

RE-WRITING THE BODY: PORNOGRAPHY IN THE SERVICE OF FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Angela Carter's musings on the female body dealing with representations, re-readings and re-writings of the conventions of the pornographic, published at the dawn of the "feminist sex wars," saw in pornography a potential critique of the existing relation between sexes and in the pornographer an "unconscious ally." This article attempts to explore the complex relationship between representation, gender and genre as delineated by *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and "Black Venus." Carter enumerates the conventions of pornography, explicates its various tendencies and undermines them through re-reading, repetition, exaggeration, and parody to bring out the similarities between the treatment of women in pornographic literature and in institutions sanctioned and nurtured by the society.

KEYWORDS: Pornography, Representation, Genre, Gender, Re-reading, Repetition.

RESUMEN

La representación del cuerpo femenino que hace Angela Carter cuando reescribe el género pornográfico desvelaba el potencial crítico de la pornografía a la hora de examinar las relaciones entre los sexos y hacía del pornógrafo un aliado inconsciente. Este trabajo examina la compleja relación entre representación, género sexual y literario explorada en *The Passion of New Eve*, *The Sadeian Woman* y "Black Venus," publicados al albor de las guerras feministas en torno al porno. Carter enumera las convenciones de este género, explica sus diversas acepciones y las desconstruye al re-leerlas, repetirlas o exagerarlas paródicamente para señalar las similitudes entre el tratamiento de la mujer en la literatura pornográfica así como en las instituciones sociales asentadas en el modelo patriarcal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pornografía, representación, género literario, género sexual, re-lectura, repetición.



...the female body is a highly contested site—its flesh is both the recipient and the source of desire, lust and hatred. As a pawn of technology [in a capitalist society], it is sacred and sacrificial, bearing the politics of society and state. The body is our common band, yet it separates us in its public display of identity, race and gender [class and age] (Diana Angaitis, qtd. in 'Pro'Sobopha 117)

1. DOES THE BODY MATTER?

Mind-body dualism, with its privileging of the former, and its subsequent correlation with categories of male and female, respectively, has been at the heart of Western philosophical and theoretical tradition. The body with its ineradicable associations with the natural, the biological and the animal as opposed to the cultural, the rational and the human has been used to construct the feminine as the inferior other. The relegation of the female as the corporeal, the less privileged of the male-female dichotomy and its social, cultural, racial and religious ramifications have been a site of constant debate within the feminist circles. “Biological determinism,” as feminists term it, has been used to validate the unequal treatment meted out to women down the ages. However, as Kathleen Lennon rightly argues in “Feminist Perspectives on the Body” (2010), early feminists chose to dwell on the rational capabilities of the female mind rather than to address the “deterministic link” between the female mind, body and social functions. Later feminists, as bell hooks states in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), realized that their war against sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression can only be materialized by ridding the female body of its negative associations and exposing the culturally determined nature of femininities and masculinities (1).

Simone de Beauvoir was the first to hint at the sex/gender distinction, but her descriptions of the female body cycles of menstruation, reproduction and nursing as hindering women’s potential and freedom were considered derogatory. Feminist thinkers who sought to celebrate the female body as a site of difference and female bodily processes as a source of power doubted Beauvoir’s allegiance to the feminist cause. There were others, as Barbara S. Andrew states in “Beauvoir’s Place in Philosophical Thought” (2003), who claimed that the purported ambivalence in Beauvoir’s writings on the female body was due to the inaccuracy of translations and the resultant failure to consider her writings as a descriptive phenomenology of the female body as lived in specific situations (30). Nevertheless, Beauvoir’s notion of femininity as a “condition” brought about by society rather than a “natural” or “an innate entity” became pivotal to the feminist movement of the 1970s, opening up new avenues for challenge and change (Andrew 31).

The rise of a counterculture in the mid-to-late 1960s injected a renewed vigour into the feminist movement, which now focused on reproductive rights, sexual rights, and the representation of women in literature, media and popular culture. The closing years of the 1960s as well as the seventies saw myriad discussions in Anglo-American as well as the French feminist circles on the all-pervading logic of patriarchy, the representation of women in canonical literature, the prospect of an



alternative tradition of women's writing, the possibility of a new women's language, a "feminine" text and so on. These discussions had a common denominator in their preoccupation with the body, bodily processes as well as the sex-gender distinction. Approach to the body became the axis along which the feminists became divided into different camps. This was the socio-political scenario that Angela Carter tried to negotiate through her writings.

2. SADE, CARTER AND PORNOGRAPHY

Angela Carter begins *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979) with an introductory note in which she appraises the writings of Marquis de Sade—an eighteenth-century French aristocrat, politician and libertine—for its reluctance to see "female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function" and the questions it broaches about the "culturally determined nature of women" and the resultant relation between sexes (1). In the polemical preface that follows, she explores the possibility of employing "pornography in the service of women" (3). Carter begins with Freud's notion of anatomy as destiny, moves on to the "anatomical reductionalism of graffiti" with its depiction of male as a positive aspiring '!' and female as a negative 'o' that exists in waiting, and then to the world of myths and archetypes where the "real conditions of life" are masked by historically determined archetypes, which equate "woman to the passive receptivity of the soil, [and] to the richness and fecundity of the earth" (4-8). Carter's endeavour all along is to point to the culturally determined and sanctioned "behavioural modes of masculine and feminine" and the "ineradicable sexual differentiation" that function in accordance with the false universals that have been handed down to us instead of the particular circumstances—historical, social and economic—of our lives (7, 4). She proceeds to explore how, "[f]lesh comes to us out of history" and accompanying it "the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh" (12). The overlooking of class, religion, race, and economic status as factors that come in between the "initial urge" and the final "attainment" of the "most elementary assertion of self" is what irks Carter and she considers the notion of "universality of female experience" in matters of gender and sexuality "a clever confidence trick" (13). It is against this backdrop that Carter places the genre of pornographic literature, enumerates its various features and functions, and delineates her concept of the "moral pornographer" as someone who might employ pornography to critique the current relation between sexes (22).

Pornography, to Carter, "is always [applied] art with work to do," its primary function the arousal of sexual excitement—by describing the sexual act in "purely inviting terms"—and its target consumer "a man who subscribes to a particular social fiction of manliness" (SW 13-15). By convention, the writer of pornographic literature is to refrain from describing the real conditions of sexual encounters, for instance, the living condition of a prostitute (who might be his heroine) or the hardships of her trade. His only job, writes Carter, is "to assert that the function of flesh is pure pleasure" (22). When pitted against the age old problem of female subjectivity being reductively defined in terms of reproductive function, Carter saw



in pornography a potential to critique the existing relation between sexes and in the pornographer an “unconscious ally” (25). Thus, she came up with the concept of the moral pornographer as someone whose

...business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it. (22)

Sade as a writer who “creates, not an artificial paradise of gratified sexuality but a model of hell” where sexual gratification is an “expression of pure tyranny” by the hand that wields the whip and where “the male means tyrannous and female means martyred, no matter what the official genders of the male and the female beings are” is of great significance in Carter’s scheme of things (*SW* 27). She considers Sade’s stories of excesses—of sexual aberrations, and sexual violence—as a critique of the myth of female castration at the heart of Western culture, which has for ages conditioned the attitude of men towards women and women towards themselves not as human beings but as wounded creatures born to bleed (26).

