SHARP ANSWERS, SKIN-DEEP SCARS IN *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE (1977)*

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Abstract

Angela Carter has been fascinated with the 'bloody' way the female body has been scripted by culture as a corporeal-textual site for gender identity. Her attack on women's discourse of self-victimization, her depiction of violent sexualrelationships and of femalesexuality as either deadly or monstrouslyvoracious, all indicate affinities with the Gothic. This study focuses on the violence of identity construction, in relation to the main character of the novel **The Passion of New Eve (1977)**, who has to turn from man into woman in order to reach a deep understanding of selfhood.

Keywords: womanhood, journey, sexuality, violence, passion.

Angela Carter's writing playfully hovers between postmodernism, feminism and the Gothic. Her experience in Japan sharpened her writing and caused further controversy as her critical eye turned to the issue of women's identity construction. The sharp edge of her writing largely stems from her use of the Gothic, which tackles these themes ina horrific space, while Carter deals with them in a theatrical site, where people cross the boundaries but display an acute awareness of the theatricality of their fear, and the paradox remains, that fear is the more theatrical, the more genuine. In Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve*, postmodern play is truly subversive, for it is realenjoyment.

The exploration of the "bloody" textuality is present throughout Carter's work, from her first novel *ShadowDance* (1966) to her last one, *Wise Children* (1991), favouring the joy more than the horror of play in later fictions. Carter accepts Freud's theory of the unconscious, which has shaped so much of twentieth-century thought, in that it has allowed the questioning of the ways in which identities are constructed according to conflicting or contradictory desires within the self. Carter indicates Freud as a core influence on her work, as his theory of the unconscious and dreams were "about life" (Appignanesi,1987). Furthermore, she points out her tendency "to provoke unease" in the way she explores sexuality is inevitable when dealing with the unconscious: "that's what the unconscious is for" (ibid.). The exploration of the unconscious is necessary in exposing the violent drives that fuel desire, and the ways those desires construct human relationships and identities.

But the greatest problem for Carter and feminism in general is the impact psychoanalysis has had on the notions of masculinity and femininity. Freud's theory of castration, which leaves women as 'lacking' in some fundamental way in relation to the male, is problematic to feminism. Furthermore, Lacan places the phallus as representative of the Father's Law. One enters into language, into the socio-symbolic order whereby identity ensues. Even though French feminist theorists accept this in their explorations of the role of the mother in introducing the child to language, Lacan'sscenario raises debate

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with the implication that subjectivity depends upon identification with the father's law. The child has no connection to the mother's body, leading to a repression of the maternal. If women stand for the threatening 'other' they might begin to subvert the dominant discourse from their marginal position. The French diverge in their views but aim at rethinking the unconscious as a tension between a masculine allegiance to the law and a feminine willingness to disobey it. The same clash between compliance and disobedience of the law runs throughout Carter's texts, which, often speak of the possibilities and limitations of feminine transgressions. Women are capable of disrupting the symbolic order by directly confronting men's repressed desires, by going behind the screen of representation that a patriarchal order imposes upon their bodies. If anything, this might allow for a confrontation with what the symbolic order has always designated as "that unthinkable outside" – the "unthinkable side of femininity" (Clément, Kristeva, 1998/2001:72).

In *The Passion of New Eve,* as soon as Evelyn arrives in New York he is already identified as an abuser of women. The intensity of his fantasy world is linked to academic pretension, explicit in the same opening scene. The cultured male expresses his power over popular cinema using sexual language. Even if he experiences some physical enjoyment, he is trapped in the stereotype he has chosen. His level of autonomy will increase with the fluidity of his name. Beyond the fantasy of Tristessa, Evelyn describes his experience in terms that anticipate Zero's: "Sometimes I'd amuse myself by tying a girl to the bed before I copulated with her. Apart from that I was perfectly normal" (PNE 9). As a man, Evelyn violently asserts his masculinity through acts of sexual dominance over women, often taking a sadomasochistic pleasure in their suffering. This "sadistic streak" develops in Evelyn at a very early age, having "acquired an ambivalent attitude towards women" (PNE 9) through his specular fascination with Tristessa. For Evelyn, Tristessa is "necrophilia incarnate" (PNE 7), perfecting the cinematic role of "abused femininity" (PNE 35), since "suffering was her vocation" (PNE 8). Evelyn directly associates the "allure" of her "tragic and absurd heroism" (PNE 7) with his adolescent sexual awakening, "the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in me" (PNE 8).

