopedia of feminist literary theory*, p.45). Such categories are viewed as cultural and ideological constructions.



The claim that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman” by Simone de Beauvoir was highly deployed by feminist novelists in the following years including Angela Carter, A.S Byatt, Dorris Lessing and the others.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) asserts that “feminist critique should analyze how category of women is produced and restrained by power structure, rather than looking to those power structures for emancipation.”(p.2)

Throughout history, women have always been denied of their rights and considered as the inferior sex. They have always been viewed and analyzed by men and labeled as the second sex, the other. Around the world, feminist movements have been trying to change the general conditions of women’s life, to make it better by giving awareness to women to know their potentialities better, to make their own destiny and to increase possibilities for a livable life.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how the category of “women” is produced within Carter’s novel *The Passion of New Eve*, and how the main character can challenge the forced construction of her identity.

According to Butler, although gender identity is constructed by society, it is possible to subvert the power structure. The protagonist in the novel is ultimately able to create a new identity for herself, to create a new Eve or in other words, a new woman.

### **1.5. Methodology**

The model which will be focused on my study is that of Judith Butler’s concept of gender identity as a performative act which is the effect of social construction, particularly a patriarchal society. By performative she means that there is no subject or

doer behind the deed, rather it is “the political motivations that assign origins and fixed identities to the categories of gender and sexuality.”(*Modern Literary Criticism and Theory*, p.142) Therefore “woman” or in general, gender is not a fixed category; it is the product of power structure.

Butler’s two famous books; *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) deal with these concepts and will be used fully in this study. Butler in her *Gender Trouble* claims that, “one is a woman to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame.”(xi) Individuals behave in a way that society considers acceptable for them. Although Butler asserts that gender is socially constructed, she also insists that it is possible to subvert such construction.

Other sources of research such as books, articles, papers from either libraries or internet will be used in this thesis.

The focus of this study will be the construction of women’s identity in society and how one can counter such construction and therefore annihilate it. Examples are brought from Angela Carter’s novel *The Passion of New Eve* who has beautifully presented such claims.

## **1.6. Thesis Organization**

The dissertation will consist of five chapters. The first chapter will be an introduction of my study in which I will give a general synopsis of my project and state my problem and its significance. Literature review and methodology will be presented in this chapter as well.

The second chapter will be dealt with theoretical concepts of Judith Butler on gender studies, particularly the social construction of femininity, power and gender roles.

The third chapter will cover Angela Carter's biography, her works and a summary of her novel, *The Passion of New Eve*.

In the fourth chapter the theoretical concepts of Judith Butler on gender construction will be applied to the novel.

In conclusion, I will discuss how effectively Carter deals with the cultural and social construction of sex and gender.

## CHAPTER II

### THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### 2.1. Woman as the subject of feminism

Feminism has greatly influenced and challenged the way literary works are read, taught or evaluated. Although there is a plurality of feminism rather than a single one and that there is disagreement among feminists about the aim of feminism, all feminists have the same belief that women all over the world are disadvantaged, treated as the second sex and considered as inferior to men. Still worse is the assumption that such disadvantages are taken as the result of women's biology and nature. For instance Aristotle said: "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualifications; we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness" (*Beyond the Second Sex*, 1990, 3). What the feminists are committed to do is to challenge and change the status quo of women. Alison Stone (2007) states that