Demythologising Patriarchal Constructions: The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman and The Passion of New Eve

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Chapter 4

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The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman and The Passion of New Eve cast off the atmosphere of gloom to a greater extent than the two novels dealt with in the previous chapter. These two novels may be described as transitional works as Carter experiments more with the carnival grotesque mode in these novels. The landscapes, characters and the incidents are suggestive of the grotesque quality of the works in question. Nevertheless, unlike the previous works, which are predominantly terrifying, these two works are marked by the presence of the playful grotesque in them.

The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman and The Passion of New Eve are both studies of different social structures. Carter who has always attempted to subvert the notion of patriarchal societies is critical of matriarchal societies too in these novels. Even as the Minister of Determination and Dr. Hoffman in The Infernal Desire Machines try to impose a particular set of beliefs and ideas on societies controlled by them, Mother in The Passion of New Eve is no different. Hoping to free women from the clutches of patriarchy, Mother is in fact imprisoning them inside a different framework of ideology. Carter uses the grotesque for satirical
purposes in the two novels in question. Both the novels are narrated from a male-point-of-view, and are written in the mode of the picaresque narrative. Carter considered picaresque narratives as effective in making imaginary societies which teach us about our own society (Haffenden 95).

In a picaresque narrative, the picaro may be a true innocent knave, a trickster, a satiric observer or a victim. The picaro in his travel meets people whose knavery is exposed by their brutal treatment of him. The picaro may exploit the follies of the men whom he meets thereby demonstrating his own knavery and their folly. Alternatively, he is inherently corruptible so that he falls prey to the manoeuvres of the scoundrels he meets. Through the encounters of the picaro, the devious aspects of the societies that he enters are exposed and analysed. The picaro progresses towards a practical knowledge of life and at the end, he learns how to survive (Paulson 58).

The protagonists of the two novels go through varied experiences as they enter different societies at various stages in their journey. Both Desiderio and Evelyn have to assume a number of different identities. The protagonists in both the novels fall in love with a fantasy. They become disillusioned when they find the real nature of the objects of their desire. The privileged position enjoyed by both Desiderio and Evelyn as males are reversed in the course of the narratives. The follies inherent in them and their societies are brought to the fore through their encounters with different social groups.
From their wanderings they get greater insights into issues relating to society, culture and gender, which help them to emerge transformed from their adventures.

_The Infernal Desire Machines_ begins with the picture of a city under dissolution, a very prominent motif of the grotesque. The world around them becomes alienated for the city dwellers when Dr. Hoffman, the mad physicist, disrupts the orderliness of their life with his bizarre experiments. Unable to withstand the estrangement, some of them commit suicide. The words of Desiderio, the hero of the novel reflect the sentiments of the whole city: “I lived in the city when our adversary Dr. Hoffman filled it with mirages in order to drive us all mad. Nothing in the city was what it seemed—nothing at all! Because Dr. Hoffman, you see, was waging a massive campaign against human reason itself” (DH 19). Though the changes brought over the city are hallucinatory, they are real enough to disrupt the reality of the life of the people: “Trade was at an end. All the factories closed down and there was wholesale unemployment” (DH 20). Dr. Hoffman the physicist is waging a war against reality. His endeavour is to replace reality with illusion. The Minister of Determination alone is the only one in the whole city who is not affected by the “Hoffman effect”. He sends Desiderio, his young confidential secretary on the mission of tracing the sinister Doctor and killing him so that reason may be restored and their people saved from disintegration.
The changes brought about in the city by Dr. Hoffman's "eroto energy" have been at first imperceptible and very subtle. Then one day all on a sudden, he actualizes his disruptive coup. The audience in an opera house is transformed into peacocks. With this initial gambit, Dr. Hoffman begins his war against reason in earnest. Hoffman’s experiments with reality are based on the principle that anything imagined can also exist. The city begins to be populated with images from the wildest possible dreams. The narrative captures the city’s mood at this outrage:

We were taken entirely by surprise and chaos supervened immediately. Hallucination flowed with magical speed in every brain. A kind of orgiastic panic seized the city. Those bluff, complaisant avenues in metamorphoses as a magic forest. [. . .] This phantasmagoric redefinition of a city was constantly fluctuating for it was now the kingdom of the instantaneous. Hardly anything remained the same for more than one second and the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it has become the arbitrary realm of dream (DH 17-18).

According to Kayser:

The grotesque reveals that, constantly and without any provocation, we all are the targets of malicious powers. Especially our everyday world, the small, apparently familiar
things in constant use, turn out to be strange, evil, and possessed by hostile demons who constantly swoop down on us (111).

This seems perfectly true of the city which Hoffman is trying to deconstruct. We are reminded of the fact that the seemingly peaceful façade of our life can be disrupted anytime by the intervention of the hostile forces lurking in the world. Desiderio's quest takes him through bizarre experiences and strange communities. Almost all the essential ingredients of the modern grotesque put forth by Kayser which are, the confusion, the fantastic quality, the alienation of the world and the terror inspired by the disintegration of the world are seen here (52). The presence of these elements constrains the reader to regard with suspicion the promises of technological advancement.

Desiderio, though a secret agent working to stop the doctor's advances, ends up being controlled by the doctor himself. He is led through a whole series of subcultures by the manipulation of Dr. Hoffman. From the moment that he starts from the city as a secret agent with the mission of destroying the Doctor, Desiderio comes under his control. Through his shape-changing daughter Albertina, the Doctor orchestrates the movements and actions of Desiderio. Desiderio falls madly in love with Albertina and is ready to follow her to the ends of the world. From the travelling circus he is taken to the river people, then to a brothel peopled with automata, to a society of centaurs and finally to the Gothic castle of the Doctor himself. In the laboratories inside the castle, Dr. Hoffman produces eroto energy from the secretions of caged
lovers with the help of huge generators. It is with this energy that the Doctor projects the visions of the unreal thereby creating chaos in the country. Later, the realization that Albertina is only her father’s agent brings Desiderio back to his senses. He destroys both the Doctor and Albertina.

Desiderio's adventure takes him through the strangest experiences and brings him into contact with highly grotesque creatures like the freaks in the travelling show, the grotesque count, the centaurs and the hideous creatures at the House of Anonymity. The mysterious figure of Albertina distances Desiderio from the world. She appears to him in his dream sometimes as a girl with transparent flesh through which shows her heart, which is a knot of flames and at other times as a black ugly but marvellous swan with a gold collar on which is written Albertina.

Desiderio takes long to realize that the Doctor manipulates everything through the samples that the peepshow proprietor carries. The show, which is called the "Seven Wonders of the World in Three Life like Dimensions", is in itself, grotesque. The sinister looking castle in the beautiful semi-tropical forest, the wax figure of the headless body of a mutilated woman and the wax figures of the pair of lovers, all look life-like. They are the manifestations of the workings of a perverse mind. The peepshow proprietor who now carries Hoffman's set of samples claims that he once taught Hoffman physics at the University. The set of samples is the medium through which Hoffman
negates the reality of the world. The peepshow proprietor explains to Desiderio how they work:

‘They are symbolic constituents of representation of basic constituents of the universe. If they are properly arranged, all the possible situations in the world and every possible mutation of those situations can be represented [. . .]. The symbols serve as patterns or templates from which physical objects and real events may be evolved by the process he calls “effective evolving”. I go about the world like Santa with a sack and nobody knows it is filled up with changes’ (DH 96).

