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### Bakhtian Theory of Carnavalesque and Fantastic: Subversion of Gender in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Wise Children* of Angela Carter

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose this research paper is to study feministic approach of Angela Carter through the lens of Bakhtian theory of carnivalesque and grotesque investigating the texts of *The Passion of New Eve* and *Wise Children*. Bakhtin discusses in detail his theory of carnivalesque in *Rabelais and his World*. Bakhtin was greatly impacted by the comic theories of Dostoevsky and Rabelais who was a writer of French Renaissance. Bakhtin propounded the theories of Grotesque Realism to explore the multidimensional layers of reality. For Bakhtin folk humor is a medium to comprehend reality as it is a mirror of society. Bakhtin found the Grotesque humor very useful tool to depict the existential reality of life. Angela Carter won Nobel Prize for literature for her revolutionary feminism and deconstruction of patriarchy. Carter gives the image of the wolf to characterize the monstrous quality of his Bluebeards in her novels. The wolf is deadly and in each plot of her novels there is a deadly conflict between wolf and the dove. Carter uses all the elements of grotesque and fantastic to create an atmosphere of burlesque and horror and carnivalesque with flavor of supernaturalism. The plot of the novels run on two levels; on the surface level the forces of darkness intensify the atmosphere of horror but in the textual level the farcical elements and grotesque the thematic unity. Her women are the victims of sexual oppression as the patriarchy is silent in their marginalization and objectification. In this study the main issues of sexuality of women, gender discrimination are investigated in detail.

**Keywords:** Grotesque, Deconstruction, Carnavalesque, Farcical, Burlesque, Fantastic, Parody, Objectification.

Mikhail Bakhtin propounded the theory of carnivalesque in his *Rabelais and his World* and used the elements of fantastic and grotesque to depict the layers of reality. Bakhtin took the carnival situation very seriously and observed under the garb of a carnival the playwright can dramatize any scene on the stage except violence. The predominant elements are excess and grotesqueness. Bakhtin gives the theory of polyphony and observes that in a novel there are many hidden voices like drama. Carter wrote in imitation of Bakhtin

and used the tools of carnivalesque to articulate her radical vision of feminism. Bakhtin argued that carnival and carnivalesque create special situation giving freedom, equality and abundance to the dramatist. During carnival, rank is abolished and everyone is equal. Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and *Wise Children* depict the radical themes of the female body and her defilement. She gives her own vision of love, sex and disruption of archetypes and myths. Carter's focus is on creating a new woman employing the strategies of deconstruction of phallogocentric assumptions about gender. The tools of carnivalesque helped her to create a new eve destroying the old images of the Eve. Carter uses the folk comedy to expose and ridicule human degradation and the collapse of values. The scenes of ugliness and perversion are dramatized in farcical style in imitation of Bakhtin. Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir shaped her feministic vision as she believed that in spite of the four waves of women empowerment women all over the world are persecuted and tormented by the male dominated society. In her novels she created the image of the Bluebeard depicting the male hegemony and oppression. Angela Carter's novels depict the radical views on feminism. Beauvoir contended that women were treated as objects and not individuals. Feminist such as Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Ann Oakley further investigated the gender role stereotyping highlighting the oppressive effects of oppressive patriarchy. Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray found that woman is treated as the "Other" Angela Carter created rebellious and powerful women such as Fevvers Marianne Anne Blossom and Lady Atlanta in her novels.

Cixous further argues that a true erotic woman can be created in literature using the strategies of subversion and grotesque. Angela Carter got inspiration from the feministic perception of Cixous and created erotic women in her novels deconstructing the traditional concept of gender. In this paper the researcher has explored how Carter challenged the biological gender; bisexuality or androgyny in her *The Passion of New Eve*. She achieved this because of her new approach to comedy and grotesque. The elements of fantastic and grotesque helped her to create the images of the hysteric and the bisexual. For instance in *The Passion of New Eve* the plot of the novel is dominated by the farcical elements. The Great Parricide converts male Evelyn into a "newly born woman". Evelyn is captured by the mythical Mother Goddess who transforms his sex to experience the struggles and sufferings of women. Evelyn experiences the pain as he expressed his anguish thus: "I realized the worm, red place in which I lay was a simulacrum of the womb. The voices and weird music died away; then I could hear nothing but the pounding of my own blood in my ears" (Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* 49).

