

# Beyond the Borders of the Body

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## Abstract

Fay Weldon and Angela Carter offer a viable feminist politics in their narratives by exposing and exploding the rigid gender boundaries of dominant culture. Both writers articulate their female characters' identities in the realm of 'elsewhere', while at the same time subverting phallogocentrism by employing mimicry as a mockery tool. The female characters' bodies under scrutiny in the current paper are expressing their 'deviant' physicality by means of radical alterations of their body forms in the name of the ideal beauty. Their pursuit, however, is an intensely subversive method which mimics the phallic script for the purpose of overthrowing it. In their pursuit of body alteration, Carter and Weldon's female characters share the belief that you can control what you otherwise could not through body technologies. Their characters' body modifications address gender inequality, a way to rebel against male dominance and to reclaim power over their own bodies, therefore they are perceived as spaces of important social significance. Instead of an object of social control by patriarchy, the body is perceived as a space for exploring one's own individual, unique identity, experiencing pleasure and establishing bonds to others.

**Key Words:** mimicry, feminism, identity, subversion, parody

## I. Eluding the script: mimicking an ideal body

For the purpose of the current analysis, a discussion of the concept of 'mimicry' will be necessary. Mimicry has been used in the post-colonial theory to designate an ambivalent relation between colonizers and colonized in which the colonized subject was encouraged to mimic the colonizers' beliefs and values; also, the concept was adopted within the feminist theories. The most important aspect in this context is that the imperfect copy of the colonizer could eventually pose a real threat to the dominant system by means of parody and mockery, much in the same way that women could mock and parody patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty and thus endanger patriarchal ideology.

Mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite [...] the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference [...] mimicry is therefore stricken by indeterminacy: [it] emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry also poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers. (Bhaba 86)

The concept of mimicry sits at the core of Homi Bhaba's view of the ambivalence of colonial discourse, in which the colonized subject is reproduced as "almost the same, but not quite." (Bhaba 86) The copying of the colonizing culture, behavior, manners and values by the colonized contains both mockery and a certain 'menace', 'so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.' (Bhaba 86) Mimicry reveals the limitation in the authority of colonial discourse, almost the same way as it does in the phallogocentrism, where it embodies the roots of its own annihilation.

The consequences of this for both post-colonial and feminist studies are quite profound, for what emerges through this flaw in colonial/patriarchal power is *writing*. The

'menace' of post-colonial/feminine writing comes from this disruption of colonial/patriarchal authority, from the fact that its mimicry is also potentially mockery. The threat inherent in mimicry, then, comes not from an overt resistance but from the way in which it continually suggests an identity not quite like the colonizer/not quite like patriarchy's values and ideals. This identity of the colonized/feminine subject – "almost the same" (Bhaba 89) as the ideal, but not quite, poses a threat to the colonizer/patriarchy.

It is from this shady area between mimicry and mockery where phallocentrism comes to be threatened by a radically transformed female body which mimics the ideal of feminine beauty. The pervasive images of women ideal bodies have created a cultural standard of beauty which more than often is parodic in that it operates as a simulacrum, imitating or mimicking a fabrication of the perfect woman. This paper will argue that Fay Weldon's Ruth from *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and Angela Carter's Eve/Evelyn from *The Passion of a New Eve* articulate a postmodern feminist politics through the inclusion of mimicry as a tool for the subversion of phallocentrism.

Weldon and Carter successfully show that the transformation of the female body is an effective site of resistance. While drawing on science fiction as-yet-undiscovered technology and invoking their characters' excessive transformations, both authors enable readers to consider the potential of a feminist 'elsewhere'. It is hoped to articulate this ambiguous space of 'elsewhere' throughout this paper.

Since both novels hinge on revenge plots, each makes a statement about the relationship between gender and power. Weldon's Ruth chooses to undergo intensive plastic surgery to take revenge for her husband's infidelities and to look like, or mimic, his lover, Mary Fisher. On the surface, Weldon falls prey to traditional romantic ideology, but the excessiveness of Ruth's transformation actually undoes the romance novel.