Hoffman represents the capitalist control of desire through media. Hoffman’s technologically transmitted images are equivalent to the ones projected by the mass media. The symbols he uses for evolving real events and objects offer endless options which in effect are as good as having no choice, a condition which eventually leads to a state of surfeit and boredom. (Jordan, *Enthralment* 32).

The images with which the media inundate human lives and how they lure and ensnare man in capitalist definitions of life, are revealed by means of the intervention of the grotesque. Sometimes sinister and sometimes marvellous images are sent from the doctor’s machines to invade and disrupt the familiar world whereby the world is estranged and terror is inspired by the unfathomable. The apparently harmonious world represented by the Minister
of Determination is estranged under the impact of the dreadful forces represented by that of Dr. Hoffman, which break up and destroy its unity.

The readers too are shaken by the impact of the grotesque world exposed before them:

The grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of the abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence (Kayser 37).

By means of the grotesque portrayal of the Doctor’s sinister machinations, Angela Carter warns us to be alive to the pitfalls and dangers involved in allowing our hopes and desires to be fashioned and controlled by media technology. Aidan Day observes that the world of desire let loose by the Doctor is a “true postmodern nightmare.” Behind his efforts to liberate desire is his monomaniacal drive to control and direct fantasy (89).

Carter’s commitment to feminism is revealed throughout the novel. In order to expose the cruelties perpetrated by men on women she exploits the grotesque mode of representation. The novel exposes how women are fashioned out of the fantasies of men making them just the projections of their desires with no will and voice of their own. Even in the matriarchal societies of barbarians and tribals they do not enjoy any privileged position. The
societies and counter cultures which Desiderio encounters during his quest differ vastly from each other in terms of cultural norms and social codes. However, they are identical in their treatment of women. Women are invariably marginalized, objectified and dehumanized in all these communities.

Desiderio is totally apathetic towards the atrocities perpetrated by the men on the women of these communities. Sally Robinson observes that Desiderio’s inability to sympathize with these women arises from the fact that they are in fact projections of his own desire, his imaginings of what women are: “They are ‘erotic toys’, mutilated bodies, phallic mothers, castrating Amazons, who are all punished for the crime of being female”. The text demonstrates how women are “produced” and not represented in a narrative of male subjectivity (104-05).

The womenfolk of the river people are outlandish and grotesque in their appearance and manners: “All the women moved in this same stereotyped way, like benign automata, so what with that and their musical box speech; it was quite possible to feel they were not fully human” (DH 73). The women also wear a great deal of paint on their faces masking their features, and thus concealing their identity as individuals.

The female figures that people the Sadeian brothel the “House of Anonymity” disgust Desiderio because they do not conform to his idea of
femaleness. He finds that they are no longer the pleasure giving, erotic toys of his desire but creatures grotesquely transfigured by the perverted desire of the Count. Desiderio remarks:

This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of woman; when I examined them more closely, I saw that none of them were any longer, or might never have been, women. All, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute (DH 132).

The fact that the oppression of women is not an uncommon feature even among savage tribes is proved through the lives of women along the African coast. The females are all circumscribed and are “entirely cold and respond only to cruelty and abuse” (DH 161). The wives of the tribal chieftain bear the marks of physical mutilation:

Many bore the bleeding marks of gigantic bites in their breast and buttocks. Some had a nipple missing, most were minus one or several toes and fingers. One girl had a ruby set in the socket in place of a lost eyeball and some wore false teeth carved in strange shapes out of the tusks of elephants. Yet all had been beautiful and their various disfigurements lent them an exquisite pathos (DH 158).
In the country of the centaurs too women are treated as though their calling is suffering: “The women folk are tattooed all over, even their faces, in order to cause them more suffering, for they believed women were born only to suffer” (*DH* 172). The ritualistic tattooing of their body is not just masochistic, but misogynistic. Desiderio is not appalled by the fact that the centaurs keep their women in low esteem. The women are made to toil very hard while the men lead a life of leisure. As a representative of a patriarchal set-up, oppression of women is part of his culture.

The fact that Hoffmann works against a prevalent system does in no way differentiate it from the existing system in its treatment of women. Rather its immense potential to substantiate a world of fantasy perpetrates new and unimaginable crimes against women. The male figures in the text retain power over the female and put this power into play in their increased objectification of women. The power given to them by Hoffmann’s liberation of desire allows men to indulge in their pervert desires (Robinson 107-08).

Initially Desiderio’s desire for a home and a loving family keeps him with the river people as Kiku. He forgets his mission and wishes to remain with them: “If I murdered Desiderio and became Kiku for ever, I need fear nothing in my life ever, any more. I need not fear loneliness or boredom or lack of love. My life, would flow like the river on which I lived” (*DH* 80). Being the son of a prostitute, Desiderio has never enjoyed the security of
family life. His desire for a home and family materializes in the idyllic life of the river people. The advantage he has over the river people is his learning which earns him their love and respect. But in a strange turn of events the same proves to be perilous. The river people lead a life steeped in myth and rituals. Anything that they cannot learn or understand is magic to them. Desiderio, highly impressed by the lifestyle and rituals of the river people at first misses the signification of the overwhelming love and care they show for a total stranger like him. The story of the snake, the Fire-Bringer exposes the nefarious side of the community to him. The drunken narrator tells him how they killed the snake which knew the art of making fire, and ate it in order to acquire knowledge about "fire making". Desiderio is shaken by the implication of the story:

I shook with terror and despair. I remembered a story I had read once in an old book about some tribe of Central Asia who made a point of killing and eating in their own country any stranger indiscreet enough to commit a miracle or show any particular sign of sanctity, for thus they imbibe his magic virtue (DH 91).

The sudden turn of events points to the grotesqueness of the whole affair. The beautiful idyll of the river people acquires a sinister and dangerous undertone for Desiderio. As in a jigsaw puzzle, the reason for all their curious behaviour falls in to place:
All at once I filled in the suspicious gaps my lovely sentimentality has refused to acknowledge. Nao-kurai’s air of furtive triumph after I had accepted his daughter; Mama’s excessive cordiality; their suspicious eagerness to adopt me when they knew, I was really nothing but a feared, mysterious dweller upon the shore all time, [...] yet who owned the most precious, most arcane knowledge they could only gain for themselves by desperate measures. And I knew as well as if Nao-Kurai had sung it out that they proposed to kill me and eat me, like Snake, the Fire-Bringer, in the fable, so that they would all learn how to read and write after a common feast where I would feature as the main dish on the menu at my own wedding breakfast. I was torn between mirth and horror (DH 91).

