

Futuristic Dystopias as Feminist Protest in Angela Carter's fiction

Dr. Rajaram Sitaram Zirange

Head, Postgraduate Department of English,
Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University
Yashwantrao Mohite College, Pune – 38 (India).

Angela Carter (1940-1992) began her writing career as a journalist. In her very first novel, *Shadow Dance* she challenges the notion of sexuality. Though she wrote in the tradition of Realism, her characters are violent and bizarre. The critics describe Angela Carter as a Gothic novelist. She herself agrees with the label on account for her fondness for macabre, the gothic blood-and-thunderstorms and creepy atmosphere. She is also called a writer of fantasy. She uses fantasy to criticize and examine the material conditions of the real world around her. But she does not like the meaning of the word 'fantasy'. Fantasy is an escapist fiction, and Carter does not try to escape from reality. Her biographer, Lorna Sage, says:

(Carter's fictions) prowl around on the fringes of proper English novel like dream monsters-nasty erotic, brilliant creations that feed off cultural crisis. She has taken over the sub-genres (romance, spies, porn, crime, gothic, Science Fiction) and turned their grubby stereotypes into sophisticated mythology... she writes aggressively against the grain of Puritanism-cum-naturalism, producing adult fairy tales. (Carter: 1969, p. 2).

As a feminist writer of Science Fiction, Carter contrasts reality with the imaginative world of the future, or the world populated by bizarre characters and situations.

Generally, Science Fiction is associated with a wide range of strange machines, technological devices like robots, ray-guns, space-ships, time-machines and, of course, strange creatures, monsters and aliens in Outer-space. This association is created by the pulp-science fiction that has become very popular in the USA, and now in other countries as well. The definition of Science Fiction given in the Oxford English Dictionary emphasizes this very aspect of Science Fiction. However, Science fiction as a literary genre has more serious aims and objectives than merely narrating space-saga on fantastic planetary locations. Such serious intentions have been encoded in the definitions of Science Fiction given by the writers and critics such as Darko Suvin, Robert Scholes, Damien Broderick and others. According to them Science Fiction presents an alterity or a world radically different from our own in an imaginative framework, but confronts our own world in a rational cognitive manner. Science Fiction uses metaphoric and metonymic devices to contrast the world of imagination to the real world. For example, if a Science Fiction novel wishes to deal with alienness, it will present the aliens in concrete shapes, metaphorically, to show the cultural, social and technological change. Science Fiction uses a 'novum' (a new thing) as a device to present the 'difference' or 'otherness' from the world of reality.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter has created three different urban cities of the future. These futuristic cities have been created to question the notions of Gender and explore the tyranny of cultural myths about woman. In Science Fiction, the women writers have created such urban spaces to situate woman or female societies. Marge Piercy, in her *Woman On the Edge of Time*; Joanna Russ, in her *The Female Man*; Mary Bradley Lane, in her *Mizora*, have created Utopian urban spaces in the shape of female body. Their intention has been to retrace female history and tradition.

In *The Passion of New Eve* the protagonist, Evelyn, is a traveller, who comes from London to New York. The city of New York is futuristic dystopia, a post-apocalyptic United States, which is a city of 'lurid and Gothic darkness' (Carter: 1969, p. 44), a city of baby sized rats, full of violence and disorder, broken down sewage system, angry women sharpshooters swiping at men looking at blue-film posters, the blacks building a wall around Harlem and dissolution. It is a world of decay and dissolution. 'That City had become nothing but a gigantic metaphor for death'. (Carter: 1969, p. 45).

This dystopia of New York conceived in terms of male gender, where women are presented, and treated as sex objects. It is a phallo-centric world where woman is subjugated to violation.

New York, as a gendered city, is full of filth and violence. It is a city in chaos, an 'alchemical city' in the process of change. The metaphor of alchemy, an art of transmuting base metals like iron into gold, is a central idea in the *The Passion of New Eve*. Boroslav, the Czech soldier, who lives in the same hotel as Evelyn, possessed this art of alchemy, which has a pseudo-philosophical and spiritual dimension. According to this philosophy, all substances are composed of one primitive matter, the prima materia. This prima materia was identified as the mercury of the philosophers, combining male and female, like a hermaphrodite. Throughout this novel, Carter uses this idea of alchemical transmutation, combination of opposites.

As a decaying city, New York is shown to be disintegrating, but Boroslav, the alchemist, thinks possibility of creativity within its deterioration.

Chaos, the primordial substance, Chaos the earliest state of disorganized creation, blindly impelled towards the creation of a new order of phenomena of hidden meanings. The fructifying chaos of anteriority, the state before the beginning of the beginning. (Carter: 1969, p. 4).

The protagonist, Evelyn, flees from this world of disintegration to find himself:

I would go to the desert ... there I thought I might find that most elusive of chimeras, myself. (Carter: 1969, p. 11).

However, he realizes later:

I felt that I was in great hurry but I did not know I was speeding towards, the very enigma I had left behind ... , the dark room, the mirror, the woman (Carter: 1969, p. 146).