Carter uses the elements of burlesque and grotesque to depict fluid nature of gender to portray the characters of Eve and Tristessa. The plot gives a juxtaposition of verisimilitude and burlesque as the episodes of the novel are loaded with masculine and feminine elements. The narrator is transsexual Eve; therefore it is both masculine and feminine. Bristow and Broughton called this narrative as "an astute narrative that explores how transsexuality holds the clue to the constructedness of all gendered identities" (Broughton 4). The pattern of the plot of the novel is structured on the magical events; the images and the symbols of the gender split and dissolve. The structure of the novel is packed with the elements of New York, Beulah, Zero's ranch, and Tristessa's mansion create provoke laughter in the readers.

Carter was well of the radical ideas of the feminists such as Catherine Clement and Helene Cixous who outlined the lineaments of "the newly born woman" a figure brought to life through their study of Freud, Lacan and Lewis Strauss. Clement uses the hysteric as a symbol for a female position that can deconstruct male gender ideology because "she embodies an incompatible synthesis? bisexuality." (Clement 8) Angela

Carter broke with the traditional ideas and experimented with the concept of androgyny in creating women in her novels *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *The Night of the Circus*. Sandra Gilbert explored the nature of gender anomalousness through the metaphor of transvestism. She named it as the “third sex.” She proposes, in her analysis of representations of transvestism and “sexchange,” Gilbert contends that Angela Carter used the metaphor of transvestism “to shatter the contemporary patriarchal norms and rituals that oppressed women” (Gilbert 218).

Cixous argues that women express bisexuality in patriarchy is because men are “trained to aim for glorious phallic monosexuality” (Cixous 85). She has given two forms of bisexuality. In the first place it is the “fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference” (Cixous 84). In the second place it is and the experience of the presence of both sexes which are subjected to the oppression of patriarchy and society (Cixous 85). Cixous further argues that a true erotic woman can be created in literature using the strategies of subversion and grotesque. Angela Carter created such types of erotic women in her novels deconstructing the traditional concept of gender imitating Bakhtin. In this paper the researcher has explored the New Woman of Angela Carter who challenged the biological gender; bisexuality or androgyny in her *The Passion of New Eve* In a sense, both novels ring changes on Clement and Cixous’s images of the hysteric and the bisexual.

Evelyn is the main protagonist in the novel who journeys through diverse geographical settings in a post-apocalyptic United States. Carter uses myths and legends to depict his traumatic journey through time and space. At the outset of the novel Evelyn is seen rambling in a falling New York City. He is warned of the end of human civilization from a stranger who is going to India. His encounter with Baroslav, the alchemist is really sensational in the novel. Baroslav talks about the Jewish genocide committed by the Nazis during World War. He warns Evelyn that he will reach “the end and the beginning of the world” (171). Carter introduces very ugly and menacing images to create a grotesque and Gothic atmosphere. Carter has given the ugly and disturbing picture of the New York City described as a lurid war zone; populated by the blacks. They are building a wall around Harlem to fight with the whites. Carter uses the depressing images of death and destruction to depict the: “a lurid Gothic darkness.” She has referred to the metaphor of “entropic order of disorder,” to portray the gradual decline of the medieval city. Evelyn comes in contact with black Leilah who is “nigredo” the symbol of primitive darkness. Leilah is compared with animals by Carter in the novel. Evelyn falls in love with a black beauty Leilah and sexual liberties with her. He impregnates her ushering an era of chaos and disorder in the plot. Evelyn comes under the spell Leilah sexual powers as he regards his black lover as an object of sexual desires evoking the carnivalesque images:

I saw her dress was a sleeveless, vestigial shirt –waist and she had unbuttoned the front to flaunt small, high pointed breasts on which the nipples, painted bright purple to match her mouth, suck out a full half inch from the flesh, Her white, rolling eyes caught mine and stared at me for an endless second with all manner of mocking invitations in their opaque regard (16).

Evelyn followed her as she “appalled and enchanted” him with her lascivious totter. Leilah is depicted as a black witch by Carter in the first part of the novel who hypnotized Evelyn. Leilah was a “naked model” who charmed Evelyn exciting his sexual desires. He admits his pervert sexual drives that corrupted his sensibility as he says: “she took hold me, she drew me–she impelled me” (20). Evelyn betrayed and deserted her when she was pregnant. She suffered psychological ailments as she was made to suffer alone. He didn’t

marry her and left to an unknown place. His misogynist and narcissistic romance is cut short. He was mystified by her witch like warnings and primitive beliefs. She behaved like a neurotic: “She tore up her dresses in desperation; ate the broken glass and vomited it out. Leilah gave him a stringent warning:

She issued voodoo threats against my manhood; she told me a chicken would come and snap my cock off, but I didn’t believe that. All this witchery offended my European sensibility; it seems to me her pregnancy had unhinged her” (28).

