A FEMINIST CRITIQUE: “ANGELA CARTER’S VIEWS OF FEMINIST CRITICISM OF MYTHS”¹

**Bir Feminist Eleştirisi: “Angela Carter’ın Mitlerin Feminist
Eleştirisi Üzerine Görüşleri”²**

Çelik EKMEKÇİ³

Abstract

Feminist criticism of myths and its starting point is crucial for the development of the depiction of female empowerment. Women show the necessity of creating myths because they are aware of the fact that those myths are the products of men. In this respect, Angela Carter follows the traces of French feminists and critics for they know that patriarchy impacts myths, and they strongly reject androcentric myths. Also, these feminists strongly advise women to re-write male-dominated myths in which women are shown inferior or depicted as monstrous and evil by men. Therefore, Carter re-writes the myths produced by men, in which women are depicted as the other. What Carter consciously does is that she demythologises and dephilosophises the authority of the male-authored texts represented in myths. Carter, through demythologisation, also challenges the patriarchal values and authoritative dictations maintained in the myths. According to Carter, myths are human products reflecting human mind which should thoroughly be questioned and she achieves her purpose through her subversive and perverse re-writings. Regarding all, this study aims to overview Feminist Criticism of Myths in terms of ideological and theoretical bases and bring a close look to the Carterian views of Feminist Criticism of Myths. Finally, Carter, as a part of her ‘demythologising business,’ depicts the female body to show the empowered body politics of women in her re-writings.

Keywords: *Feminist criticism of myths, women writings, feminist mythmaking, Angela Carter*

¹ I hereby declare that this study has been extracted from the dissertation of mine entitled “Body Politics in Angela Carter’s Works” and it includes the literary and theoretical analyses scrutinised within the scope of my doctoral study.

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³ Asst. Prof. Dr., Bartın University, Western Languages and Literatures, celikekmekci@bartin.edu.tr

Öz

Mitlerin Feminist Eleştirisi ve başlangıç noktası, kadın-güçlenmesi tasvirlerinin geliştirilmesi üzerine önemli bir noktaya sahiptir. Kadınlar, daha önce yazılan mitlerin erkek ürünü olduğunu bildiklerinden dolayı, kendilerine ait mitler yaratmanın gerekli olduğunu göstermişlerdir. Bu bağlamda Angela Carter, Fransız Feministlerin ve eleştirmenlerin izlerini takip eder, çünkü Fransız Feministler bilmektedirler ki, ataerkil görüş mitolojilere etki etmektedir ve bu Feministler erkek egemen mitlerini reddederler. Ayrıca Fransız Feministler, kadınlara, erkek-egemen mitlerini yeniden yazmalarını şiddetle tavsiye eder çünkü eril görüşün egemen olduğu bu mitlerde kadın, canavar ve şer olarak ya da aşağı görülen bir varlık olarak tasvir edilmektedir. Böylece, Carter, kadınların öteki olarak tasvir edildikleri, erkek ürünü olan mitleri yeniden yazar. Carter'ın bilinçli olarak yaptığı, mitlerde anlatılan erkek yazarların yazınlarını mitolojiden ve felsefeden arındırmaktır. Carter, mitolojiden arındırma sayesinde, bu mitlerde savunulan ataerkil değerleri ve otoriter dikteleri hiçe sayar. Carter'e göre mitler, insan aklını yansıtan bir insan ürünü olup, bütün yönleriyle sorgulanmalıdır, böylece Carter, yıkıcı ve aksi olan yeniden yazılmış yazınlarıyla bu amacına ulaşmaktadır. Tüm bu anlatılanlara dayanarak, bu çalışma, Mitlerin Feminist Eleştirisini ideolojik ve teorik bağlamlarda incelemeyi hedefleyip Carter'ın, Mitlerin Feminist Eleştirisi hakkındaki görüşlerine yakından bir bakış getirecektir. Sonuç olarak, Carter, 'mitlerden arındırma işleminin' bir parçası olarak kadınların güçlü beden politikalarını göstermek için, yeniden yazılmış metinlerinde kadın bedenini tasvir etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Mitlerin feminist eleştirisi, kadın yazınları, kadın mit yaratımı, Angela Carter*