Both Zero and Evelyn have misogynist attitudes and misplaced literary ambitions, both believe that women have deprived them of male fertility. Although Tristessa embodies for Evelyn a supreme image of femininity, she is later revealed to be a transvestite, merely playing a woman in drag. Tristessa represents a masculine ideal of femininity made by and for men, as Eve/lyn himself comes to realise: "*That* was why he [Tristessa] had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, he had made of himself the only woman he could have loved!" (PNE 129). This directly reflects back on Evelyn's attitude towards women, before he becomes one himself, desiring them only for the image of suffering femininity that he projects onto their bodies .

Evelyn's misogynistic view of women is made all the more explicit in his relationship with Leilah: "a perfect woman; like the moon, she only gave reflected light"

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(PNE 34). When Evelyn first meets Leilah, who is "black as the source of shadow" (PNE 18), he projects onto her the role of temptress, leading him against his will into "the geometric labyrinth of the heart of the city" (PNE 21). In a sense, Leilah is leading him into his own heart of darkness, as Evelyn is no longer merely a voyeur taking pleasure in women's pain, as he did with Tristessa, but becomes an active participant in his fantasies of abuse. At one point he believes she is a "succubus", one of the "devils in female form who come by night to seduce the saints", and because of this, he then punishes her by tying her to the bed, beating her, degrading her body, and then defending his acts of sexual violence by claiming she is "a born victim" (PNE 27-8). This scene significantly foreshadows Leilah's reappearance at the end of the novel, and we realise that she has perhaps been determining Eve/lyn's labyrinthine journey throughout the entire text.

If the prey-predator metaphor exposes the power relationship between the sexes, the *femme fatale* script suggests the male fear of woman's predatory abilities. Leilah lures Eve/lyn into the labyrinth of the dark city where he feels her power: "I knew how defenceless I was, how much at risk" (PNE 24). Her destructive power is only revealed when she shows her other identity as Lilith luring Eve/lyn to his fate of castration. For now she is only an innocent sex doll, performing a somewhat fatal charm in her narcissistic contemplation in the mirror. Astonished at Leilah's endless desire Evelyn punishes her by tying her to the iron bed during the day. At night, however, as the black whore is set free, she becomes absorbed by her self-image, perceiving herself as other:

> "I used to adore to watch her dressing herself in the evenings… She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and …we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah. Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection." (PNE 28)

The mirror Leilah is the incarnation of male desire, although her relation to the mirror self is different from Evelyn's. She is not in love with Evelyn, she is "a born victim" (PNE 28), suffering the abuse of Evelyn the torturer. To him, she represents "a perfect woman, like the moon, she only gave reflected light. She had mimicked me, she had become the thing I wanted of her, so that she could make me love her" (PNE 34). In mimicking what the male desires of her, she double-crosses him.

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues that "the mutilations our society inflicts upon women" (*SW* 23) are encouraged by the symbolic wound projected onto their bodies, which is derived from the phallocentric view of the female as castrated and thus fundamentally lacking in relation to the male. Evelyn ultimately desires Leilah for "the exquisite negative of her sex" (PNE 27), which allows him control over her. Carter is

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specifically examining here the ways in which pain and violence are used to control women, when the boundaries between sexuality and violence fade away:

> "The whippings, the beatings, the gouging, the stabbings of erotic violence reawaken the memory of the social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by her castration, which is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus, to which it is related in the complex dialectic of imagination and reality that produces culture. Female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitudes towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed". (SW 23)

As Eve/lyn is given the appearance of a woman, he learns the balance of power is tilted to his detriment, as he becomes the feared 'other' of male desires. Like Leilah, Eve/lynis repeatedlyraped. According to psychoanalytic theory, those fears contribute directly to the making of the male subject, since he defines his identity in relation to the threat of castration. Women represent this threat because they are already 'lacking', and are thus a reminder of what men might also lose. Furthermore, since women are not afraid of losing what they do not have, they are capable of disrupting the symbolic order. Thus, in order to keep women submissive they themselves need to be convinced they are no more than wounded creatures who are born to bleed, passively suffering the violence inflicted on them.