Carter was not the first to hold Sade’s writings as valuable to the women’s cause for their consideration of the body as “the exclusive source of everything that is human,” sexual desire as paramount in all human behaviour, and “all sexuality as a political reality” (Philips 36-37; Carter, *SW* 31). Simone de Beauvoir in *Must We Burn Sade?* (1951) had expressed her admiration for Sade’s treatment of sexuality as a social fact and his championing of female individualism as opposed to the pervasive logic of repressive universality (28). However, Beauvoir sidesteps Sade’s excesses by pointing to the lack of evidence about his childhood days, which might hold the key to his random tendencies or aberrations. The truth about Sade will never be known, she writes, because we meet an already mature Sade. More than the aberrations, the manner in which he assumes responsibility for them is what fascinates Beauvoir and she attributes his “real originality” to this act of making “his sexuality an ethic” and expressing it in his works of literature (*Must We Burn Sade* 4). According to Beauvoir,

He [Sade] subordinated his existence to his eroticism because eroticism appeared to him to be the only possible fulfilment of his existence. If he devoted himself to it with such energy, shamelessness and persistence, he did so because he attached greater importance to the stories he wove around the act of pleasure than to the contingent happenings; he chose the imaginary. (7)

She states that it was the society, with its denial of Sade’s craving for absolute freedom and its attempt to have “undisputed possession” (7) of the individual, which caught hold of Sade’s secrets and branded him a criminal.



3. FEMINIST SEX/PORN WARS

Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* published in 1979 at the dawn of the feminist sex/porn wars, which was to divide the feminist movement into warring camps of sex-positive feminists and anti-pornography feminists for decades to come, invited the attention of a host of critics, writers and theorists. Beginning with the 1970s, feminists found themselves at opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to issues such as pornography and sex work—with one end applauding the opportunity and the other condemning the oppression involved. Pornography was defined differently by the two sides involved in the debate and each definition catered to their respective notions regarding the production and consumption of pornography.

Anti-pornography feminists or radical feminists were mostly activists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, who fought for legislation against pornography. They founded groups like 'Women against Violence in Pornography and Media' and 'Women against Violence against Women,' which included Susan Griffin, Kathleen Barry and Laura Lederer as founding members. These organizations sought to delimit pornography by opening up provisions for women harmed by pornography to file lawsuits against the perpetrators. Accordingly, Dworkin and MacKinnon drafted the Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinance, which was initially accepted by many city councils (of the United States), but later dismissed by the legal apparatus (law courts) on the grounds of going against the fundamental freedoms of speech and expression.¹

Dworkin in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) traces the etymology of the term pornography to the ancient Greek words *porne* and *graphos* meaning "whore" and "writing" respectively. She proceeds to state that in ancient Greece *porne* referred to the cheapest and least protected women in society, that is, the vile whore (not that all whores were considered vile) and thus, pornography meant "graphic depiction of women as vile as whores" (*PMPW* 199-200). According to Dworkin, pornography still adheres to its root meaning; the only change has been the increase in the number of methods of depiction of these whores (with the advancement in technology); the content and purpose of the pornographic as well as the status, value and the depiction of the women involved in pornography remain the same (200). She contends that the purpose of whores is to serve men sexually and that they operate within a system of male domination. Dworkin considers the "sexual colonisation of women's bodies" by men a material reality sanctioned and propagated by the institutions of "law, marriage, prostitution, pornography, health care," economy, "organized religion and systematized physical aggression against women (for instance in rape and battery)" (203). The hate, abuse, dehumanization, violence, and sadism depicted in pornography, their corresponding occurrences in

¹ See Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality* (1988). Here, Dworkin and MacKinnon explain the necessity of treating pornography as a violation of the civil rights of the women involved and the necessity to curb it.



the lives of women used in the production of pornography and the same hate and abuse in the lived experiences of women in general disturb Dworkin.

In an elaborate introduction to her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, touted as one of the most important texts on pornography, Dworkin condemns it as an “orchestrated destruction of women’s bodies and souls,” “a violation of the civil rights of women,” and a breeding ground of “insult and injury, rape and assault” (xxvii-xxx). She borrows the words of Kate Millet from *The Prostitution Papers: A Candid Dialogue* (1971) and uses it as an epigraph to her chapter on pornography: “Somehow every indignity the female suffers ultimately comes to be symbolized in a sexuality that is held to be her responsibility, her shame” (199). However, she contends that pornography has been, is and will be the root cause of all forms of oppression and violence against women and the key to women’s emancipation is in the abolition of pornography. During the closing years of the 1970s, writers like Robin Morgan and Susan Brownmiller had already made a connection between pornography and sexual violence against women. For Morgan, pornography was the theory and rape, the practice (174). In *Going too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (1977), she labelled feminists who defended pornography as “Sade’s new Juliettes” as they have aligned themselves with a sexual practice based on domination. Subsequently, Catharine MacKinnon condemned pornography as it puts real women in abusive situations (in the sex industry) and gives the consumers of pornography an opportunity to “act on” the women in pictures.

Sex-positive feminists or libertarian feminists, on the other hand, condemned the anti-pornography stance as it limited sexual freedom or choice, perpetuating a sense of shame around sex and women’s own sexual fantasies, and because it was a threat to the already marginalized sexual subcultures. The early members of the group include Ellen Willis, Gayle Rubin, and Pat Califia who saw sex as an avenue for pleasure and pornography as an escape from the “repressions of bourgeois ideology”—romantic love, heterosexual monogamy and procreative sex. As Robin Ann Sheets states in “Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism: Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’” (1991), they formed the ‘Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force’ to counter the efforts of Dworkin and MacKinnon (Sheets 638). Ellen Willis in “Feminism, Moralism and Pornography” (1979) wrote,

A woman who is raped is a victim; a woman who enjoys pornography (even if that means enjoying a rape fantasy) is in a sense a rebel, insisting on an aspect of her sexuality that has been defined as a male preserve. Insofar as pornography glorifies male supremacy and sexual alienation, it is deeply reactionary. But in rejecting sexual repression and hypocrisy—which have inflicted even more damage on women than on men—it expresses a radical impulse. (464)