Desiderio’s mixed response to the event itself points to the grotesque quality of the incident. Hitherto familiar and safe surroundings take on an ominous significance, alienating Desiderio from it. The sudden estrangement fills him with a feeling of the ridiculous and the horrifying. Carter subverts the idea of social idylls and the idealized portrayal of pastoral life, both through the river people and the centaurs.

The centaurs are created in the fashion of Swift’s Huoyhnhnms. The land of the centaurs is wonderful and dangerous at the same time. The region is spread with strange trees and plants. There are trees with poisonous stings,
with scaly trunks and which possess a fish like odour. There are cacti that give forth sweet milk and plants that lay eggs and cluck like hens. Here flora and fauna seems to have interchanged their functions. The centaurs’ land and their life style are an emanation of Desiderio’s vision of an ideal world. Under the Hoffman effect Desiderio’s imagination helps generate the primitive Utopian pastoral of his dreams. He becomes aware of his role in generating this world only when the male centaurs rape Albertina:

At the back of my mind flickered a teasing image, that of a young girl trampled by horses. I could not remember when or where I had seen it, such a horrible thing; but it was the most graphic and haunting of memories and a voice in my mind, the cracked, hoarse, drunken voice of the dead peep-show proprietor, told me that I was somehow, all unknowing, the instigator of this horror. My pain and agitation increased beyond all measure (DH 180).

The rustic simplicity of the centaurs, their primitive mode of cultivation and the tranquility of their life fascinate him so much that he begins to despise the world of human beings. In the new surroundings, Albertina too takes the shape of his desire and looks more attractive than ever to him: “She would come home in the golden evening, wreathed with corn like a pagan deity in a pastoral” (DH 187).
Desiderio, rapt in the heavenly life of the centaurs, fails to see the element of violence underlying their seemingly tranquil life. However, Desiderio’s sense of complacency is shaken when he learns that the centaurs intend to practice their violent ritual rites on Albertina and himself. The hitherto tranquil, admirable world of the centaurs becomes increasingly absurd and fantastically estranged for Desiderio, giving rise to “a feeling of helplessness and disparagement” (Kayser 78). The centaurs come to know from their priest that the two strange creatures are sent by the Sacred Stallion to show his flock the fearful shapes they may come to if they do not follow his dogmas. As a gesture of atonement, they decide to nail Desiderio and Albertina with iron shoes, tattoo them all over and give them to the spirits. Desiderio realizes that the spirits are wild horses who will trample them to death. At the same time as Desiderio’s desires begin to take the shape of nightmares, the Doctor’s aerial patrol saves them. The grotesque twist given to the episode enables Carter to subvert the notion of the pastoral idyll and to lay stress on the need to put a rational restraint over one’s desires. That our secret longings and strong desires will eventually materialize in some shape is a proven fact according to Jung. In his analysis of dreams he has given the examples of those who disregarded the warnings of their dreams and met with unpleasant experiences. What some of the dreams had told Jung was that the dreamer had a secret longing for such an adventure (35).
Just as Desiderio's longing for an Utopian pastoral wills the creation of the centaurs, it is the Count's desire for self-annihilation that brings into existence, the cannibal chief. The portrayal of the grotesque Count demonstrates how with the unleashing of the imagination and the freeing of desire from reason, evil and violence take charge of the human mind. The Count is the incarnation of perversity and cruelty. His account of himself reveals him as a megalomaniac and a libertine constantly in search of new forms of sadistic pleasure. He is both a sinister and a comic figure. The Count is an iconoclast of the highest degree. He goes against every accepted standard of behaviour. The terrifying as well as the carnivalistic aspects of the grotesque may be seen in his nature and actions. For example, when the Count stops to eat at an abandoned Church, the first thing he does is to urinate over the altar.

His perverted mind seems to imbibe energy from witnessing catastrophe. When he learns that Desiderio happens to get caught in a landslide but comes out unharmed, the Count expresses his regret at having missed the sight: "'How I should have liked to have seen it! And gloried in the Wagnerian clamour of it all [. . .] the shrieks, the crash of rending stone. And little children dashed to smithereens by bounding boulders! What a spectacle! '" (DH 122). Count is a voracious eater too. Desiderio comments on his eating habits thus: "Out of the basket came a feast [. . .]. The Count ate very heartily; indeed, he ate with a blind voracity that demolished the
spread so speedily the valet and I were hard put to it to seize enough to satisfy ourselves, although there was so much" (*DH* 125).

The Count’s desecration of the place of worship by drenching the altar in urine, his gluttony and his sexual orgies make him a carnival-grotesque figure. Drenching in urine is the most popular form of degradation of the carnival. Debasement of all that is sacred and exalted is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 370). A glutton is the most fertile of the carnival grotesque images. In the act of eating, the body grows at the expense of the world. By devouring it the glutton makes the world a part of himself. It signifies man’s triumph over the world (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 281).

The diabolic nature of the count is revealed during his visit to the Sadeian Brothel, the “House of Anonymity”. The place excites him to a frenzy as he can perpetrate more hideous cruelties on flesh which is where he tries out his artistic excellence: “‘I have devoted my life to the humiliation and exaltation of the flesh. I am an artist; my material is the flesh; my medium is destruction; and my inspiration is nature’” (*DH* 126). True to his words, the striped girl whom he chooses as his partner for the night is left a mutilated, bleeding mass of flesh at the end of his brutal sexual orgies.

The grotesque depiction of the House of Anonymity, the inmates and the sexual orgies of the Count subvert traditional social codes. Carter opens a
highly disturbing world of gross perversities and abominable deformities before the readers. On entering the brothel, the Count and Desiderio are confronted by monkeys that have been turned into living candelabra and live chairs and tables, which are actually transformed animals. The Count and Desiderio are required to wear the special garb of the brothel, which exposes their genitals but covers their faces. From the furniture to the caged girls, the brothel is a world of grotesquerie. It offers the readers none of the voyeuristic pleasures which is generally got from a brothel scene. In contrast it incites the ludicrous and the horrifying, pointing to its grotesque quality. None of the girls in the brothel is fully human:

They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute.

Their hides were streaked, blotched and marbled and some trembled on the point of reverting completely to the beast . . . But, if some were antlered like stag, others had the branches of trees sprouting out of their bland forehead . . . . All the figures presented a dream-like fusion of diverse states of being, blind, speechless beings from a nocturnal forest where trees had eyes and dragons rolled about on wheels (DH 132-33).

The grotesque depiction of the house of pleasure exposes lust in all its hideousness and demonstrates how women are trapped in a male imaginary construct. The libertine unleashes his desire and imagination to concretize the
most perverted of his fantasies. The whole scene points to the danger of total anarchy that an uncontrolled liberation of the imagination can lead to. Here Carter's effort is also to parody pornography, which is meant for titillation and intended to give voyeuristic pleasure. Pornography never exposes the erotic violence committed by men upon women. Carter expresses her emotions regarding this very strongly in her study about Sade as a pornographer: "It is a great shame we can forbid these bleedings in art but not in life, for the beatings, the rapes and the woundings takes place in a privacy beyond the reach of official censorship" (SW 23). In her opinion, Sade is a moral pornographer, as he never creates an artificial paradise of gratified sexuality. She feels that in this sense Sade writes pornography in the service of women.

