

GROTESQUE BODIES AND SPACES IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE*

Papatya ALKAN GENCA¹

ABSTRACT

Angela Carter's widely-acclaimed novel The Passion of New Eve is a dystopian text in which a bleak, rotten, and destructive setting provides the backdrop for the problematization of such issues as gender and politics, and the collapse of binaries. It is significant to focus on the novel's dismantling of binaries, especially in terms of the problematized distinction between human and non-human, biological body and machine, inside and outside, man-made and natural. Such dismantling is especially manifest in the physical characterization of Eve/lyn, the Mother, Zero, and Tristessa. All of these characters are presented as forms of excess. Moreover, the spaces they inhabit reinforce and perpetuate their excessiveness as well as grotesque depictions. In this respect, this paper argues that grotesque bodies embedded within grotesque landscapes in The Passion of New Eve makes it possible to have an ecological discussion of the relationship between the body and the environment.

Keywords: *The Passion of New Eve, grotesque, excess, posthuman.*

ANGELA CARTER'İN YENİ HAVVA'NIN ÇİLESİ ADLI ROMANINDA GROTESK BEDENLER VE MEKANLAR

ÖZ

Angela Carter'in geniş yankı uyandırmış olan Yeni Havva'nın Çilesi adlı romanı, karanlık, çürümüş ve yıkıcı bir ortamın toplumsal cinsiyet ve politika ile ikiliklerin çöküşü gibi meselelerin sorunsallaştırılmasına arka plan oluşturduğu distopik bir metindir. Romanın ikilikleri parçalarına ayırmasına odaklanmak - özellikle insan ve insan olmayan, biyolojik beden ve makina, içerisi ve dışarı, insan eliyle yapılmış ve doğal gibi ikiliklerin arasındaki problematik farklılık bağlamında odaklanmak - önemlidir. Bu parçalara ayırma durumu özellikle Eve/lyn, Mother, Zero ve Tristessa adlı karakterlerin fiziksel tasvirlerinde aşikardır. Bu karakterlerin hepsi "fazlalık" biçimleri olarak sunulmaktadır. Dahası, işgal ettikleri mekanlar bunların fazlalıklarını ve de grotesk tasvirlerini pekiştirip yeniden üretmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu makale Yeni Havva'nın Çilesi'ndeki grotesk mekanlarda var olan grotesk bedenlerin, beden ve çevre

¹ Assistant Prof. Dr., Manisa Celal Bayar University, Dept. of English, papatyaalkan@yahoo.com

arasındaki ilişkiyi ekolojik bir çerçevede tartışmaya olanak sağlamakta olduğunu söylemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni Havva'nın Çilesi, grotesk, fazlalık, insan-ötesi

Introduction

Angela Carter's 1977 novel *The Passion of New Eve* is the parodic story of an Englishman called Evelyn who becomes Eve through a series of extraordinary events in a rather dystopian and apocalyptic America. This paper looks into the text's employ of the grotesque which is manifest in various key characters, and the text's use of the setting in relation to both the grotesque and the posthuman. It argues that *The Passion of New Eve* lays bare the ambivalent dualities that have been central to Western thought such as nature/culture, human/non-human, inside/outside, and man/woman. It also argues that these binaries are exposed to be problematic in the text's portrayal of Eve/lyn, the Mother, Zero, and Tristessa (hence the grotesque characters) and its representation of New York and the desert (hence the grotesque spaces).

Introduced into the literary debates especially with Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, the grotesque has a long history across multiple disciplines. Originally a term used in art theory/history, the grotesque has also been in use to describe, evaluate, or criticize certain works of literature. Its first conceptual use is usually attributed to the discovery of Nero's *Domus Aerea* the walls of which were covered with paintings that looked peculiarly disproportionate and in stark contrast to the ideal shape or form.² These are "a series of strange and mysterious drawings, combining vegetarian and animal and human body parts in intricate, intermingled, and fantastical designs" (Russo 3), and they were called grotesque after the Italian word *grotto*, which denotes a small cave, because they were assumed to be underground. This allusion the cave within the word itself ties it to such concepts as "low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral" (Russo 1). Today, the grotesque is used as an adjective to describe anything that is ugly, distorted, weird, or hideous. However, this is a rather wide definition which does not really say much about the nuances that differentiate

² It should be kept in mind that there are "many examples of drawings and objects in the grotto-esque style which predate both classical and renaissance Rome" (Russo 3).

the grotesque from other forms. While the weirdness of the grotesque form is immediately evident, one should acknowledge that such weirdness has a purpose beyond providing a mere visual stimulus. Therefore, this paper proposes that one should think of the grotesque as a critique of binaries such as normal/abnormal, sane/insane, beautiful/ugly, proportionate/distorted, and so on. Then, the grotesque resides at a gray area where strict distinctions collide and collapse. This gives way to a re-thinking of the world designed on a binary structure. The definition of the grotesque as such is significant for the relationship between the human and the environment in the sense that the grotesque offers an alternative to the conventional and monolithic perception of this relationship. Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* provides a variety of possibilities to see how this alternative can be observed.