The sexual relationship with Leilah also symbolizes his extension of self. He and Leilah create a distorted illusive world. Carter gives the image of a mirror as Leilah is being watched with her neurotic split personality (30). John Berger’ observes that Leilah represents the traumatic woman deserted by her lover; she is an image of as split self struggling alone in the wide world. When Leilah gazes at the fractured mirror she sees her “bisected” image (30), the images of “bi-sex” and the fragmentation of gendered identity. When Evelyn gazes into the “mirror” of Leilah, he prefigures his own eventual transformation into a woman. The city is ugly and threatening with its stinking smell. Carter creates the images of ugliness; of rats and garbage to depict the dark side of New York where living is hellish and the collapse of civilization is imminent. New York displays all the colors of decay, Evelyn’ uses many grotesque images to depict the hellish nature of New York City. Carter imitates T.S. Eliot visualizing the New York City as a waste land; an image of death and destruction. Evelyn calls it as “an alchemical city; a city ruled by chaos and disorder and enveloped in darkness” (16). New York City becomes a metaphor of waste land populated by sick and dying people. Carter introduces Baroslav who was a Czechoslovak deserter in the novel in search of a new identity. He feels sick and tells Evelyn that ‘the age of reason is over’ (13).

*The Passion of the New Eve* is packed with bizarre images giving a fine combination of myths and monstrous. The creation of Eve and Tiresias are the products of mythical history and culture; they are compared to legendary Tiresias of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* who incorporates male and female traits. They are “chimera of chimeras” created using different parts of different animals (34). Tiresias is “the most beautiful woman of the world” (2); but soon it is known that she is “gross deception” (141). Tiresias is actually a man whose genitals are tucked between his ass with Scottish tape. Carter also uses the grotesque in describing the underground laboratory at Beulah, whose name means “a place where contrarities are equally true (44). The scene of operation of Evelyn is depicted as a true grotesque:

Angela Carter’s last novel *Wise Children*, celebrates the glorification of the carnival. The spider-web structure of the plot of the novel is highly interesting and confusing as the plot is loaded with sub-plots. Carter deals with the theatrical illusion and the world of music Dora Chance is an aged narrator who openly admits her loss of memory and often narrates episodes that occurred before she was born. Carter narrates a grotesque tale about illegitimacy, mistaken identity, theatrical illusion and old age. She was greatly impacted by the technique of the carnival grotesque; used this fantastic device in her earlier novels but in *Wise Children* she is at her best as the technique finds its culmination. The novel depicts the grotesque tale of the tangled fortunes of two theatrical families. The main focus is on the history of the Hazard theatrical dynasty, from its nineteenth century to its downfall. She picks up on this imagery: “There were rings on his finger, like a king or pope, and a big gold medallion round his neck” (Angela Carter, *Wise Children* 198). Her entire narration revolves around her cruel father Hazard. Dora begins the tale in a natural style. The decline of British imperialism is traced in the decline of the Hazard theatrical dynasty. Dora’s famous refrain running into the novel: “Lo, how the mighty have fallen!” alludes to the fall of “the imperial Hazard dynasty that

ruled England for so many years (10). Melchior's father, Ranulph Hazard was a great traveler who crossed all the continents to propagate the cultural values of England. Ranulph believes that Shakespeare was "a kind of God"; the embodiment of British culture. He was travelled all over the world to sell the religion of Shakespeare and the English values he represents. Like Fevvers, the Chance twins exhibit excessive femininity through masquerade and spectacle. They are twins but they respect the identity of other as Nora says: "Dora never pried because twins we may be but we respect each other's secrets" (231). Dora and Nora are senior in age but they are energetic as they realize that they cannot "afford to die for at least another twenty years" that too when they have been thin lung that it is "high time for the final curtain" (230). Dora and Nora are twins and they get financial benefit from their likeness. Hardin aptly observes thus: "Identity is their commodity, and they have learned how to market it. By hiding their difference, they are anomaly" (Hardin 78). Nora has lost physical agility because of old age. She leads a horrible life in their basement in her wheelchair. She is called "Wheelchair" lady. Nora and Dora are haunted by their glamorous youth and beauty and their carnivalesque recklessness:" When I was young, says Dora, .... I'd wanted The moment, to live in just the glorious moment,.. ( 125).

To conclude, both the novels *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Wise Children* depict the fluid vision of Angela Carter in the tradition of Bakhtin. She uses all the interesting tools of carnivalesque and grotesque to deconstruct patriarchy and male hegemony.

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