The Count tries to escape in a ship to Europe when pursued by his double, the black pimp. Desiderio too is forced to follow him. In the ship episode, the material bodily principle, the most important feature of grotesque realism plays a predominant role. The rudiments of these elements seen in the previous novels gain momentum in The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman. Even the diabolical Count transforms to a comical figure in the ship episode. Their ship is captured by pirates who kill all the sailors. For twelve days after they seize the ship the pirates remain silent, grave, and diligently practice with their swords. Their day begins with prayers and a strange ritual:

Every morning, after prayers, the pirate leader removed the black loincloth which was his only garb and bent over on the
poop in front of the altar while each of his men filed past him in devout silence, kissed his exposed arse and emitted a sharp bark of adulation [. . .] . Their fidelity to their lord was so great one could have thought each pirate was only an aspect of the leader, so that the many was one. [. . .] After this display or refreshment of fidelity, they practised with their swords (DH 150).

On the twelfth night, which happens to be a full moon day, they participate in a ritual drinking. After two rounds of drinks, all their pent-up passions are released in a drunken debauchery. They are miraculously transformed from grave, dutiful swordsmen to actors in a farce:

[. . .] after a third round, they stripped off their loincloths and, one and all, embarked on a farting contest. They made the radiant welkin ring with a battery of broken wind. Exposing to the moon the twin hemispheres of their lemon-coloured hinder cheeks, each banged away as loudly as he was able, amid a great deal of unharmonious laughter, and soon they began to set light to the gascos they expelled with matches, so a blue flame hovered briefly above every backside (DH 153).

The function of the material bodily principle is to liberate objects from the snares of false seriousness, from illusions and sublimation inspired by fear. It frees the pirates from fear and subservience, allowing them to give a free play
to their pent-up passions. It also questions the nature of servile fidelity shown by subordinates to their superiors.

The Count encounters his double, the black pimp, once again in the person of the African tribal chieftain. The Count who in the manner of Don Quixote controls the sea and commands the storm to take them safe to land gets reduced to a quaking skeleton when he sees the cannibals. Here too Carter shatters the illusion of the social idyll through the example of the African people. The tribal chief's words are enough to expose the underlying violence in their social system:

The customs of my country are as barbarous as the propriety with which they are executed. For example, not one of those delightful children who seem, each one, to have stepped straight off the pen of Jean-Jacques Rousseau but has not, since he put forth his milk teeth, dined daily off a grilled rump, or roasted shoulder, a stew, a fricassee or else a hash of human meat (DH 159).

The tribal chieftain admits that he is a ruthless ruler. He maintains his rule by inducing superstitious fears in the minds of his subjects. Even the smallest of rebellious thoughts arising within the hearts of his subjects is found out through telepathy. The incipient rebels and the entire family are then boiled alive. His words, "'I am happy only in that I am a monster,'" best explains him (DH 161).
The chieftain’s army made up of women is equally ruthless. These women earn their position by eating alive, their first-born child. The women folk of the community generally lack any feelings. Every girl child has her clitoris brutally excised so that she is absolutely devoid of any feeling. In the words of the tribal chief, their women folk “are entirely cold and respond only to cruelty and abuse” (*DH* 161). When the chief arrives, sitting on his chariot of human bones, his concubines are required to place their hands such that a track is improvised, over which the chariot runs crushing their hands. The tribal chieftain is a manifestation of the Count’s desire to be avenged by the black pimp for his lover's murder. Desiderio realizes this only when the Count come face to face with the chieftain:

‘You are my only destination,’ replied the Count. ‘You altered my compass so that it would point only to you, my hypocritical shadow, my double, my brother.’ Then I saw this dreadful chieftain was indeed the black pimp who was now about to avenge his lover’s murder, for such was the Count’s desire he should be and do so (*DH* 159).

In a highly grotesque incident, which is pathetic and comic at the same time, the black pimp takes revenge on the Count. The horror element is softened by a touch of the comic. The Count is boiled alive in a huge cauldron to which the chef adds salt and pepper. The element of horror is counterbalanced by the humorous depiction of the scene:
The chef flung a string of onions into the pot, thoughtfully stirred in more salt, stirred and sipped the stock from his ladle. He nodded. Then lady soldiers marched the Count between them to the fire, took firm hold each one of an elbow, lifted him bodily and plunged him feet first into the water, so that his head stuck over the rim. But his face did not change expression as it began to grow rosy. [. . .] And then, when he was red as a lobster, he began to laugh with joy-pure joy (DH 163).

It is only when the cannibals prepare to roast him and the Count’s valet, that Desiderio realizes that the Count’s valet is none other than Albertina. Her vision triggers him into action and snatching the musket from one of the soldiers, Desiderio shoots the chieftain. The chieftain’s fall is also presented in the same comic vein as that of the Count’s:

The antique bullet, larger than a grape, pierced the painted eye in the centre of his forehead. A great spurt of blood sprang out as from an unstoppered tap in such a great arc that it drenched us. He must have died instantaneously but some spasm of muscle jerked him to his feet.[. . .] Somehow his uncoordinated shuddering freed the wheels of his trolley and [. . .] it began to move [. . .] still the corpse stayed upright [. . .] it started on a headlong career, crushing wives and [. . .] those of his tribe who [. . .] flung themselves under the wheels of its chariot with
maenad shrieks. Bouncing over a path of flesh, bearing a
tottering tower, the car's mad career took it to the bank of the
river and there it plunged into a foaming torrent that carried it to
the edge of the waterfall within seconds (DH 164).

The end of the Count and the fall of the cannibal chief demonstrate how black
humour intensifies the horror in the grotesque. Commenting on “grotesque
black humour”, Mathew Winston observes that death dominates in this kind
of humour. But it occurs in a ridiculous manner and is never dignified. The
grotesque black humour tries to create a kind of uncertainty in the reader,
arousing laughter one moment and horror next (283-84).

The grotesque episodes in the African coast subvert the idea of the
noble savage and of a social idyll under a benevolent ruler. They also tell us
that oppression of women is not just a civilized perversion. The barbarians
who lead a life uncorrupted by civilization too are equally bad in treating their
women. The society of the centaurs and the cannibals demonstrate that even a
well-knit society may be terrorised into submission by those who rule it.
Oppression, violence and restrictions are the elements underlying their
seemingly contented community.

During his stay with the fairground people, Desiderio happens to meet
and know several grotesque figures. The travelling circus in itself is a
carnival-grotesque motif. When he joins the peep show as the proprietor’s
nephew, Desiderio too becomes a part of the travelling show through the connivance of the Doctor himself. Most of the members of the sideshows are grotesques with their distorted features and capacity for suffering. The atmosphere is gloomy and infernal around these people. It exposes an altogether different side of the life of those who are in the entertaining business. The freaks live in a world of their own, coming to terms with their deformity: "They were not in the least aware how extraordinary they were because they made their living out of the grotesque. Their bread was deformity. Their biographies, however tragic or bizarre, were all alike in singularity [. . .]" (DH 99).