A closer look at both sides of the debate shows that the irreconcilable differences between the two spring from their attitude towards sex and sexuality. Radical feminists with their affiliations to the lesbian feminist community saw heterosexual practices as perpetuating male dominance and practices such as pornography and sadomasochism as validating male violence against women, whereas the libertarian feminists upheld the idea of pleasure, supported all kinds of consensual sexual



activities and saw anti-pornography movements as validating the society's ideal of women's sexual needs and fantasies. Radical and libertarian feminists, as Ann Ferguson argues in "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists" (1984), work with set assumptions regarding the nature of sexuality, power and freedom. Both are guilty of defining pornography in an exclusive manner (with respect to the opposing side's claims), "collapsing the positions of the opposition into a single extremist stance" (Purcell) and resorting to essentialist claims—one side mourning the loss of the essentially emotional female sexuality and the other mourning the denial of erotic pleasure to women (Ferguson 110). Though much was said about the mutually exclusive nature of the arguments of the two warring camps and the need for them to join forces in their struggle against different kinds of violence against women and other sexual minorities, the fissure remains

4. CARTER AND THE SADEIAN WOMAN

Angela Carter's re-reading of Marquis de Sade was of interest to the anti-pornography feminists as well as the sex-positive feminists, for Sade was an important figure when it came to discussions about the construction of sexual stereotypes and the representation of violence perpetuated by pornography. Dworkin in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* devoted an entire chapter to discussions on Sade. She considers Sade as "the world's foremost pornographer," "a rapist and a writer twisted into one scurvy knot," and his life and writings as a "cloth soaked in the blood of women imagined and real" (70). She elaborates Sade's biography in detail and condemns him for the cruelties he inflicted upon women. Dworkin considers Sade as an "anti-Christ of feminism" and a perpetrator of unmatched violence and tyranny. For her, Sade's world functions around one's attitude towards male power and domination—you can either suffer its administrations or revel in them. His female characters Justine and Juliette, according to Dworkin, are prototypical of all types found in pornography—"they are wax dolls into which things are stuck," one suffers interminably while the other aligns herself with the perpetrators of suffering and becomes one among them (95). Dworkin states that Sade's biographers as well as other writers who chronicled his life and writings tend to trivialize Sade's crimes against women and dismiss them with "endemic contempt." Dworkin views such writings as a reflection of our misogynistic culture and brands writers such as Carter who attempts to employ Sade's writings in the service of feminism as "pseudo feminist" (84). Dworkin's sentiments about *The Sadeian Woman* were shared by many radical feminists who criticized Carter for reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes and disseminating the idea that women's sexual liberation is possible only through their participation in the male culture of violence.² Sex-positive feminists, on the other

² For more criticism on Carter, see Sally Keenan. "Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*: Feminism as Treason" in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism* (1997).



hand, saw Carter's treatise as an attempt at deconstructing and demythologizing essentialist assumptions underlying definitions as well as representations of femininity.

The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History enumerates the conventions of pornography and explicates its various tendencies. Carter's repetition and re-reading of the stories of Justine and Juliette as well as the exaggerations portrayed in them undermine as well as engage with the feminist use of the pornographic. It attempts to bring out the similarities between the treatment of women in pornographic literature and that of women in institutions sanctioned and nurtured by the inherently patriarchal society. For Carter, Sade's writings and its extreme tendencies act as a critique of the myths and archetypes used in circumscribing women and their sexuality. She begins her treatise *The Sadeian Woman* by stating that pornography in its present form is harmful to women because it does not show sexual relations as an expression of social relations or sex as a part of human practice, but as something unchangeable, exotic and inviting. Here, she refers to one of the main conventions of pornography, namely, to paint sexual relations in purely inviting terms with pleasure as its be-all and end-all. According to Carter, all pornography shows mythic versions of men and women, that is, any glimpse of "a real man or a real woman" cannot be found in these archetypal representations of men and women where the unique 'I' is sacrificed in favour of the collective sexed being (SW 6). Pornography assists the process of false universalizing and its excesses, she writes, "belong[s] to that timeless, locationless area outside history, outside geography, where fascist art is born" (13).

Other important features of pornography listed in *The Sadeian Woman* include the prostitute as the favourite heroine of pornography, since the pornographic texts have a gap for the reader to step inside and enact his own fantasies, and the narratives are written in first person as if by a woman (14-17). Here, the archetypes of negative female sexuality are successfully reinforced and the metaphor involved in sexual activity—as a representation of what people do to one another—is suppressed. Carter comes to the conclusion that as long as pornography serves to reinforce the ideas and values of a given society, it is tolerated, and once it steps out of its conventional functions and starts to comment on real life, it is banned (20). She cites this as a reason for Sade's writings being banned for more than two hundred years, and delineates how Sade flouted the conventions of the pornographic by describing sex in abominable ways and by presenting the violence, the cruelty, and the power dynamics involved. He renders all aspects of sexuality suspect, all tenderness false, and all beds minefields (28). Carter considers his writing subversive and hence, representative of sexual relations as a reflection of social interactions between men and women. The use of the "grabbing" effect of pornography to comment on the world is what Carter calls "moral pornography" and she sees it as having far-reaching effects since

In this article Keenan argues that the opposition to Carter was mostly due to her disagreements with some important aspects of the feminist movement of her times, namely, victim feminism and her opposition to the idealization of motherhood and maternal body.



... the pornographer has it in his power to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerrilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of these relations ... and to show that the everyday meetings in the marriage bed are parodies of their own pretensions, that the freest unions may contain the seeds of the worst exploitation. (SW 24)

Sade's writings are of importance to Carter, for he became a terrorist of the imagination "turning the unacknowledged truths of the encounters of sexuality into a cruel festival at which women are the prime sacrificial victims when they are not the ritual murderesses themselves" (24). And they were banned because he ventured into a previously unknown territory and portrayed the "erotic violence committed by men upon women" and that was "too vicious a reminder of the mutilations our society inflicts upon women" (25). According to Carter, Sade made use of pornography to make a "wounding satire" on mankind as well as the historical time in which the novels are set. He ventured further than most satirists and pornographers because he believed that a radical social transformation towards the ideal of freedom for all was possible (27). In this respect, Carter claims:

He was unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and in installing women as beings of power in his imaginary worlds. This sets him apart from all other pornographers at all times and most other writers of his period. ... He put pornography in the service of women, or, perhaps, allowed it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women. (SW 41-42)

In *The Sadeian Woman*, every chapter is devoted to each of the major works of Sade, namely, *Justine*, or *The Misfortunes of Virtue* and *Juliette*, or *The Prosperities of Vice*. *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and *The Hundred and Twenty Days at Sodom* are also discussed at length. These discussions transpire within the context of the conventions of the pornographic as well as the eighteenth-century conventions of femininity and sexuality as laid down by society. *Justine* the titular hero/heroine of *Justine*, or *The Misfortunes of Virtue* is described as a woman "martyrized by the circumstances of her life as a woman" and incessantly punished for a crime that she has committed involuntarily—the crime of being "born a woman" (SW 43-44). *Justine*, a poor woman in a man's world, "a receptacle of feeling" and a "repository" of the feminine sensibility of the time, represents the eighteenth-century ideal of bourgeois woman whose honour and sexual reputation were inextricably linked (53-54). *Justine* considers "repression" and "abstinence" as ultimate virtues and she harbours a monstrous fear of her own sexuality (55).