Evelyn abandons Leilah, fleeing from the degradation and "universal pandemic of despair" that he has found in New York, which he locates in Leila's body, projecting onto her flesh a "corrupt languor" of rotting femininity (PNE 37).He escapes to the desert, "where there were no ghosts" (PNE 38).

Mother turns Evelyn into an excessively male version of the 'feminine', modelling her New Eve after a Playboy centrefold (PNE 75), the kind of woman that men are encouraged to desire. Significantly, though, even if Eve/lyn is now technologically altered into an 'unnatural' woman, s/he is hardly a 'feminised' subject. At first, as Eve/lyn peeks at her new body, she does not undergo any psychological change, merely viewing her external appearance from a masculine perspective: "the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself" (PNE 75). On one level this indicates a paradoxical split in self-perception, in which the "desiring viewer and the desired object, usually distinct figures, are here confined within the one body." (Johnson, 1997:172) However, Eve/lyn does not think herself as any less male despite all the lessons she is taught. She is shown "non-phallic imagery such as sea-anemones opening and closing; caves, with streams issuing from them; roses opening to admit a bee; the sea, the moon" (PNE 72), images that ironically figure the female body as passive.

Thus, Mother's project of 'feminising' Eve/lyn essentially relies on symbols that a patriarchal order uses to veil women's bodies in mystery. Mother reinforces the patriarchal discourse in her belief that motherhood will provide the supreme proof and

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triumph of Eve/lyn's femininity. Though Eve/lyn is forced to view reproductions of "Every Virgin and Child that had ever been painted", this absurd attempt "to subliminally instil the maternal instinct itself" (PNE 72) is answered by Eve/lyn when she retorts: "it takes more than identifying with Raphael's Madonna to make a real woman!" (PNE 80). Though Eve/lyn claims Beulah signifies his/her "journey's end as a man" (PNE 60), as soon as she escapes Beulah, Eve/lyn claims to feel "almost a hero, almost Evelyn, again" (PNE 81). Later, she will realise that she has not in fact "reached the end of the maze yet", and will have to "descend lower", until Leilah brings her to the deepest cave for a final confrontation with Mother and her myths (PNE 49). Fleeing from Beulah, however, embarking on yet another evasion of the 'feminine', Eve/lyn is convinced she is in complete possession of the old Evelyn's "arrogant and still unaltered heart" (PNE 82).

The symbolic castration that a phallocentric discourse projects onto women's bodies, viewing them as 'other' within, turns Eve/lyn into a feminine subject in the end. Women are denied any articulation of their desires, to the extent "where a woman's sexual desire is so repressed that it can only find expression as rape, reflecting a patriarchal misogynist culture which constructs femininity as passive and masochistic." (Johnson, 1997:59). Eve/lyn's 'real' transformation begins with her painful recognition of that 'otherness' within.

The monstrous woman in the novel learns to enjoy her artificial sexuality through the power to play. The bloody process of becoming a woman still torments the performing woman, and the horror is most apparent when performance has replaced nature. Womanhood is monstrous in *The Passion of New Eve*because it involves a process of construction. Eve/lyn is a man turned into a woman, whose body is a collage of metaphor and flesh, to convey the lyrical definition of femininity. Mother and the women of Beulah had carved out her new shape "according to a blueprint taken from a consensus agreement on the physical nature of an ideal woman drawn up from a protracted study of the media" (PNE 78).

Eve/lyn's birth into new Eve is a scene of sexual violence that Carter spices with irony. In the womb-like operating room Eve/lyn is operated on by Mother with a knife, in front of the female spectators "seated in banked seats around the little stage like the spectators of a chamber opera" (PNE 69). The theatrical sense emphasizing the motif of femininity as masquerade is further illustrated by the inculcation of old Hollywood woman's films into new Eve/lyn's head. Her psycho-programming is fashioned after Tristessa, the kitsch image of womanhood as pain, as well as the Virgin-and-Child icons painted "to instil the maternal instinct" (PNE 72). The ironic point is that the resulting Eve/lyn is "the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in [Evelyn's] head" (PNE 75). The women in Beulah create a theatre around Evelyn's sex-change, which underlines the artificiality of their religion. The theatre becomes a means of both physical and psychological control, as they place him in a womb-like room they call the place of birth. He feels a sense of dread,

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> "yet this specifically metaphysical dread…had been created with unscrupulous cunning by ingenious stage-management – a little red light, the sound of a couple of archaic musical instruments. Even my reactions were out of my control, were strictly programmed by the tribe of desert matriarchs" (PNE 52).