The Alligator man, the bearded lady and the sharp-shooter become Desiderio’s friends. Madame La Barbe who exhibits her beard in order to make a living is a perfect lady otherwise: "It was not her beard that made her unique; it was the fact that, never, in all her life, had she known a single moment's happiness" (DH 106). Mamie Buckskin, the sharp shooter, is a paradox: "A fully phallic female with the bosom of a nursing mother and a gun, death-dealing erectile tissue, perpetually, at her thigh [. . .] Mamie too, was a tragic woman" (DH 109). The third of Desiderio’s friends, the Alligator Man, spends most of the time under water in a glass tank. He is covered all over with scales. The personal history of these freaks exposes Desiderio to the tragic side of the life of those who surprise, enchant and amuse an audience: "I see them all haloed in the dark after light of
accomplished tragedy, moving with the inexorability of the doomed towards a violent death" (DH 109).

Desiderio who gets sidetracked by Albertina in his mission to search out and kill the doctor, follows her to the Doctor’s castle. It is not as an enemy but as a friend that he enters the Doctor’s eccentric world. The Doctor produces eroto-energy from the secretions of copulating pairs of young men and women who are put inside cages and injected with hormones. The sight of the caged lovers is something which Desiderio is not prepared for. The kind of fatality involved in their action depresses him. He becomes aware of the dangers involved in unleashing the desires of a mad scientist like Hoffman. Hoffman’s aim is to inherit the whole world and make it work according to his whims and fancies. He seeks to cage and manipulate the energies of desire, not really to liberate them. Hoffman, possessed by the “it”, lets loose the abysmal forces and almost succeeds in transforming the world into a phantasmagoria of fragmented images. Nevertheless, Desiderio recovers from his infatuation in time to apprehend the vile intention of the Doctor. The abysmal force that lurks waiting to engulf Desiderio’s world is finally detected. The sight of an unoccupied cage sends tremors through Desiderio. Albertina acts only as a decoy to lure him towards the abysmal plans of the Doctor. He understands that the empty cage is meant for him and Albertina:
Our long-delayed but so greatly longed for conjunction would spurt such a charge of energy our infinity would fill the world and, in this experiential void, the Doctor would descend on the city and his liberation would begin. [. . .] I had seen nothing in the peep-show to warn me of the grotesque denouement of my great passion (DH 215-16).

Desiderio who comes to his senses in time kills the Doctor and Albertina to save humanity from hitherto unknown violence and perversion. Desiderio’s quest comes to an end, his mission is fulfilled and he returns to the city, a hero.

Through this novel, Carter shatters the idea of complete and ultimate liberation through technological development. The novel suggests that in the hope of liberation we only become slaves to the ideas of consumer capitalism propagated through media projected images. It also warns that the erratic objectification of desires will lead to anarchy. Carter underscores the need to put a rational restraint over desires. Otherwise mankind will only succeed in creating a world of chaos with its efforts to make the wildest dreams materialize.

Obversely Carter reminds the reader of the dangers of excessive rationalism also. Even as he sets out to destroy the principle of unreason as represented by Hoffman, Desiderio is critical of the inhuman rationalism
displayed by the Minister. He believes that a human being needs to possess some degree of imagination. When the Doctor’s Desire Machines orchestrate the people into indulging in mindless evil, the Minister’s Determination Police who deal sternly with the city dwellers and look as if they are “recruited wholesale from a Jewish nightmare” demonstrate another kind of evil (DH22). While Carter criticizes unreason, she does not altogether rule out the function of desires and dreams in human life.

The Passion of New Eve is a grimly dystopian novel which projects the vision of “a future America that has disintegrated into an anarchic landscape of warring private armies and desert marauders” (McHale 67). The novel states some very explicit things about the cultural production of femininity and it also presents a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity. The Passion explores in detail the question of gender identity as epitomized in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous aphorism: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295).

In exploring the source of difference between women and men, Ruth Sherry identifies them as being biological and cultural. Biology differentiates humankind into male and female sexes. In addition to this difference cultures too tend to divide many human characteristics into two groups and label some as masculine, which they attribute to the male, and some as feminine that are
considered proper for a female. This opposition based on culture rather than biology is referred to as gender (18).

Fundamental to *The Passion* is the feminist concept of the distinction between biological sex and culturally constructed gender. The events in the novel are a vehicle that enables Carter to foreground this distinction. Carter achieves this end by means of the portrayal of the transformations of Evelyn, Leilah, and Tristessa. Apart from giving an amusing account of the methods by which femininity can be constructed, Carter also explores the question whether femininity resides in biology or in gender attributes (Palmer *Women's Fiction* 18-19).

Evelyn, the protagonist of the novel, begins his adventures in a disordered, violent America. At the centre of the story is the Hollywood screen idol Tristessa. Tristessa, the epitome of femininity, happens to be a man in drag, trying to preserve the illusion that he is a woman. Tristessa is a transvestite whereas Evelyn becomes Eve, a trans-sexual. The question of whether gender is a natural given or a constructed thing is being explored through these characters.

As in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*, the beginning of the novel itself gives the picture of a city under dissolution which as already seen is an important grotesque motif. Evelyn, the young man from London
lands in New York to see the city of his imagination—a city shaped by the
Hollywood fantasies:

I imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the
sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration and all would be
peopled by [...] the shadowless inhabitants of a finite and
succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe
could have found no cobweb corners to roost in. But in New
York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid,
Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became
my world (PNE 10).

The New York of realities disappoints him. The city is disgustingly dirty and
fearfully restless. Society is divided into various sects and groups who try to
disrupt life through guerilla warfare. Women's movements, militant black
movements, groups of proselytizers, all together turn the city into a land of
chaos. As Baroslav, the Czech soldier who becomes Evelyn’s friend puts it:
“‘Chaos [...] embraces all opposing forms in a state of undifferentiated
dissolution’” (PNE 14).

Evelyn falls an easy prey to the charms of a young American black
woman called Leilah. Leilah who is at first a predator later turns victim.
Their relationship ends with a visit to a local abortionist. Evelyn runs away to
the desert to save himself from the wrath of the blacks. The manner in which
Leilah transforms herself into an object of male gaze conveys a lot about the
treatment of femininity as commodity. Leilah earns her living as a naked model, a naked dancer and takes part in simulated sex shows. She spends hours before her mirror to make herself look sexually appealing and therefore saleable:

She did not grow beautiful by a simple process of becoming. Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. [. . .] Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection (PNE 28).