Synopsis of *The Passion of New Eve*

An Englishman called Evelyn, who is supposed to be employed at a university in New York, moves there only to find himself in a chaotic urban space where women and the black are the two most prominent fear factors as they fight for domination in the city. Unable to find work in this chaotic environment and equally unwilling to go back to England, Evelyn stays in New York and eventually falls in lust with a young woman called Leilah. Their relationship is purely physical, and it comes to an end when Leilah gets pregnant.³ With no reason to remain in New York, he decides to have a road trip (an American classic) going through the desert, but gets captured by the minions of a woman who calls herself the Mother. The Mother is a scientist/cult figure who resides in a laboratory called Beulah where she turns Evelyn into a woman and calls her Eve. The Mother intends to impregnate Eve with Evelyn's sperm, but at some point Eve manages to escape from the laboratory only to fall prey to a man called Zero, who lives on his ranch with a number of women none of whom are allowed to speak in human language. Zero is obsessed with a silent-movie star named Tristessa of whom Evelyn is also a huge fan. He believes that Tristessa is a

³ Her pregnancy indicates a profound "physical" change, and therefore marks the beginning of the ending of their visceral relationship, because it was her body that Evelyn seeks after, and nothing more. Reducing her (or anybody, or any "body") to the outward shell will be an important part of the narrative as the story unfolds.

witch who has made him impotent. Eventually finding her in her highly reclusive place in the desert, Zero and his women destroy it although Zero cannot kill Tristessa. It turns out that Tristessa is not biologically a woman but a man impersonating one. Eve and Tristessa escape, and together they learn (or, rather, “re-learn”) their respective manhood and womanhood in each other: Eve learns to be a “woman proper,” and Tristessa learns to be a “man proper.” Their relationship, however, is short-lived because Tristessa gets shot and killed, and Eve manages to escape. The narrative moves from the desert to New York; Eve meets Leilah, who, this time, is called Lilith, and as it happens, she is the daughter of the Mother. She offers to give Eve her penis and testicles back as they have been kept in a refrigerator, but Eve refuses the offer. In the end, the story comes to full circle when Evelyn, now Eve, sets out to go back to England, leaving New York behind, leaving literal body parts behind, but taking with herself things and experiences she has lacked before.

Grotesque Bodies

Mikhail Bakhtin pays specific attention to how the grotesque is indispensably linked to the body, and how the grotesque body is significantly different from the classical or conventional representations of the body. He argues that “the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon” (317). This can be observed in the bodily portrayals of Eve/lyn, the Mother, Zero, and Tristessa in *The Passion of New Eve*. Their grotesqueness, however, does not come in singular, all-encompassing forms. Nevertheless, a shared conceptual frame underlying all of them can be discerned in their different portrayals. All these characters are various forms of excess, and the text deals with how they relate (or do not relate) to their environments in their capacities as (human) beings. They are hybrid and grotesque creatures, inhabiting zones that are at the intersection of human and non-human, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural. In a way, they are the embodiment of the problematic binaries that inform the debates of ecology and literary theory.

Western thought has always functioned through a zero-one logic where there are clearly drawn boundaries and hierarchies between what is called binary opposites. Such binary opposites, as Derrida would say, lie at the heart of Western philosophy. For the discussion in this paper, the distinction between the mind and the body is of paramount importance. Such distinction is based on

Descartes' contention that the mind should be the prioritized over the body due to its ability to think and to be in no dependency on materiality. In *Discourse on the Method*, he proposes the following: "I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is solely to think, and who, in order to exist does not require any place, or depend on any material thing. So much so that this "I" that is to say the soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body" (36). He, thus, locates the self outside of the body and disregards the body as an indispensable component of the self. Moreover, such a formulation sees the body as a complete thing in itself, something whose contours are clearly and indisputably visible to all. However, "the identity of the human body can never be viewed as a final or finished product as in the case of the Cartesian automaton, since it is a body that is in constant interchange with its environment. The human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies (Gatens 110). From an ecocritical point of view, then, there is a continuous interaction, the human body is one that alters and is altered by the environment. This interaction is also evident in the human body's interaction with other bodies; not only human bodies but also non-human bodies. In *The Passion of New Eve*, such interaction is much clear in the relationship between Eve/lyn and the Mother.