The other futuristic world created by Carter in the *The Passion of New Eve* is the city of Beulah, the matriarchal city. Carter borrowed the name Beulah from William Blake's writings. Beulah for Blake was the state of innocence. As Harold Bloom points out in his *The Visionary Company: A Rending of English Romantic Poetry*:

Beulah is female, Eden male Beulah, according to Blake, is the emanation of Eden that is its outer and feminist or created form. Beulah is therefore temporal and illusory Its emotions are all of the forgiving variety, emphasizing feminine self sacrifice (Carter: 1977, p. 10).

But Carter's Beulah is a prototype of feminist separatist communities created in the Feminist Science Fiction of Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy and others. The topography of Beulah is unique in the sense that it is created in the shape of a womb. Evelyn says:

Beulah lies in the interior, in the inward part of the earth; its emblem is a broken column; ... Mother built this underground town, she borrowed it out below the sand. (Carter: 1977, p. 15).

The shape and the colours of Beulah have artificial quality. Evelyn describes the room he was kept in:

This room was quite round, as if it had been blown out, like bubble gum, inflated under the earth, its walls were of a tough, synthetic integument, with an unnatural sheen upon it that troubled me to see, it was so slick, so lifeless. (Carter: 1977, p. 13).

Since Beulah is underground, there is dampness in it, and absence of light, as it would be in the womb of a woman. It has the colours of a woman's womb. Evelyn realizes:

It will become the place where I was born. (Carter: 1977, p. 38).

Dimness and shadow characterized Beulah. It is an antithesis of patriarchy. The granite structure of a monument erected at the entrance of Beulah represents a stone cock with testicles, 'but the cock is broken off clean in the middle'. (Carter: 1977, p. 39).

The city of Beulah is presided over by the Mother. Evelyn describes, her as 'a menacing Hindu Statue', 'a sacred monster',

She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; She was breasted like a sow -she possessed two tiers of nipples. (Bloom: 1963, pp. 21-22).

Beulah is a mixture of mythology and technology. There are modern gadgets like transmitter, modern weapons, and very sophisticated instruments and a laboratory for surgery, which Evelyn calls a 'triumph of Science'. The mysterious announcements coming from the transmitter reverberate in the enclosed womblike place, creating terror. The maxims proclaimed from the loudspeakers preach principles of matriarchy and reinterpret the patriarchal myths like Oedipus. The world of Beulah is the reversal of world of patriarchy. Technology, which is normally associated with patriarchy and male gender, is interpreted here in terms of matriarchy. In spite of the technological details, the presentation of Beulah is surreal; it appears to Evelyn as a nightmare.

The aim of this female Utopia is to bring revolution in the social and political system and in the system of beliefs. The mother is a central figure in Beulah, who has transformed herself by plastic surgery, and plans to transform Evelyn as a New Eve, who will create a new world order giving birth to a new Messiah. She would like to obliterate altogether the male-female dichotomy. So Beulah is not merely a Utopia, it is a programme to create a world without gendered prejudices, and domination based on gender-distinction.

Evelyn, metamorphosed as New Eve, physically a woman but psychologically still a man, runs away from the world of Beulah in search of his true self. Evelyn comes back to the desert. After this transformation into a woman, the ideal change of place for Evelyn is the patriarchal township of Zero, where she would undergo the essential experience of the life of a woman in a male dominated society.

Zero's city is a grotesque place, where pigs are more respected than woman. Zero, who rules the place, is a great autocrat. He rules his seven wives mercilessly. Zero believes that women are to be degraded and reviled. He does not allow them even the use of language. They are not supposed to shoo away his pigs. He is obsessed with the belief that Tristessa, the Hollywood heroine, has magically rendered him infertile, and until he discovers her, ravishes

her and kills her. His procreativity will not be restored. He is able to rule his wives savagely because his women are made to believe that their good health depends on his periodic copulation with them. These women represent the women in general in a patriarchal society, in which women have been allotted specific roles for generations together. Zero's world is prescribed for New Eve to learn and understand 'socially constructed images of the feminine as well as atrocities committed on women by men throughout time, from clitoridectomy to suttee. (Rubenstein: 1993, p. 110). The New Eve undergoes by sexual experience for some time since, though physically a woman, psychologically she is a man.

Zero's city is apparently the antithesis of Beulah, the City of the Mother. The Mother represents fertility, while Zero's City stands for infertility. Zero himself is sterile and meaningfully situated in the desert, a symbol for sterility. Secondly, if Mother stands for totalitarian female sexuality, Zero stands for totalitarian male sexuality. Zero's city is in dazzling sunlight. There cannot be any shadow in the desert. But Beulah, the mother's womb, is full of shadows. The male-world of Zero represents rationality, and it is comprehensible because there are no shadows of doubts. But the world of Beulah is incomprehensible. Evelyn may be bewildered in Zero's place, but he/she has no doubt about the role he/she must play there.

But just as Beulah is a combination of opposites: 'there is a place where contraries are equally true. This place is called Beulah.¹⁹ These contraries are mythology and technology. Technology is associated with male while mythology with female. The mother in Beulah combines the two. Similarly, the world of Zero involves contradiction. Zero produces his own myth of male power of rejuvenation. He himself labours under irrational belief that Tristessa was the cause of his sterility. The meaning of the two cities is subverted by Carter in the course of narration. However, the point is that the cities built by her possess the element of 'estrangement' through time and space.

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