Justine's poverty and femininity are described as threatening her autonomy and reducing her to "the dupe of an experience," that is, "her innocence invalidates experience and turns it into events, things that happen to her but do not change her" as in the case of women in general, whose lives are "conducted always in the invisible presence of others who extract the meaning of her experience for themselves and thereby diminish all meaning" (57-58). *Justine's* virtue is a "sentimental response" to a world where she hopes that goodness will reap reward and her incompetence, gullibility, whining, frigidity, and "reluctance to take control of her own life" makes



her a “perfect woman” (62.) Justine is described as “the prototype of two centuries of women” who find themselves trapped in a world not made for them; unable to remake it for the “lack of existential tools” to do so; doomed to suffer till suffering becomes their second nature, and full of self-pity (65). *The Sadeian Woman* presents Justine as the pornographic personification of the aetiology of the female condition in the twentieth-century (65). She is hailed as the precursor of many literary heroines such as “the tearful heroines of Jean Rhys, Edna O’Brien and Joan Didion,” and Hollywood icons of the twentieth-century such as Garbo, Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe, who propagate the myth of masochistic femininity (64, 70). As an exaggeration of the condition of women,

Justine is the model for the nineteenth and early twentieth-century denial of femininity as praxis, the denial of femininity as a positive mode of dealing with the world. Worst of all, a cultural conspiracy has deluded Justine and her sisters into a belief that their dear being is in itself sufficient contribution to the world; so they present the enigmatic image of irresistibility and powerlessness, forever trapped in impotence. (SW 81)

In Sade’s novels, as Carter rightly points out, the worst tortures are reserved for women of upper class who value their beauty and chastity (SW 84). Wives and mothers are objects of fury and are chastised. The notion of sex as sanctioned only in the service of reproduction is ridiculed (87). The idea of women’s body as something to be ashamed of and the breasts and buttocks as inherently freakish are debunked in *Justine* when the girls imprisoned in the monastery are thrust face-down and the attention is turned to their arse. They are stripped of everything they value as part of their self-reverence and hence become “heroine[s] of a black, inverted fairy tale” (44). Thus, Sade’s Justine becomes a parody of the eighteenth-century ideal of womanhood. The moral of the fairy tale of the perfect woman is “to be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case” and to “exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case—that is, to be killed” (88). Thus, Justine paints the sad story of a sexually attractive woman who refuses to acknowledge her sexuality and sells it in a world which regards “good looks as a commodity” (65).

Sade’s Justine treats her body as a temple and the “desecration of the temple” forms her story. She is an “angel-face on the run” (SW 43). The root-cause of Justine’s misfortunes is her identification with the ideal of femininity equated to virtue, virginity and sanctity of her body. Sade’s exaggerated portrayal of the struggles of Justine is read by Carter as an attempt to throw light on the idealizations of femininity, which are used to circumscribe women and curb their freedom. Carter’s commentary on Justine is followed by a commentary on twentieth-century Justines “in the celluloid brothel of the cinema” (68). A beautiful face and a sexually attractive body as pre-requisites for a virtuous (asexual) heroine, resulted in the “Good Bad Girl”—erotic yet completely oblivious to her own eroticism. Hollywood idealizations of femininity such as “the pre-sexual waif” played by Mary Pickford, “the middle-aged woman, whose sexual life may be assumed to be at an end” played by Mae West, women who appeared in drag played by the European imports to Hollywood like Garbo and Dietrich and the “pretty dumb blonde” immortalized by Marilyn



Monroe are all new-age Justines exemplifying association of virtue with the denial of sexuality (68-71). *The Sadeian Woman* thus explores the new-age constructions of femininity as well. In the process, the fairy tale of the perfect woman as the passive woman is ridiculed and undermined.

Sade presents Justine's antithesis in her sister Juliette who acts according to the precepts and practices of a man's world, and hence does not suffer but inflicts suffering. Financial gain and "libidinal gratification" are what drives Juliette and her story is one about the prosperities of vice (SW90). Juliette partakes of the vices of a world which values a woman as nothing but a commodity and presents herself as the best on sale. Juliette is a woman who succeeds in transcending her gender but not its inherent contradictions (98). She is like a hangman in a country where the hangman rules, i.e., only he escapes punishment (113). Carter says that Juliette thrives because she identifies with the interests of the ruling class (the patriarchy) and lives accordingly (114). If Justine is the "holy virgin," the archetype of the blameless woman who suffers or the predecessor of the suffering blonde, Juliette is the "profane whore" who stands for "world, worldly" and is the predecessor of the Cosmopolitan girl whose femininity is "part of the armoury of self-interest" (115-17).

Other aspects of interest in Juliette's story of excesses and transgressions involve her willing participation in anal intercourse—a capital crime in the France of her times; her participation in the "charade of sexual anarchy" (Juliette dressed as a man marrying a woman and dressed as a woman marrying man and Noirceuil, her lover, doing the same) showing the mutability of gender; and her unwillingness to bear children except a child from Count de Lorsanges who will ensure her inheritance. Even after giving birth, she undermines the mothering function because she refuses to nurture her child, neglects it and eventually, kills it. Sade's *Juliette* is a clarion call against feminine sexuality defined in terms of its reproductive and mothering functions. The repeated orgies and coprophagic activities throughout *Juliette* can be seen as a subversion of the allure of the erotic. Sade's novel, according to Carter, robs the world of the theory of maternal supremacy, of the concept of the sacred womb, of the imaginary construct of goddess and with it the concept of eternity. Carter traces people's fear of emancipation of women to the collapse of the concept of eternity because bereft of eternity we will be left with nothing but this world, and that will mean "the final secularisation of mankind" which the powerful and the dominant are scared of (SW 127).