Thus she abandons herself to the mirror, functioning as the object of the exotic dreams of men who come to watch her perform. Through this ritual incarnation, “she systematically carnalised herself and became dressed meat” (PNE 31). Leilah ceases to be an individual human being with an identity of her own and takes up the role of a grotesquely arrayed erotic object. The grotesque nature of what Leilah has converted herself into escapes Evelyn’s attention since she is now a reflection of the image of woman as sexual object already imprinted in his mind. The words describing her actions as she makes herself up cross the sphere of the inhuman: “with the manual dexterity of an assembler of precision instruments” (PNE 29), she glues, greases and sprays to convert her body to a grotesque assemblage of colours, paints, dusts and pieces of cloth. Once this transformation is achieved she is no longer her
original self: “everyday Leilah disappeared immediately” (PNE 28). The intervention of grotesque satire in the description of Leilah’s transformation into an object of male gaze drives home the true nature of women in society. As de Beauvoir observes:

[. . .] woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her. So we must first go on to describe woman such as men have fancied her in their dreams, for what-in-man’s-eyes-she-seems-to-be is one of the necessary factors in her real situation (169).

Leilah’s transformation into an erotic object exposes how women are dehumanized and transformed into a “thing”, an object of sexual gratification for the male. Her masquerade as “dressed meat” suggests how femininity is converted into a commodity to be purchased at the marketplace.

When Evelyn has had enough of her he abandons Leilah “to the dying city” and escapes. Linden Peach observes that Evelyn is “an arch-misogynist; a vicious parody of the male, objectifying gaze” (118). The relationship between Evelyn and Leilah is marked by violence. She is forced into subordination through violent means. He lives out of the money she gets by selling the charms of her femininity. Once she becomes pregnant, his desire for her vanishes altogether. When none of her voodoo threats force him into marriage, Leilah becomes passive. She becomes the true picture of the image of woman in his mind: “She was a perfect woman; like the moon, she only
gave reflected light” (*PNE* 34). Carter seems to be saying that total passivity is what the patriarchal society demands of a woman.

Eve who runs away from Leilah least suspects that a grotesque world lies in wait for him. His experiences in the matriarchal world of the Mother take him through the same kind of pain and humiliation that Leilah has undergone at his hands. By going through such a terrible experience he learns what it is to be a woman. Evelyn is captured and taken to the Mother. She calls herself the “great Parricide” and the “Castratrix of the Phallocentric Universe” (*PNE* 67). The emblem of a broken phallus which greets him right at the entrance, sends a shiver through Evelyn. All the pain and violence he has perpetrated on women as a male is meted out to him from the moment he is captured by the women soldiers of Beulah; the Mother’s all female world. Technology and mythology meet in Beulah. Evelyn is unceremoniously dragged into this world by his captress: “She gave me no chance to get back on my feet; she dragged me along on my face so I arrived unceremoniously, in the woman’s town and when fathoms deep, I came to rest at last, I was blubbering in the sand, aware of nothing but my own abasement” (*PNE* 48). The masculine gender, which is considered superior, is degraded here when Evelyn is brutally dragged by women into a world of their own. Once he reaches the underground world of the Mother, a metaphysical dread grips him. Evelyn is estranged from the world around him and the alienated world begins to be extremely terrifying:
Now I felt I had been precipitated unceremoniously into the very heart of an alien cosmogony. Beneath the earth [. . .] I felt upon me the whole heaviness of that entire continent with its cities and its coinage, its mines, its foundries, its wars and its mythologies imposing itself in all its immensity, like the nightmare, upon my breast. I gasped, I choked. My fear took on a new quality; not only fear for my own safety, now, but dread of the immensity of the world about me (PNE 52).

The abysmal quality, the insecurity and the terror inspired by that alienated world around him all point to its grotesque quality. Here, through the use of the grotesque, the fearful nature of the Matriarchal world is revealed. It is a space as gruesome and terrifying as the oppressive patriarchal space. The sublime mottos and ideals of the community of women clash with the ridiculously distorted and monstrously horrible grotesque figure of the Mother:

I was appalled by the spectacle of the goddess. She was a sacred monster. [. . .] She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow – she possessed two tiers of nipples [. . .]. Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of giant fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. [. . .] Her voice
was like, an orchestra composed entirely of cellos, sonority made speech (*PNE* 59-60).

The rape scene that follows is transformed into a piece of black comedy when even in the midst of his ordeal Evelyn makes funny discoveries about the Mother: “Her nipples leaped about like bobbles on the fringe of an old fashioned red plush curtain”(*PNE* 64). When Evelyn is placed on the Mother’s knees he feels that it is like being seated at the console of a gigantic cinema organ (*PNE* 65). Some aspects of the carnival grotesque are seen here, both in the description of the grotesque body of the Mother and the subsequent rape scene. The elements of the bodily lower stratum are exaggerated to an excess here. Mother, with her two tiers of breasts, belly “rich as thousand harvests” and vagina like “the crater of a volcano” is a typically carnival figure. The Mother disrupts the notion of the feminine in patriarchal conception. Evelyn, a representative of the patriarchal world is degraded and reduced to the condition of a trembling, cowering animal:

I lose my nerve in the hubbub, I whinny, mew, scrabble weakly at the sanded floor trying to burrow my way out. [. . .] Sophia seized my trembling body as I cowered there and dragged it to the great ululating being who now toppled from her chair to fall on her back on the floor, waving her legs in the air as fast as her girth permitted her (*PNE* 64).
The "degradation of the high", which is the essential principle of "grotesque realism" comes into play when Evelyn is raped by the black goddess. Here Evelyn and through him the superior male sex is humiliated, ridiculed and miserably subjugated when he is raped by a woman.

In the effort by the women to sustain their female Utopia at Beulah, Evelyn is chosen to be the "parthenogenesis archetype" (PNE 68). He is to be castrated, transformed into a complete woman and then impregnated with his own sperm. The terror castration holds for man is revealed through Evelyn’s reaction when the girl gets him ready for the operation. He breaks down and begs her to allow him to escape. Though he loves women, it terrifies him to lose his masculinity and become a woman. He prefers to face the dangers of the desert than to be a woman. But he is destined to be the one to give birth to the "Messiah of the Antithesis" (PNE 67).

Further degradation of the male principle and triumph over phallocentricity suggest itself in the scene that depicts Evelyn’s operation. The knife in Mother’s hand becomes a painful reminder of his virility to Evelyn: "The monstrous being brandished an obsidian knife as black as she was. [. . .] Oh, the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated with a phallic symbol!" (PNE 70). Evelyn must undergo more punishment for making a weapon of his instrument of pleasure. He is forced to watch his
genital apparatus being sliced off before he loses his consciousness completely:

Raising her knife, she brought it down. She cut off all my genital appendages with a single blow, caught them in her other hand and tossed them to Sophia, who slipped them into the pocket of her shorts. So she excised everything I had been and left me, instead, with a wound that would, in future, bleed once a month, at the bidding of the moon (PNE 71).

The phallic symbol is debased when it is treated trivially and with scorn. The cultural importance assigned to the phallus is debunked through the gesture of tossing it from the hands of one woman to the other as if it is a thing of no significance. Along with his sex, the second syllable too is sliced off from Evelyn's name to transform him to "Eve" the woman.