Being informed by the environment for Evelyn, however, starts even before his encounter with the Mother. In New York, he is defined in bodily terms since he is the subject to his object of desire (i.e. Leila), a male body to be despised by the women, and a white body to be looked down upon by the black. However, his grotesque transformation does not properly start until he gets captured by the disciples of the Mother. Eve/lyn, indeed, is the most grotesque body in the sense that his "self-ness" is so viscerally and painfully distorted in front of the readers, so to speak. Evelyn becomes Eve, turning into the embodiment of the Mother's experiment for creating the perfect woman and of Zero's object of violence as well as his own ideal woman. It is not only her body that undergoes change but also her psychology which becomes tuned into being a woman. Indeed, this is one of the most striking moments in the narrative where the body informs and transforms the mind, and not vice versa. The mother claims that "a change in the appearance will restructure the essence" (PNE 68), and thus underscoring clearly how Descartes' formulation falls short. As such, the text subverts the mind/body dichotomy.

The Mother – his destroyer and her creator - is also a grotesque figure both in person and in appearance. She becomes too much woman with her two rows of breasts and her gigantic vagina, which serves as a metaphorical as well as a literal *vagina dentata*. The fact that she is not given a proper name but called the Mother is significant as it indicates how she is limited to and by her sex and body. Her name – the Mother – surely brings forth a series of associations. Traditionally aligned with Nature itself, motherhood is one of the (few) positive images allocated to women. The tendency is to think of the mother and nature as nurturing and creative figures. However, the Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* has a more ambivalent configuration: her powers lie in her ability to construct as well as to destruct. Just like the mother image, nature itself can also present in violent ways. In this sense, it can be claimed that there is a deviation, in the text, from the positive narratives perpetuated about nature and motherhood. Moreover, it is not possible to think of the Mother within an either/or dichotomy, which also underlines her grotesqueness.

Zero's grotesqueness is related less to his physical appearance than to his actions. His excess lies in his hyper-masculine and highly aggressive attitude towards women. At this point, he may seem quite similar to the Mother. However, he is also impotent, which means he does not have the actual agency to impregnate women. In this respect, unlike the Mother he lacks the potency or the agency to transform his environment in a visible and visceral way. That does not mean, nevertheless, that he does not have the means to do so. He uses a more psychological construction and destruction in subduing the woman in his ranch. Zero is the perfect example of a carnophallogocentric man, as he is most frequently depicted as a flesh-eating, phallus-crazy man. His desire to situate himself as the logos is most evident in the way he devours his food just like he seems to want to devour the women in his vicinity although he is not capable of doing so in deed. In this respect, he is both potent and impotent, both the center and the periphery, and both the subject and the object of a narrative which rests on a man who has trapped women because he is supposedly trapped by a woman himself.

These three figures become the lynchpin of the text's main concern: dismantled and problematized dualities shown through characters which embody more than one thing. In other words, they are not either/or characters but are both/and configurations; and this is exactly how the grotesque can be a meaningful means of

unfolding the text and its strategies. Does the text suggest that the reader consider the Mother as a nurturer or a destroyer? How can one categorize Eve/lyn since conventional categorizations as man or woman fall short? How can one conceptualize Zero and his potency/impotency? Such questions underscore the ambivalence that the text as well as the grotesque relies on. In other words, the characters' excess and ambivalence make them perfect grotesques (obviously an oxymoron).

In these figures, there is an underlying connection between what constitutes the body and what constitutes the self; this connection becomes markedly evident in their excessive presence, both bodily and otherwise. Their excess seemingly situates them in a negative space, although it does not have to be seen as such. In her reading of Haraway and Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti argues that "it is crucial to invent conceptual schemes that allow us to rethink the unity and the interdependence of the bodily and its historical 'others' at the very point in time when these others return to dislocate the foundations of the humanistic worldview" (203). She calls it "the positivity of monsters" (203), and it is this monstrosity that requires further exploration in order to understand how the body can be thought in relation to the posthuman, because "the cyborg, the monster, the animal, the classical 'other than' the human are thus emancipated from the category of pejorative difference and shown forth in a more positive light" (Braidotti 204).