They use ritual theatre to indoctrinate Eve: "Sophia must have thrown a switch in the hi-fi for the voice of a vast choir with an organ and a brazen dissension of trumpets burst apart this archetypal hole in which I was lying with a sumptuous prodigality of decibels" (PNE 67). Revising patriarchal Christianity, they tell Eve/lyn he is going to bring forth "the Messiah of the Antithesis"(PNE 67), that she will be a new Eve and the Virgin Mary, that her child will renew the world, "prompt on cue, trumpets and cymbals crashed off-stage" (PNE 77). Spiritual transformation is a matter of staging, which Carter is critical towards, due to its lack of spontaneity. In Beulah, miracles such as the Virgin birth occur with the help of technology, a carefully orchestrated one. On the other hand, the use of magic and the supernatural makes room for the spiritual dimension.
Carter parodies the womb-like caves in 'Familiar panic of entry into the Earth's entrails':

> "Consider the womb, the "inner productive space", the extensible realm sited in the penetrable flesh, most potent matrix of all mysteries. The great, good place; domain of futurity in which the embryo forms itself from the flesh and blood of its mother; the unguessable riches of the sea are a symbol of it, so are the caves, those dark, sequestered place where initiation and revelation take place. Men long for it and fear it; the womb…is a fleshy link between past and future, the physical location of an everlasting present tense that can usefully serve as a symbol of eternity, a concept that has always presented some difficulties in visualization. The hypothetical dream-time of the foetus seems to be the best that we can do." (2000:108)

The theatre is also a space within the psyche where one revises the Oedipal drama. When Sophia says "kill your father! Sleep with your mother! Burst through all the interdictions!" Eve/lyn knows he has arrived "at the place of transgression" (PNE 64). The androgyne breaks the Oedipal model because s/he refuses to identify with one role. The women deconstruct the Oedipal drama, replacing it with their own goddess drama. Eve/lyn has been led to the place where 'I' becomes 'other':

> "When Leilah lured me out of the drug-store, into the night, towards her bed, she had organized the conspiracy of events that involved the desert, the dead bird, the knife, the sacrificial stone…Leilah had always intended to bring me here, to the deepest cave, to this focus of all the darkness that had always been waiting for me in a room with just such close, red walls within me. For in this room lies the focus of darkness. She is the destination of all men, the darkness that glides at the last moment, always out of reach; the door called orgasm slams in his face, closes fast on the Nirvana of non-being which is gone as soon as it is glimpsed. She, this darkest one, this fleshy extinction, beyond time, beyond imagination, always just

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> beyond, a little way beyond the fingertips of the spirit, the eternally elusive quietus who will free me from a being, transform my I into the other and, in doing so, annihilate it." (PNE 58-59)

Women write of freedom and constructed worlds in the wilderness, as Eve/lyn describes the place of her birth in similar terms: "I'd lost them by the time I left the desert, the domain of the sun, the arena of metaphysics, the place where I became myself" (PNE 164).
Eve understands

> "the slut of Harlem can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the projection of the lusts and greed and self-loathing of a young man called Evelyn, who does not exist, either. This lucid stranger…seems to offer me disinterested friendship" (PNE 175).

Tristessa possess the qualities of the category of the abject. So does Eve, as she cannot fit in either sex, as a woman with a man's mind. After undergoing plastic surgery, Eve/lyn is in an abject state and unable to interpret her new identity: "for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines" (PNE 74). "Psycho-programming" notwithstanding, Eve/lyn's attitude toward the new self is conditioned by the dualism of the phallocratic order. He as Eve/lyn will become the object of Mother's desire as Leilah has been to him.