Evelyn who once dreaded the prospect of being a woman, Narcissus like, falls strangely in love with his/her new form as Eve turns out to be "the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in Evelyn's mind" (PNE 75). When Mother converts Evelyn to a Play Boy centre fold, unconsciously she recreates the masculine idea of the female. The New Eve whom she creates to disrupt the phallocentric universe ironically turns out to be an incarnation of male desire, a perfect sample of womanhood as envisaged by men. When the women at Beulah work on Eve's shape based on the nature of an ideal woman drawn up from the media, they do so
unconscious of the fact that they are drawing upon the ideas projected from a male subjectivity. Mother’s sonorous speech about the “halting of the phallocentric thrust so that the world could ripen in female space without the mortal intervention of time”, proves to be a farce (PNE 77). Carter seems to suggest that there is no such thing as a female subjectivity or even an objective view of the world as everything is manipulated and fashioned according to the needs of the phallocentric culture.

Mother’s hope of creating a myth of her own by bringing forth the Messiah of females through Eve’s auto parthenogenesis fails when Eve escapes captivity. Carter here highlights the point made by her in The Sadeian Woman that myths are consolatory nonsense. She warns us against adopting myths because, “myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances” (SW 5). The myth created by Mother in no way serves to ease the condition of women. Instead, it seem to entrap women in another set of restricting ideologies, denying them a right of choice or freedom to exercise their subjectivity. The grotesque depiction of the all female world of the Mother becomes a negative critique of myth and matriarchy.

The episodes at Mother’s Beulah and at Zero’s harem are Carter’s exploration of the cultural production of femininity. These episodes demonstrate in detail that gender is something acquired by the intervention of
culture. Evelyn’s metamorphosis into a woman at Beulah involves two stages. The physical changes are effected through a series of operations and the psychological changes are accomplished through psychosomatic treatment. The sex operation transforms him biologically into a female, but he becomes feminine only after he inculcates “the attributes of dependence, passivity, masochism and the desire to nurture which women are expected to possess [. . .] ”(Palmer, *Women’s Fiction* 18). Eve/Evelyn learns these culturally constructed gender qualities only during his/ her stay at Zero’s oppressively patriarchal world.

K. K. Ruthven in his *Feminist Literary Studies* observes that the subjection of women is not brought about by their natural inferiority as is believed but by their classification as intrinsically inferior by a male-dominated culture. What enables a girl to become a woman is not the natural transformations of her body when she attains the age of puberty but the socialising processes of Culture which dictates to her how she ought to think and act as a woman. “Women are not inferior by Nature but inferiorised by Culture: they are acculturated into inferiority.” In the domain of the patriarchal culture woman is not considered as an essence but “a construct on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted” (44-45).

Eve who escapes from Beulah goes through the “socialising processes of culture” after she is made a captive by the monomaniacal poet Zero. In the
hands of Zero, an arch misogynist, Eve/Evelyn goes through the real experiences of a woman in a male-centred world. Zero’s world is inherently grotesque with its distortion, inversions and heightened action. It is both abysmal and ludicrous. In the topsy turvy world of Zero, women are held in low esteem. They are not given enough food to eat; not allowed to live in clean circumstances and are not even permitted to speak a human language. In contrast, the pigs are allowed full freedom, are loved and properly looked after. The treacherous pigs often trip the girls down into their troughs and tease them in many other ways. The girls are taken to the city to work as prostitutes and earn enough to feed Zero and his pigs. Zero has created a myth of his own to terrify and keep the women under submission. Carter once again highlights the miserable plight of women as dumb creatures reduced to the state of animals in the patriarchal world. Through the exaggerated grotesque depiction of Zero’s world Carter satirizes the women who find pleasure in being submissive and leading a life worse than that of animals.

Eve’s apprenticeship as a woman at Zero’s ranch achieves everything, which Mother’s psychosurgery has failed to accomplish. It is here that she becomes truly feminine. Eve’s life in Zero’s harem turns out to be the punishment for the humiliation and violence which as Evelyn he had perpetrated on Leilah. Every time zero attacks Eve she feels a lack of self:

And more than my body, some other yet equally essential part of my being was ravaged by him for [...] I felt myself to be, not
myself but, he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self, which always brought with it a shock of introspection, forced me to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation (PNE 102).

Paradoxically Zero’s repeated rapes transform Evelyn into a woman not just in body but also in mind. The psychosomatic treatment at Mother’s place has not been successful in making Eve think and feel like a woman. The old Evelyn remains in her mind and it is the violent experiences at the hands of Zero that turn Eve into a woman as culture would have her. The grotesque portrayal of Zero’s patriarchal world and Mother’s matriarchal world allows Carter to subvert existing views on gender identity. She posits that the allegedly feminine qualities which make women inferior to men are invented and indoctrinated by force through the agency of the male-dominated culture.

It is Zero’s obsession for the Hollywood icon Tristessa that has driven him into the desert. He believes that Tristessa is responsible for making him sterile by casting a spell on him from out of the silver screen. He spends hours every day searching the desert for Tristessa’s hideout so that he can kill her and thereby restore his potency. When he and his harem finally find Tristessa, they discover something appalling about her. Tristessa is not a woman but a man in drag. A man who has fallen in love with his own sexual fantasy of a woman that he transforms himself into it: “That was why he had been the perfect man’s woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own
desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved!” *(PNE 128-9)*. According to Carter Tristessa’s character says a lot about “the cultural production of femininity and of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities” (Haffenden 86).

By means of a highly carnivalesque scene Carter yet again subverts the notions about gender identity. She demonstrates that gender is a constructed thing, something slapped on to an individual by the society rather than something that one is born with. Tristessa is the epitome of femininity, a perfect woman of the masculine imagination. After seeing Tristessa and grasping her secret, Eve reasons thus: “Tristessa, the sensuous fabrication of the mythology of flea-pits. How could a real woman, ever have been so much a woman as you?” *(PNE 129)*.

Zero who pounces on Tristessa as “the avenging phallic fire” is taken aback by her masculinity *(PNE 127)*. When the initial shock passes, Zero and his harem let loose a series of crazy activities and the scene takes on a highly carnivalesque tone: “Zero rose to his knees and gazed with wonder at the spectacle. ‘Shee-it!’ he exclaimed again and then began to laugh. As if at a signal the girls all burst out laughing too and slid off the statues to crowd round the poor, bound, female man” *(PNE 128)*. Their laughter is the ambivalent carnival laughter and it is directed both at Tristessa and at those who have been fooled by her. Tristessa’s fame is dragged through the mud
and he is made to go through experiences of ultimate humiliation. The laughter is directed towards Zero also as he has been all this time pursuing an illusion, an idea: “Tristessa had no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status only an iconographic one” (PNE 129). The Hollywood icon, the goddess of the silver screen is degraded, along with the masculine imagination that created her. In the scene of degradation, the material bodily elements take over completely. In grotesque realism, debasement of all that is sacred and exalted take place by bringing them to the level of the material bodily stratum or by mixing with its images (Rabelais 370). Through the grotesque gesture of displaying the buttocks, which according to Bakhtin is one of the most common uncrowning gestures, Zero’s wives degrade the Hollywood goddess:

Some of the other girls chose their favorite method of desecration, pulled down their dungarees and pissed copiously on the floor, while others tore off every stitch of clothing and danced obscene naked dances in front of him, contemptuously flourishing their fringed holes at him and brandishing mocking buttocks. The clamour and gesticulation were those of the monkey house (PNE 128).