These grotesque bodies, then, can be also discussed within the framework of the posthuman. Just like the grotesque, the posthuman has various (contesting) definitions and demarcation; however, for this discussion, the posthuman can be taken as "being celebratory about the collapse of restrictive human boundaries such as gender and race, yet also containing within it more disturbing elements of the uncanny and apocalyptic" (McAuley n.pag.). In other words, the posthuman carries within itself contradictory and ambivalent configurations of what it means to be human (and other-than-human). In literature, apocalyptic and the grotesque already overlap, because the apocalyptic narrative "takes the form of a revelation of the end of history. Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed" (Thompson 13). It is not the world that is transformed but also the human and the human predicament. In this negative space, the human cannot maintain its already existing forms and configurations, and thus is utterly transformed into somebody (and some "body") else. Evelyn's

transformation into a woman, the Mother's metamorphosed body, and Zero's monstrous masculinity all attest to the same idea: the human, the man, the woman, the body as concepts fall short in being a denominator in this space, and therefore "the human" enters into the realm of the posthuman. It is the grotesque form which can be used to explain and explore this entry into the posthuman. As is already noted, McAuley draws attention to the overlap between the posthuman and the apocalyptic and dystopian, and *The Passion of New Eve's* elaborate and metaphorically rich use of setting brings forth the most evident superimposition of the two, especially in its portrayal and employ of New York and the desert. Indeed, it is already evident that New York and the desert already stand on two opposing ends of the spectrum as far as space is concerned.

Grotesque Spaces

New York is the ultimate urban space, or a "concrete jungle where dreams are made of," according to the lyrics of a popular Alicia Keys song. This juxtaposition of concrete – a representation of human civilization – and jungle – a representation of nature – marks New York as an important place to discuss the grotesque, which is already defined in the present article as a critique of binaries. The text's portrayal of New York becomes a means of simultaneous dismantling of several dichotomies.

Upon his arrival at New York to work at a university, Evelyn soon realizes that what he imagined to find there and what he actually experiences are completely different from one another. First of all, he expects a different experience since in his mind New York is the opposite of Europe, the first one standing for the new, as its name also indicates, and the latter stands for the old. Moreover, England represents the idyllic countryside, which Evelyn calls the "moist, green, gentle island" (*PNE* 15). The new in New York alludes to better, more interesting, more advanced, and more civilized. However, instead of a vibrant urban setting elevated by advanced technology, the New York of *The Passion of New Eve* is gripped by chaos: "Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the city [...] I had imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration [...] But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colors, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world" (*PNE* 10). In other words, Evelyn walks into a city of backwardness and uncivilized darkness as opposed to a technologically advanced pillar

of civilization. He gives even more details which solidify his contention that New York is not really habitable:

It was, then, an alchemical city, it was chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night. Built on a grid like the harmonious cities of the Chinese Empire, planned like those cities, in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason, the streets had been given numbers and not names out of respect for pure function, had been designed in clean, abstract lines, discrete blocks, geometric intersections, to avoid just those vile repositories of the past, sewers of history that poison the lives of European cities. *A city of visible reason* – that had been the intention.” (PNE 16) (emphasis mine)

New York, as this depiction puts forth, is a failed project of human reason. His experience with Leilah and his observations about the militant groups taking over the city make Evelyn weary of New York. Feeling sick of the urban space and looking forward to experiencing its complete conceptual opposite, Evelyn decides to take a road trip towards the West, to the desert. He thinks of the desert as a pure space, devoid of the complexity and chaos that New York stands for: “Festering with misanthropy, dreading the pestilence I ascribed to inhabited places I abandoned all my ill-made plans. I would not go to South, there were too many ghosts of Europe in the Bayous. I would go where there were no ghosts. *I needed pure air and cleanness. I would go to the desert. There, the primordial light, unexhausted by eyes, would purify me*” (PNE 38) (emphasis mine).

Thus, he wants to go to the desert, assuming that he would be free of human population, that he would have contact with nature in its purest form, that the nature would provide him the absolution he seeks. The text obviously plays on the culture/nature dichotomy. However, it does not make a clear-cut preference for either of these binaries. Both New York (representative of culture) and the desert (representative of nature) prove to be equally unwelcoming and problematic. In other words, Carter's text destabilizes conventional conceptualizations of the city and the rural life. Thus, it is not possible to pinpoint a stable standpoint with regards to either category.

Conclusion

Carolyn Merchant draws attention to the reciprocity between the human and the non-human world, and she posits that “[h]umans

adapt to nature's environmental conditions; but when humans alter their surroundings, nature responds through ecological changes" (8). This reciprocity finds the perfect outlet in apocalyptic and dystopian narratives as they portray how human actions may create a certain world as well as how a certain world may inform the form and direction of human actions. They problematize the existing discourse in their obviously chaotic settings and characterizations because they are conscious of the inadequacies and problems presented by them. In a similar vein, Rosi Braidotti contends that "[w]e need to find new forms of literacy to decode today's world" (200). In other words, she suggests that old binaries do not function properly in explaining the human and its relation to the world, and vice versa. This paper has argued that the grotesque is one of the key elements that can help decode today's world because it has already been at work to destabilize the distinction between the organic and the non-organic, human and non-human, and so on. By looking at the ugly, the monstrous, the rejected, the disposed of, one can find pathways to understand and make sense of the profound changes that have been in progress in the world.

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