Philosophy in the Boudoir, which describes the education of a Sadeian heroine and her "ambivalent triumph over the female principle as typified in the reproductive function," is also examined in *The Sadeian Woman* (137). Eugénie, a fifteen-year old girl, is educated in Sadeian ways with lessons on the anatomy of the male and the female bodies, the function of the clitoris in female sensual pleasure, the techniques of masturbating a male, and other allied activities. *Philosophy in the Boudoir* intersperses orgies with philosophical sermons on love, marriage, contraception, abortion, family, prostitution, and cruelty (SW 138). A political pamphlet called *Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, if you Would Become Republican*, read out in the middle of an orgy, occupies a considerable length of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. Many feminists have singled out this text, which expresses republican and atheist



opinions, as it speaks for the freedom of women. *The Sadeian Woman* also analyses *Yet Another Effort*:

If we admit ... that all women should submit to our desires, surely we ought to allow them to fully satisfy their own ... Charming sex, you will be free; just as men do, you shall enjoy all the pleasures that Nature makes your duty, do not withhold yourselves from one. Must the diviner part of mankind be kept in chains by the other? Ah, break those bonds; nature wills it. Have no other curb than your tastes, no other laws than those of your own desires, no more morality than that of Nature herself. Languish no more under those barbarous prejudices that wither your charms and imprison the divine impulses of your heart: you are as free as we are and the career of the battles of Venus as open to you as to us. (SW 139)

Sade, according to Carter, envisions this hypothetical republic and is interested in forging a libertarian sexuality, which will guarantee “a certain qualified freedom” to everyone trained in the ways of this republic (SW 139).

Carter’s commentary on *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is subtitled “The Education of a Female Oedipus” and its subsections are titled ‘Mothers and Daughters,’ and ‘Kleinian Appendix: Liberty, Misanthropy and the Breast’ hinting at psychoanalytic undertones. It advances a deep-rooted hatred for the mother and the mothering function. The body of the mother, which brings us into the world of pain, is hated and tortured. The cruelties inflicted upon Madame de Mistival (Eugénie’s mother) by Eugénie and her instructors are discussed at length: Madame de Mistival is flogged by her husband, raped by her daughter (using a dildo—a mechanical phallus), is infected with syphilis and her sexual organ is sewn up. She is punished for repressing her sexuality, subordinating it to the reproductive function as well as for trying to suppress her daughter’s sexuality. The highlight of Madame de Mistival’s violation, according to Carter, is that she faints at the point when she almost reaches an orgasm. Carter is disappointed that Sade refuses an opportunity to let “pleasure to triumph over pain” and sidesteps the possibility of “constructing a machine for liberation” (154). Here, Carter points to the central paradox of Sade’s pornography: he can only conceive of “freedom as existing in opposition,” freedom as defined by tyranny, i.e., he remains within the philosophical framework of the time (151). The Sadeian woman, according to Carter, “subverts only her own socially conditioned role in the world of god, the king and the law” (155). For instance, Eugénie transgresses the socially approved limits of her sexuality but her father (Mistival’s husband) engineers and approves of Eugénie’s stint at the Boudoir as well as the atrocities she commits on Madame de Mistival. She, to use Carter’s chess analogy, transforms from the “pawn” to the “queen,” but the King is still the master.

The “Speculative Finale” of *The Sadeian Woman* discusses Sade’s treatment of flesh as akin to meat. “Sade is a great puritan and will disinfect of sensuality anything he can lay hands on; therefore he writes about sexual relations in terms of butchery and violence,” states Carter (162-63). Thus, we see that Carter is not oblivious to the violence inherent in Sade’s portrayal of sexual relations. Her attitude alternates between appreciation and criticism. She, like Barthes in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, notes the absence of eroticism in Sade as well as the mythic quality of Sade’s



writings. Many critics have discussed Carter's treatment of Sade's writings as a myth and its relationship with the fairy tale genre.³ However, *The Sadeian Woman* can be better described as an exploration of the debates surrounding the feminist sex/porn wars. Carter's analysis of Sade's Justine delineates the problems surrounding the "repression of sexuality," and the identification with "victim" status. It also warns against allying femininity with purity, virginity, sacrifice and sanctity. Alternatively, the story of Juliette analyses the limitations of libertarian sexuality. Just as the female libertines "ingest" signs of maleness but do not "integrate" them within themselves (103), the libertarian sexuality and allied practices such as pornography do not guarantee the liberation that sex-positive feminists advocate. The boundary between pornography as a source of oppression and violence and pornography as a tool for liberation seems fluid; hence, the feminist use of pornography and the pornographic occupies an uneasy middle ground. Apart from *The Sadeian Woman*, which is an explicit commentary on the use of the pornographic in the service of feminism, Carter's oeuvre is replete with references to the pornographic. For example, Honeybuzzard in *Shadow Dance* poses for pornographic photographs; the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber" is a connoisseur of pornography and enjoys emulating it; and *The Passion of New Eve* has elaborate discussions on the pornographic as delineated in the following section.

5. EVELYN/EVE: THE MASCULINE AND THE FEMININE

The Passion of New Eve discusses the pornographic in its portrayal of the various relationships of the titular Evelyn/Eve. The novel follows Evelyn's travel to New York and his encounter with Leilah, a woman of colour. Evelyn meets Leilah at a drugstore and is attracted to her. From the moment he sees her, he is determined to have her and is led on by Leilah to her abode. The chase appears to be a scene lifted from a pornographic novel where there is luring, striptease and finally the act. Leilah's black leather shoes with six-inch high heels, her black mesh stockings, her red fur coat, her short white dotted-cotton dress, her peeking purple-painted nipples underneath, and her luring of Evelyn deep into the labyrinth of the heart of the city, dropping her dress and her crotch-less knickers on the way, are reminiscent of a porn movie scene (*PNE* 19-29). Evelyn's description of the chase and the act is noteworthy. He states:

She dropped her fur on the floor, I stripped, both our breathing was clamorous. All my existence was now gone away into my tumescence; I was nothing but cock and I dropped down upon her like, I suppose, a bird of prey, although my prey, throughout the pursuit, had played the hunter. My full-fleshed and voracious beak

³ For instance, Aidan Day in *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* discusses in the chapter entitled "The Passion of New Eve" Carter's engagement with myths and archetypes in *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Sadeian Woman* (123).



tore open the poisoned wound of love between her thighs, suddenly, suddenly. Leilah, the night's gift to me, the city's gift. (PNE 25)

Though Leilah is the hunter during the chase, the chase ends with Evelyn overpowering her. Here, the metaphor of the hunter and the bird of prey, and the sexually charged language refers back to the age-old conventions of the pornographic.

Moreover, Leilah is described as having soft black skin and a voracious sexual appetite. She is a naked model, a naked dancer at the bar and an occasional participant in simulated sex shows who lives in a dingy apartment which becomes Evelyn's own "domestic brothel" (PNE 29). Leilah's yearning for more and more carnal pleasure and her act of thrusting Evelyn's tired and limp cock inside her are the only acts of sexual autonomy she performs. However, Evelyn punished her for such transgressions by tying her to the bed with his belt and leaving her in the room all day long. She submitted to such indignities with the curious ironic laughter of a "born victim" (28). In the evenings, when Leilah dressed up to go to work, she took hours transforming herself to a "seductive apparatus" and Evelyn liked to watch her getting dressed (29). He observed her painting her face and her body, and transforming herself to an "erotic dream" (30). Evelyn saw Leilah as inevitably trapped in a "solipsistic world of the woman watching herself being watched in a mirror" and doing her best to concur with the image of every man's sexual fantasy (30). Eventually, Evelyn gets bored with Leilah and she becomes an irritation of flesh, an itch that must be scratched (31).