They then set out on a destructive tour of the house breaking windows, smashing furniture, smearing excrement on the walls and finally making a
carnival bonfire of rolls of films. Not satisfied with all this they conduct a
mock wedding of Tristessa, and Eve.

The wedding ceremony is marked with carnival eccentricities. Zero’s
wives dress for the occasion in many coloured rags and daub their faces with
rouge and lipstick. In a reversal of gender roles once again, Eve is dressed as
the bridegroom in an evening suit and Tristessa as the bride in white satin.
But the harem pelts him with rouge, lipstick and eye paint until the white skirt
is daubed and streaked. The wedding ceremony is both degrading and
regenerating.

The degradation of Tristessa becomes a critique of western cultural
images of women. It is also regenerative in the sense that it enables us to
take a different view of such myths about femininity. The phallocentric
universe has always tried to sustain the cultural idea of woman as a passive
“thing”, a negation of existence itself. Tristessa too becomes a part in this
masculine conspiracy: “‘Passivity,’ he said. ‘Inaction. That time should not
act upon me that I should not die. So I was seduced by the notion of a
woman’s being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being [. . .]’”
(PNE 137). These are the ideas of femininity being projected by the media
through the celluloid icons so that they get imprinted in the minds of people.
A woman is appreciated not for what she is, but for being what man wants her
to be. That is why a man in drag becomes the most admired screen goddess:
"He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved!" (PNE 128-9). The complete destruction of the glass house is symbolic of the shattering of the myth that Tristessa creates for himself and along with it, Carter shatters the phallocentric myths about femininity.

The boy soldiers who capture Eve and Tristessa making love in the desert, satirize the naivety and fanaticism of certain American Christian sects. The boys who cannot condone lechery shoot Tristessa but forgive Eve since Christ forgave the woman taken in adultery. The colonel of the militant band is a boy of fourteen, the son of a millionaire from Florida. The boy who was born on Christmas day strongly believes that he is Christ, reborn to save the world, which is America for him. He forms a boys' crusade to lead the Holy war against Blacks, Mexicans, Red Indians, Militant Lesbians and gays and thus to save America from dissolution. However, when night arrives they are just little boys afraid of the darkness. Carter's presentation of this band of boy soldiers exposes the naivety, irrationality and blind faith of such factions founded on religious faith.

Escaping from the boy soldiers, Eve is thrown back to the hub of city life. Eve/Evelyn's adventures in America come a full circle. Her adventures in the desert over, the disillusioned newly formed Eve meets Leilah once again. Leilah, who is now Lilith the leader of a guerilla gang, turns out to be
the daughter of the goddess of Beulah. The Leilah who is engaged in guerilla warfare has nothing in common with the harlot Evelyn knew in New York she too has transformed: “Had that gorgeous piece of flesh and acquiescence been all the time a show, an imitation, an illusion?” (PNE 172). Now Eve realizes that Leilah has only been a projection of his desires: “She can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the projection of the lusts and greed and self-loathing of a youngman called Evelyn, who does not exist either” (PNE 175). Eve learns from Leilah that the desert, the land of myths has become the grave of myths too. Leilah’s Mother has realized the folly of trying to create new myths or sustain old ones:

“History overtook myth”, she said, “And rendered it obsolete. Mother tried to take history into her own hands but it was too slippery for her to hold [. . .] Historicity rendered myth unnecessary,” said Leilah. “The priestesses of Cybele have left off simulating miraculous births for a while and have turned into storm-troopers” (PNE 172-73).

The Mother voluntarily resigns from godhead and retires to a cave by the sea.

Eve is taken by Leilah on a journey to the coast where Mother lives. Eve enters a very narrow cave where Mother is said to be waiting for her. A highly symbolic journey takes place where Eve travels backwards to the Eocene period, the beginning of time itself. She goes through a very strange experience where time running backwards takes her along with it to the
beginning where she becomes one with the primordial atom. This is the scene of conclusive demythologisation, the site of Eve's ultimate revelation. The awareness that everything springs from the same source enables her to realize the foolishness in differentiating between the creatures of the world let alone that between male and female. The alchemical hermaphrodite image, which recurs in the novel, once again becomes significant. Eve realizes the significance of the hermaphrodite figure when she unites with Tristessa in the desert. She feels that it is an alchemical process where both of them become one, "the great Platonic hermaphrodite”.

The bird archaeopteryx reminds her of the dual nature and interchangeability of objects in nature. The vision suggests to her not the oneness of things but their interchangeability. The hermaphrodite image highlights the argument that the male and the female are complementary to one another. One has no existence without the other. A male dominated world as envisaged by patriarchs or an all female world dreamt of by matriarchs like Mother in Beulah are quite absurd notions, while the symbol of archaeopteryx suggests that there is no fixed pattern in the universe. Things that we see today have not been so in the past and will change again in the future:

At that time there was a bird called ‘archaeopteryx’ [. . .] bird and lizard both at once, a being composed of the contradictory elements of air and earth. From its angelic aspect spring the
whole family tree of feathered, flying things from its reptilian or satanic side the saurian, creepy crawlers, crocs, the sealed leaper and the lovely little salamander [. . .]. A miraculous seminal intermediate being whose nature I grasped in the desert (PNE 185).

Eve realizes that just as the differences between species are not so in evolutionary terms, the differences between men and women, which is a socio-cultural construct, have no natural ground. Just as Evelyn and Tristessa have been constructed and reconstructed, gender roles can be constructed differently. Eve who comes out of the cave is in fact the New Eve. Leaving behind the bonds of old false myths, even the myth of origin, which proves to be false, she goes in search of a new future: “Ocean, Ocean, mother of mysteries bear me to the place of birth” (PNE 191).

When she lands back on the coast after her strange experience down evolutionary lane, Eve is once again offered the genitals, which once belonged to Evelyn. But she promptly refuses it as she has come to know the secrets of creation. She no longer feels sorry for being a woman and decides to remain so. She escapes to the sea in the boat kept by the grotesque old woman on the seashore. The old woman who may be Mother herself is the representation of old dying symbols of womanhood. Since history has overtaken myth and made it outmoded, New Eve and her child begotten from her union with Tristessa may hope to live in a world free of mythic unreason.
Desiderio and Evelyn learn during their picaresque adventure that the basic principles that rule different societies are more or less the same. The illustrations of the societies that the protagonists of the two novels enter become tools in Carter's hand to expose the limitations of various social structures. She establishes the fact that myths are constructed in order to imprison people in the narrow confines of patriarchy. Carter explodes the cultural myths about gender identity and rewrites the myth of creation through the carnivalesque mode. She is also critical of the media projected images that entrap mankind in a false world created out of fantasy and desire.