In Carter's *New Eve* there are two connected revenge plots. First and foremost is "Mother's" transformation of Evelyn into Eve. Apparently, she does this as a radical feminist revenge, marking Evelyn's misogyny to stand for the crimes of all men. While her plan is partially fulfilled, she is unable to impregnate the transformed Eve with Evelyn's sperm before Eve escapes; Evelyn is still radically transformed into Eve. Clearly, though, Carter is not succumbing to a simple shift from patriarchy to matriarchy. In fact, Beulah's matriarchy is just as problematic as the existing patriarchy, and Carter shows this problem quite well through her poetics. The second revenge plot concerns Zero's crazed insistence that an old film star, Tristessa, has cursed him with impotence. What readers eventually learn of Tristessa is that "she" is a "he" who has enacted her transformation through hormones and performance. By using both revenge plots, Carter destabilizes any ideology that might simply replace the existing one. Clearly, the protagonists in both *The Passion of a New Eve* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* transform their bodies, and while one acts for herself and the other is enacted upon, both Ruth and Eve experience new bodies and in the end, choose their fates.

## **II. Ruth: a horrific reconstruction of the body**

Certainly in Weldon's *Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, readers confront the virtual body through cosmetic surgery. Ruth, the main character, chooses to undergo serious transformation for, as she says, revenge "on my own terms." (Weldon 85) This choice is both complicated and simplified because Ruth's elected transformation is so extreme that it undermines any idea of a natural body.

In the novel Ruth rejects God and womanhood by appropriating her husband's dictum, "you are a she-devil." (47) Weldon's infinitely parodic tone does not advocate Mary Fisher's body, in fact, Weldon kills off Mary Fisher through cancer, but many readers and

critics have been troubled by the novel's outcome. However, due to Weldon's extreme parody, in addition to her use of heteroglossia, the tone can only be read as highly critical of the ideal body as Ruth defies nature in a comic turn, turned serious. At one point, there *is* a tonal shift when Ruth realizes that she must pay a huge price for self-creation in defying nature, but a clear resolution is impossible.

Weldon chooses to avoid patriarchal discourse through her language describing the body; Ruth is *not* woman but she-devil. As Weldon suggests, perhaps as a metaphor for feminisms themselves, there is much to unlearn, and many sacrifices must be made. In fact, the "road," as it were, has no final destination; the "goal" is constant disruption and the need to escape the man/woman binary. Hence, Ruth is a she-devil. In fact, by the end of the novel, Weldon writes, "it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely of power. I have all, and he has none." (277) As this analysis will demonstrate, Weldon successfully removes Ruth from the confines of the binary opposition.

Weldon's brilliance is in this creation of a new term. Ruth is neither woman nor man, but other, she-devil, to other 'woman'. And in occupying such a space, Weldon enables Ruth to act outside the binary economy of ideal/non-ideal. Ruth's self-transformation is motivated by revenge and helping oneself - pro-woman in the fact that she enables others, shows by example, and speaks some harsh truths.

Ruth is not "feminine," not nurturing, but creative and powerful. As she says, she is not doing this for all women. However, while Ruth has her selfish goal of literal self-transformation, she also speaks and acts in ways that help women within the patriarchy. Through Ruth's transformation from fixity to fixing herself and fixing Bobbo and Mary, Weldon destabilizes the boundaries of the ideal body. Weldon, through the actions of Ruth, her protagonist, renders an ironic reading of the novel, resulting in her protagonist's *escape* from that which is patriarchal by nature.

The accepted discourse within which Weldon writes, and within which Ruth acts, is patriarchal; culture is communicated through phallogocentric discourse. Women must find a means to relate to this discourse, which is characterized by its "linearity, self-possession, the affirmation of mastery, authority, and above all of unity." (Suleiman 13) Mimicry, Irigaray suggests, offers a subversion of these characteristics, thus questioning their validity and the validity of the very foundations of the patriarchy. In mimicry, patriarchal logic is examined and criticized by deconstruction and subversion, repetition, and excess. In other words, mimicry seeks to "undo" by "overdoing" and "undermine" by "overmiming." (Suleiman 140) In an effort to "challenge and *disrupt* patriarchal discourse, women must "go back to" this discourse to understand "its *position of mastery*." (Irigaray 74) Clearly, Weldon repeats, overdoes the ideal body, and coupled with Ruth's radical transformation, she undermines it.

Weldon draws on Irigarayan theory successfully on a number of levels. She employs "the self-conscious mimicry or parody - the imitation of an imitation - which may negate the system by rendering it absurd." (Waugh 183) Weldon uses *She-Devil* to critique the phallogocentric discourse in which she is operating. But it is the *type* of parody Weldon employs which generates its effectiveness.