However, Evelyn's desire for Leilah vanishes the moment he learns that she is pregnant with his child, and she becomes an embarrassment and a shocking inconvenience to him. The pregnant Leilah, on the other hand, turns obedient and submissive in order to make Evelyn love her and marry her. Nevertheless, Evelyn convinces her for an abortion, and it leaves Leilah sterilized. Evelyn blames Leilah for all that has transpired between them—the seduction, the pregnancy and the disastrous abortion, and leaves her. Leilah's sexuality and fecundity are her crimes, and she is punished for them. The encounter between Evelyn and Leilah vacillates between the scripting of pornography and a critique of its conventions.

Evelyn, who flees from Leilah, is captured in the desert by an all-female sect and is taken to Beulah—the home of a woman who calls herself "the Great Parricide" and "the Grand Emasculator." The grotesque mother-figure of Beulah—an enormous form with two tiers of nipples—rapes Evelyn, forcefully castrates him to his "diminutive Eve" and programmes him to be a woman. The new- Eve/Evelyn is housed in a womb like structure and is subjected to psycho-surgery, in anticipation of impregnating her with his own sperm collected before castration. Evelyn's capture, rape, and castration represent the dangers of a feminist utopia where the masculine is replaced by the feminine as the powerful constituent of the binary. Carter, through parody, points to the dangers of a simple inversion of the *status quo* as advocated by certain strands of feminism.

The programming of Eve or the "psycho-surgery" is performed by exposing the newly formed Eve to the movies of Tristessa (Hollywood's version of femininity), to innumerable portraits of Virgin and child, and to videotapes designed to



instil maternal instincts. The programming of Eve acts as a metaphor for the social programming of women and men into their respective gender roles. Eve's response to her new form highlights the constructedness of gender: "They had turned me into the *Playboy* centrefold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head. I had become my own masturbatory fantasy. And—how can I put it—the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself" (*PNE* 75). Fashion-magazine and media propagated images as the model for the creation of new Eve—"every man's perfect woman" is highly ironical. The role of media-generated images in the production and sustenance of the feminine and the masculine are scrutinized through Eve, the techno-created new woman. Eve, having been created and nurtured to bring forth the "Messiah of antithesis," is repeated throughout this section of the novel (*PNE* 67).

The Passion of New Eve also discusses psychoanalytic theories, the biblical myth of creation of Eve and the virgin birth of Christ. The influence of psychoanalysis on feminism was a major point of contention throughout the Second Wave feminist struggle and here Carter engages with the feminist use of the psychoanalytic. For instance, Evelyn's rape by the grotesque Mother figure is carried out in the midst of incantations such as "Kill your father! Sleep with your mother" (*PNE* 64)—an unmistakable inversion of the psychoanalytic tale of Oedipal transgression and incest.

Eve, however, escapes her captivity and the impending motherhood by fleeing to the desert. She is then captured by the "one-eyed and one-legged poet" called Zero, and is taken to his harem. The treatment of women in Zero's ranch house illustrates the dangers of pornography as listed by the anti-porn feminists, namely, the perpetuation of sadomasochist tendencies, and the resultant degradation and humiliation of women. To begin with, Zero believes that women are made of a different, more primitive, more animal-like soul stuff than men and that they do not need the paraphernalia of a civilized society (*PNE* 87). Therefore, he housed his harem in a filthy dorm and treated them like slaves. He forbade them from communicating in anything but animal sounds and allowed them to wear nothing but dungarees. He had their hair cut short with a straight fringe and their front teeth removed. He demanded complete subservience and humility from his wives. They were to kiss his bare feet every morning, work on the ranch throughout the day, perform wifely duties to him on the assigned night of the week, dress up or undress for him in a high pornography style and dance for him as and when he pleased. The slightest of transgressions were penalized with brutal assaults and bullwhip lashes. Zero acted like a godhead whose position depended on the obedience and the devotion of his wives, and they "dedicated themselves, body, heart and soul to Church of Zero" (*PNE* 99). Gender essentialism as justifying the violence against women and women as willing accomplices in their oppression are scrutinized through the interactions between Zero and his wives. Moreover, the denial of language and volition to the women in the harem can be aligned with the feminist fight for a new women's language free from phallogocentric tendencies. Just as the women in Zero's harem were denied the right to speak, the women writers of the time were denied a tool free from the clutches of patriarchy to voice their opinions and express their concerns.



The night when Eve is brought to the harem, she is raped twice in a span of two hours and is made Zero's eighth wife. Eve compares Zero's sexual savagery to "vandals attacking Rome" (*PNE* 91) and she states: "I was in no way prepared for the pain; his body was an anonymous instrument of torture, mine my own rack" (86). However, she later admits that the mediation of Zero turned her into a woman; his peremptory prick turned her into a savage woman (*PNE* 108). Here, violence as an inextricable aspect of all male-female relationships is brought to the fore. Zero functions as a representative of the patriarchal archetype—a disabled as well as an impotent version and his harem as a miniature model of the patriarchal world order. Zero's capacity for cruelty, his wives' capacity for suffering, and their consent to be treated as less than human are reminiscent of the Sadeian scenario. Zero's hatred towards Tristessa (a Hollywood screen icon), his belief that she had performed a spiritual vasectomy on him and his tireless quest for Tristessa to avenge his condition are part of the narrative. After months of scouting around the desert, Zero manages to find Tristessa's abode and takes his harem along to destroy her dwelling and punish her for "sucking dry" his virility.

Tristessa, having retired from Hollywood at the age of forty, is living in the solitude of the desert when Zero and his harem raid her. She lives in a glasshouse, which was her own mausoleum—a mausoleum filled with wax works in coffins of the "unfortunate dead of Hollywood" (*PNE* 117). Eve discovers Tristessa in a coffin trying to pass off as one of the wax figures. The moment she discovers Tristessa, Eve journeys back to her days as Evelyn, and is overcome with regret that she can no longer possess Tristessa the way Evelyn wanted to have her all through his life. Evelyn had always fantasied "meeting Tristessa, she stark naked, tied, perhaps to a tree in a midnight forest under the wheeling stars" or on a suburban golf course, as it happened in many pornographic narratives (7). He loved her only because "she was not of this world" (8). Evelyn's reveries of Tristessa and Zero's hatred for Tristessa, for being desire incarnate, undergo an anti-climax when Tristessa is revealed to be a man—a transvestite, "the greatest female impersonator in the world" (144). The most beautiful woman in the world, every man's perfect woman, is revealed to be a "sensuous fabrication of mythology" and Eve responds:

That is why he 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! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity. (128-29)

Here, Carter anticipates Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance. Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that the gendered body is performative, that is, it "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (185). Carter's new Eve states that Tristessa had "no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status, only an iconographic one" (*PNE* 129). Tristessa functions as an iconography of the ever-suffering woman as well as the



ever-desirable sex symbol of the childhood, adolescent and adult fantasies of all the men in the novel. The link between male desire and female suffering is evident in the case of Tristessa, as in the case of Evelyn and Leilah, and Zero and Eve. If the transvestism of Tristessa points to the performativity of masculinity and femininity, his ensuing affair with Eve offers a potent critique of heteronormativity. For instance, Eve states, “He came towards me. I know who we are; we are Tiresias” (146). Together “we had made the great Platonic hermaphrodite” (148). Here, Carter invokes Tiresias the prophet, who was blinded as a punishment for obtaining the forbidden knowledge of the sexual pleasure as enjoyed by both the sexes. The union of Tristessa and Eve, unlike the other unions in the novel, is described as a meeting place of love, tenderness, passion and pleasure. Eve comes out of the union with the realization:

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of 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. Still they bewilder me. (149-50)

Gender as opposed to sex and a negation of biological determinism form the crux of *The Passion of New Eve*, but, as usual, there are no binding conclusions.

A band of conservative Christian boys captures Eve and Tristessa from the desert, kills Tristessa and takes Eve along. Eve, who escapes from the Christian army, is saved by Leilah—now the leader of a resistance group fighting in the civil war that forms the background to the novel. Leilah is revealed to be Lilith, the daughter of ‘the Mother of Beulah’ who, all along, had been acting on her orders. Evelyn/Eve was part of Mother’s grand project to create a perfect ‘feminine’ archetype. Lilith informs Eve that Mother, having failed at constructing a perfect archetype, suffered a nervous breakdown and has now retired to a womb-like cave by the seas. Carter’s commentary on the subversion of archetypes attains its high point in the novel when Lilith states, “And when there was a consensus agreement on the nature of the symbolic manifestations of the spirit, no doubt Divine Virgins, Sacred Harlots and Virgin Mothers served a useful function; but the gods are all dead, there’s a good deal of redundancy in the spirit world” (175).

On their way to meet the Mother, Eve and Lilith encounter a mad, old woman on the beach. The woman with her canary yellow dyed hair, scarlet lipstick, maroon rouge, painted face, high heels, and red and white two-piece bathing suit was all covered in dirt and her flesh was all wrinkled, ravaged and sagged from her bones (177). She sang songs from the thirties and lived on canned food and vodka. This old woman is a representative of the social and cultural milieu that was past its prime. At this juncture, Carter asks a very pertinent question: how will the old ones fare in the post-apocalyptic world? It seems that she is referring to the myths and archetypes rather than the people. The apocalypse, then, becomes a reference to the deconstruction of myths of sex/gender used to contain and constrain woman



and her sexuality. The story narrated from the perspective of Eve, who was once Evelyn, also points to the performative element in pornography. Tristessa, Leilah and Eve validate their femininity through performance, be it the Hollywood's version of the most beautiful woman in the world, the porn movie version of a prostitute or a Playboy centrefold version of what it is to be a woman. Evelyn and Zero also perform their masculine roles to perfection and alert one to the dangers of subscribing to the various strands of femininity in circulation, including the pro- and anti-pornography feminisms. The male gaze in relation to the pornographic as well as the construction of femininities are issues explored in *The Passion of New Eve*.

Towards the end of the novel, Eve visits Mother in her new abode, travels through the caves and is expelled from the mouth of the inner cave as if in a rebirth. Then she meets Lilith by the seashore, who offers her the genitals which once belonged to Evelyn, preserved in a small portable refrigerator with the words, "You can have them back, if you still want them" (*PNE* 187). Eve, however, refuses them and they are engulfed by the waves. Thus, we see that *The Passion of New Eve* concentrates more on identifying the processes that create and sustain the archetypes or stereotypes of femininities and masculinities rather than on merely subverting them. In doing so, Carter goes further than most satirists and feminists, and debates, deconstructs and re-writes the framework she herself employs. In her hands, feminist theory becomes akin to a myth, which is subjected to its own share of re-reading, re-writing and demythologizing. Carter's brand of moral pornography serves to undo many gender archetypes, and she achieves it by engaging with the conventions of the pornographic as well as the feminist use of the pornographic. Carter, true to her postmodernist influences, tries to advance the feminist cause without subscribing to any macro-narratives.

6. THE BLACKNESS OF VENUS: 'OTHER' VOICES IN ANGELA CARTER

Carter's critique of the feminist use of the pornographic extends to her discussions on race as well. In "Black Venus," Carter deals with the representation of colonial bodies, and the life and writings of Charles Baudelaire. It narrates the tale of Baudelaire and his "mulatto mistress" Jeanne Duval. On this occasion Carter focuses on the racial, exotic, and gendered Other. She juxtaposes the poetic colonization of Duval, her relegation to the status of a muse and "the European colonization of other peoples and other parts of the world" (Day 154).⁴ Carter engages with the writings of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, who argue that the act of representing the Other has significant resonances within the context of colonization: on the one hand, the asymmetries of representation enacted as well

⁴ As quoted in *The Fiction of Angela Carter* edited by Sarah Gamble. It is a compilation and analysis of the essential criticism on Angela Carter published in 2001.

as reproduced; on the other, the asymmetries of power in the world. The “Black Venus” also interrogates the complexities of representing difference. Carter first explicated the sexual stereotypes associated with a racialized body in her 1968 novel *Several Perceptions*. In this work, the general association between the black body and excessive sexuality is made explicit in a casual conversation between Kay, Joseph and Sunny. It states, “Did you ... see old ma Boulder’s beau, black as your hat, blacker? ... ‘Big black bugger!’... ‘What a size! Of course, women go for niggers on account of their choppers, it’s well known, what a size!’” (SP 142). Carter’s engagement with the racial Other exposes how a world obsessed with black man’s sexuality fixates him at the level of his genitals. As Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), “One is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis” (170).