Eve/lyn's repeated rape by Zero constitutes her fall from innocence and her psychic transformation into womanhood. Eve/lyn notes, "although I was a woman, I was now passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations" (PNE 103). Bakhtin'sdefinition of the grotesque body as the "Ever unfinished, ever changing body" describes the contours of woman, who is but a grotesque copy. Eve/lyn's left-behind status as a man produces, as the alchemist draws a pure metal out of a mixture of alloys, the humiliations she suffers as a woman:

> "And more than my body, some other yet equally essential part of my being was ravaged by him for, when [Zero] mounted me [. . .] I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self, which always brought with it a shock of introspection, forced me to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation". (PNE 101-102)

Eve/lyn has not only taken on a new sexual identity, but an identity fuelled by a persistent sense of loss. Zero's assault creates further confusion as to the past, as memories merge with the images of a new femininity:

> "my new flesh momentarily betrayed me; it swept my memory back to prep school, the smell of fresh sweat, flannel boys' bodies, fresh cut grass…but it was not a real memory, it was like remembering a film I'd seen once whose

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performances did not concern me. Even my memories no longer fitted me, they were old clothes belonging to somebody else no longer living." (PNE 92)

The myth of the eternal feminine is luring to men, not just because it is created from a male point of view. It is a myth that gives women an ambiguous power reflecting men's Oedipal longing for the mystery, the mother. Tristessa confides to Eve/lyn why she longs to be a woman, pointing out the power of female passivity: "I was seduced by the notion of a woman's being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing" (PNE 137). This confession highlights ironically that women are deprived of social roles, lacking a subject position from which to speak or act. They are vulnerable, as Tristessa in the glass house, confined in the world of shadows.

Eve/lyn, a transsexual who regards her new body as a costume, is aware of her feminine masquerade. She is a woman conscious of her male gaze even if her phallic drive is annihilated by Zero. Before she found out Tristessawas a man, she thought him a woman; later when she learnt he was a man, she 'could not think of him as a man' but a "proud, solitary heroine who now underwent the unimaginable ordeal of a confrontation with the essential aspect of its being" (PNE 128). His/her love for Tristessa appears both feminine- narcissistic and heterosexual since his/her desire for 'her' is predetermined by the masculine sexuality of Eve/lyn.

The impossibility to confine the monstrous,hybrid body resulting from the union of Tristessa and Eve/lyn shatters the pyramid of desire:

"The vengeance of the sex," Eve/lyn remarks as she sets off for the unknown, "is love" (PNE 191). Thus Eve/lyn finally sees her mutilation at the hands of the cult of Beulah not as a simple revenge for the abandonment of their daughter Leilah, but as a gesture of generosity and love.

Moreover, Eve/lyn's acceptance of her new status as woman is that it is only in this patched up form that she can achieve the goal of Evelyn; that is, to "find himself." Evelyn could not have found himself because he had not acknowledged any loss or lack, given his privileged position. Through his transformation into a woman, "he" found "himself" through the recognition that "she" has nothing to lose.

In his transformation, Eve/lyn's self as man is annihilated for a new self as woman. Similar to Deleuze and Guattari's use of alchemy as a metaphor for a process of becoming (1988:253), Carter suggests that Eve/lyn's identity as a woman is not the end goal, that her child, whom Schmidt (1990:67) sees as becoming Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* , will shatter the binary masculine-feminine. Fevvers is "the new symbol of femininity… She is the archaeopteryx Eve/lyn had envisaged". Eve/lyn's journey through the cave at the novel's ending also renders the extinction of the self as time runs backwards, suggesting that Eve as a woman is just as vulnerable to change as Evelyn is, as a man.

The theatre underscores the fluidity of identity. With the doubling of disguises, the terms masculine and feminine become meaningless; gender and sexuality become mixed up. As Judith Butler (1990:140) asserts in *Gender Trouble*, gender is not a stable identity but

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a variable one constituted "through a stylized repetition of acts", so that the idea of an original gender identity is revealed, through parodic repetition, "to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original" (1990:31). However, Evelyn's transition to Eve suggests finality. Eve can only play at maleness now, and, by the end of the novel, she feels she has found her true identity as a woman by rejecting maleness. In retrospect, nevertheless, Eve/lyn still does not understand gender distinctions:

> "Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure that the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus or my own factory fresh incision and engine-turned breasts, that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions." (PNE 149-150)

The system of caves at the end of the novel reminds us of the association of the grotesque with the grotto and female anatomy. Eve's remark, "I am inching my way towards the beginning and the end of time" (PNE 185), positions her as the creator of the future, pregnant with the child of the future, born of parents whose gender and sexuality are stripped of traditional dichotomies.

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