### **III. Mimicry and the transgressive body**

Like *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Angela Carter's *The Passion of a New Eve* invites readers to confront another remade body; in fact, Carter's novel includes many remade bodies that are transformed through both surgery and performance. Evelyn, the main character, undergoes a serious transformation at the hands of the self-created

"Mother," and while this transformation is initially distinct from Ruth's in that Mother inflicts it upon him against his will, by the end of the novel, Evelyn/Eve *chooses* her fate.

Like Weldon's tone, Carter's is also infinitely parodic. Within her many-layered narrative, Carter undermines the rigid boundaries of man/woman and delights in what Haraway will later call the "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries." (Haraway 191) This pleasurable confusion heightens Carter's attempt to create an "elsewhere," another term, but instead of invoking a literal term like "she-devil," Carter shows us that no one in this novel is who he or she *seems* to be. Thus, there is no core from which a man/woman binary might operate; within *The Passion of a New Eve* these definitions hardly exist, giving way to an array of unfixed referentiality.

In *The Passion of a New Eve*, Eve, like Weldon's Ruth, is neither man nor woman. Other characters echo her ambiguity: Leilah becomes Lilith, Tristessa is a man performing as a woman, and Mother is an excess of grotesque femaleness. In this pervasive ambiguity, Carter erodes any stable identity within the existing boundaries of gender.

Evelyn's transformation into Eve is motivated by Mother's revenge and her master plan to create a matriarchy, while Tristessa's and Mother's transformations are motivated by choice. These changes underscore the very tenuous construction of ideal bodies. At the same time, they open up the possibilities for new and different ideals. Of course, Carter's goal here is not to replace but to repeat and enable many possibilities, enough to destabilize existing ideals.

Like Weldon's creation of a new term, 'she-devil', which occupies a fragile space of other to other, Carter describes Evelyn's transformation to Eve in problematic, parodic and romantic terms. Seeing herself as a "*tabula rasa*" (Carter 83), Eve suggests that what acts as the precedent for absolute gender coding might be erased, highlighting an obvious nod to the construction of gender which will be echoed later in the character of Tristessa's gender disclosure. However, Carter also manages to undermine successfully the romantic connotations of *tabula rasa* as explained by Rousseau. Eve's *tabula rasa* is hardly a blank slate, enabling her free will.

As in Weldon's *She-Devil*, Carter also highlights and calls into question the notion of the ideal body. Unlike Mary Fisher and her romance characters that obsess Ruth in Weldon's novel, Carter's Eve does not have an image but a literal blueprint of the "ideal woman" that she sees in Beulah. (78) Making fun of such a literalization, Carter's blueprint is effective because it is never described and because it parodies the limits of scientific technology. As Eve looks at herself in the mirror after her transformation, she tells readers: 'They had turned me into the *Playboy* center fold. 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. (75) Carter toys with such idealized images by encapsulating the position of both the gaze and the gazer in one subject and complicating the gaze as exclusively male.

Like Weldon, Carter parallels the transgressive possibilities of Irigaray's theory of mimicry. Haraway reminds readers that "French feminisms contribute to cyborg heteroglossia." (Haraway 232) Indeed, Carter succeeds in "undoing" by "overdoing" and "undermining" by "overmiming." (Moi 140) Reflecting Irigaray's theory, Carter displays excessiveness in her characters; in fact, each one becomes a caricature of a three-dimensional person. This accumulation of excesses enables each character to "construct herself as transgressive of, if not entirely resistant to, the discourses that seek to contain her." (Balsamo 39) Evelyn is not just castrated in Mother's transformation of him; he is given gender-training, hormones, and lessons in becoming a woman, but Eve reminds us that "it takes more than identifying with Raphael's Madonna to make a real woman!" (80) This is

one of the bigger ironies in the novel since Carter never articulates what a real woman is. In terms of excessiveness, Evelyn's transformation into Eve is certainly overdone, and as such, Carter establishes a pattern for undermining the phallogocentric system of logic. Carter's excessiveness ranges from categories of the grotesque to questions of authenticity.

In conclusion Weldon and Carter offer a viable feminist politics in their narratives, and in exposing and exploding the rigid gender boundaries of dominant culture, each enables a possibility for "elsewhere." While operating *within* patriarchal discourse, Weldon and Carter mimic this discourse in ways that effectively ask readers to internalize the fissures, or what is being said subversively, in their own traditionally linear narratives. The characters of *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* and *The Passion of New Eve* both suggest coherent plots, but these plots are so complex in their subversions that they successfully undermine fixed patriarchal discourse.

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