In “Black Venus,” Carter examines how the colonial narratives construct the female black body. As Sandra Ponzanesi accurately argues in the essay “Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices” (2005), the image of the Black Venus,

... allegorically rendered and vindicated the position of the white male colonizers expanding their authority and property over the virgin soil of the imperial territory, of which the black Venus is the quintessential emblem of the other, both in racial and in sexual terms. The appropriation and subjugation of the female exotic body was sustained by a meticulously constructed racial grammar in which the Other was represented as infantile, irrational and prey to primordial sexual lust, and consequently as mysterious and inherently subversive. The representation of local women as black Venuses by Western colonizers was strongly eroticised and often overtly pornographic, though often disguised as ethnographical work aimed at classifying and categorising the different races of the empire. (Ponzanesi 166)

Carter employs the trope of Black Venus to expound the scripting of black feminine body in colonial narratives. The dark Venus narrative expresses the “contaminated” and “highly asymmetrical relationship between the ruler and the ruled” (Ponzanesi 166). Carter’s Black Venus, as in other narratives on this character, “was a woman of immense height, the type of those beautiful giantesses who, a hundred years later, would grace the stages of the Crazy Horse or the Casino de Paris in sequin cache-sexe and tinsel pasties, divinely tall, the colour and texture of suede ... But vivacity, exuberance were never [her] ... qualities” (BV 3). She constantly “coughs and grumbles” and is full of resentment. On days “nipped by frost and sulking... she looked more like an old crow with rusty feathers in a miserable huddle by the smoky fire. ...” (2). Here, the narrative technique of disappointment is employed to de-eroticise the exotic Black Venus by presenting her as grumpy, irritable and prone to sickness.

The constructedness of the Black Venus narrative as well as the story of a people (the colonized) robbed of their history is explicated through a description of Jeanne Duval as having no documented date of birth, no fixed name or place of birth. Her story, just as the story of the colonies and its people, starts with the year she met Baudelaire:



Nobody seems to know in what year Jeanne Duval was born, although the year in which she met Charles Baudelaire (1842) is precisely logged... Besides Duval, she also used the names Prosper and Lemer, as if her name was of no consequence. Where she came from is a problem; books suggest Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, or Santo Domingo, in the Caribbean, take your pick of two different sides of the world. (Her *pays d'origine* of less importance than it would have been had she been a wine.) ... She had been deprived of history, she was the pure child of the colony. The colony—white, imperious—had fathered her. (BV 7-8)

“Black Venus” presents Jeanne Duval as robbed of her tongue and as an abode of unlimited sexuality, ignorant, rash and available. She spoke, “as though her tongue had been cut out and another one sewn in that did not fit well,” Jeanne “did not understand her lover’s poetry... his eloquence denied her language. It made her dumb ... an ignorant black girl, good for nothing; correction, good for only one thing...” (BV 9). The ideological construct of black women as penetrated, silenced, possessed, and as “static, frozen, [and] fixed eternally” is brought to the fore in the aforementioned description (Said, *Orientalism* 208). The narratives of Black Venus as constructed through the writings of Baudelaire are further scrutinized in the lines, “[s]he looked like the source of light but this was an illusion; she only shone because the dying fire lit his presents to her. Although his regard made her luminous, his shadow made her blacker than she was, his shadow could eclipse her entirely” (BV 4). This is a commentary on the violence inherent in the construction of Jeanne Duval as Baudelaire’s muse as well as the colonial narratives on the exotic Other. Here, the stereotypical representations of the feminine as goddesses and muses are seen as attempts to tether them with flattery.

The element of the pornographic in the relationship between Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval is highlighted in Jeanne’s dance performances for her keeper, who, “liked to have her make a spectacle of herself, to provide a sumptuous feast for his bright eyes that were always bigger than his belly” (BV 9). He made her dance naked except for the bangles and beads he had given her. She was to “undulate rhythmically” in a “series of voluptuous poses”—a dance devised specifically for her and in his taste (BV 3). The associations of the feminine and the masculine with nature and culture are also highlighted through an exaggerated representation of the dance performance:

It is essential to their connection that, if she should put on the private garments of nudity, its non-sartorial regalia of jewellery and rouge, then he himself must retain the public nineteenth-century masculine impedimenta of frock coat (exquisitely cut); white shirt (pure silk, London tailored); oxblood cravat; and impeccable trousers. ... Man does and is dressed to do so; his skin is his own business. He is artful, the creation of culture. Woman is; and is therefore, fully dressed in no clothes at all, her skin is common property, she is being at one with nature in a fleshy simplicity that, he insists, is the most abominable of artifices. (BV 10)

“Black Venus” abounds in references to the social constructedness of gender and race. Prostitution, another important point of contention within the feminist



movement, is also discussed in “Black Venus.” For instance, Jeanne wonders about the distinction between dancing naked in front of one man who paid and in front of a group of men who paid, and she comes to the conclusion that “somewhere in the difference, lay morality” (BV4). Prostitution, to her, “was a question of number; of being paid by more than one person at a time. That was bad. She was not a bad girl. When she slept with anyone else but Daddy, she never let them pay. It was a matter of honour. It was a question of fidelity” (BV4). These ruminations clearly elucidate that values, ethics as well as oppression mean different things to women in different situations.

Justine, Juliette, Leilah, Eve, and Jeanne Duval have their own unique struggles and responses. Consequently, the futility of trying to find commonalities between women in varied circumstances as well as their problems is emphasized. Pornography as linked to disputes over sex/gender distinction, where “sex and gender are either collapsed together, and rendered both analytically and politically indistinguishable, or . . . are severed from each other and seen as endlessly recombinable in such figures of boundary crossing as transsexualism, transvestism, bisexuality, drag and impersonation,” find expression in Carter’s writings (De Lauretis, “Feminism” 28). Eve, created by Mother in Beulah after the moulds of feminist utopia through the castration and psycho-surgery of Evelyn, and Tristessa, a transvestite and “the greatest female impersonator in the world” in *The Passion of New Eve*, enact the collapse and the endless re-combination of the sex/gender distinction, respectively. Carter’s tales, which are replete with references to the pornographic in language, style and motifs, examine the pro-pornography as well as the anti-pornography positions, and caution against a relapse into the essentialist distinction between the phantasmatic and the real. Carter’s critique of the feminist use of gender and genre also problematizes the cause and effect pattern such attempts rely on. Yet Carter’s writings, instead of choosing sides, reveal and revel in these contradictions and practice a self-reflexive feminist theory. Her writings perform the feminist theory as posited by Teresa de Lauretis:

A feminist theory begins when the feminist critique of ideologies becomes conscious of itself and turns to question its own body of writing and critical interpretations, its basic assumptions of terms and the practices which they enable and from which they emerge. This is not merely an expansion or a reconfiguration of boundaries, but a qualitative shift in political and historical consciousness. This shift implies . . . a displacement and a self-displacement... [to] a place of discourse from which speaking and thinking are at best tentative, uncertain and unguaranteed. (de Lauretis, “Displacing” 138-39)

However, Carter does not propose an annulment of political struggle for the emancipation of women. Instead, she endorses a change in the focus of the struggle, that is, to engage with the current scenario and expose the latent oppression and its underlying power dynamics. And without resorting to any foundationalist claims about race or gender, she offers a constructive critique of the problems plaguing the feminist use of the pornographic. Thus, pornography, pleasure and violence are



discussed through narratives that are an amalgam of the gothic, the pornographic and the fantastic, and the resultant ambivalence is embraced as an integral part of postmodernist writing.

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