INTRODUCTION TO THE CARTERIAN SENSE OF FEMINIST CRITICISM OF MYTHS

Angela Carter's view of the feminist criticism of myths depends upon her authentic but subversive purpose through which she performs her demythologising business. Carter strongly rejects patriarchy's overstated mythic abjections, and she re-writes since she does not trust androcentric writings. On this regard, Anna Kerchy states in her *Body Texts in The Novels of Angela Carter: Writing From a Corporeographic Point of View* that "[i]n Carter, writing by women has nothing to do with the anxiety of influence, Harold Bloom's (rather sexist) metaphor of literary paternity, defined as Oedipal murderous jealousy of the male power writing against the paternal authority of the masculine canon's great literary forefathers who must be overcome, invalidated for his becoming a true poet" (2008: 75). Thusly, as it is stated, Carter has no sense of anxiety of influence for androtexts in her writings since she rewrites the texts and produces a new female writing which deconstructs the old traditions. Depending upon that, what Harold Bloom writes in his *The Anxiety of Influence*⁴ (1973) is that his "concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death [...]" (1997: 5). Carter, however, shows that her concern is to create new female writings by deconstructing and demythologising those so-called strong ones. In doing this, Carter even rejects excessive mythologising of women for she thinks that it is nothing but consolation which is also related to the definition of myth. As Carter puts it:

[a]ll the mythic versions of women, from the myth of redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of

⁴ For detailed information, see Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: Theory of Poetry* (1997), Oxford University Press, pp.5-16.

these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place. (1979: 5-6)

According to Carter, mythic expression of women is as nonsense as that of men. Carter shows her reaction against ‘that nonsense’ which is related to the depiction of women in myths since she is in the “demythologising business” and she is “interested in myths” only because “they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree” (Carter, 1998: 27). As it is understood from the quotation, Carter’s purpose is to deconstruct and demythologise male-oriented mythology and the description or the mission of women depicted in those patriarchal myths. At the same time, Carter demythologises “the mother figure [...] in which manifestation of the female body in her works disrupt social construction of women as woman” (Peach, 1998: 3-4). Thus, this quotation can be considered to be a critique of Carter’s demythologising philosophy in general, and her writings in particular, because, on the one hand, Carter harshly criticises male-authority and its dominant institutions; on the other hand, she “writes against feminist grain” (Munford, 2006: 4). For this reason, Carter’s attitude toward feminism and feminist ideology is criticised by critics. Carter, indeed, sees that her critique policy is a representation of her challenge to every ideological system mainly against patriarchy and this is considered to be an outcome of why she sees “her fiction as very often a kind of literary criticism” (Munford, 2006: 4).

Moreover, Carter’s purpose is to show the significance of women writings. If women do not write they become partial, even if they write within this state of mind, their products become monologic⁵ just like the normative institutions of patriarchy. As Carter writes in her *Notes from the Front Line* (1983), “[...] it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women -- [...]” (1998: 29). Therefore, Carter, as French feminists mostly do, rejects the mythic notions of androtexts⁶ produced in the past. As Luce Irigaray states in her *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1990), “we are all imbued with many Greek, Latin, Oriental, Jewish and Christian traditions, at least, particularly through art, philosophy, and myths without our realizing... The theories of Marx and Freud are not adequate, because they remain bound to a patriarchal mythology which hardly ever questions itself as such” (1993: 23). As Irigaray puts it, Greco-Roman traditions are forced by patriarchal ideology through art, philosophy and mythology. Thusly, women writers like Carter, do not see them qualified enough to illuminate female creativity since they all include normative patriarchal notions. On this regard, they react and demolish these patriarchal traditions in their rewritings. Therefore, feminist mythmaking is seen as one of the biggest solutions for changing patriarchal taboos because “[i]n this environment, feminist mythmaking is interpreted as a powerful tool for counter-acting” (Dörschel, 2011: 98).

Furthermore, according to Jane Caputi, female-oriented mythmaking and myths are crucial because through such female-myths, women are able to cope with patriarchy. Caputi writes in her article entitled: “On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking” (1992) as follows: “[w]hen women refuse and refute these thoughts/myths and instead foray into the realm traditionally forbidden to our sex- the realm of the sacred storyteller, symbol and mythmakers- we participate in the creative powers of Thought

⁵ Monologic: One-voiced expression. According to Bakhtin, monologic novels: “undertake to subordinate the voices off all characters to the authoritative discourse and controlling purposes of the author [...]” (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p.77).

⁶ Texts written by men.

Woman, employing thinking, naming and willing as forms of power exercised consciously and/or intuitively in the creation of the world(s) we inhabit" (1992: 427). In other words, it is through women's refusal of man-made discourse in old and traditional myths and stories that women are able to recreate the world by representing their true identities and purposes. Hence, one of the most significant points in feminist criticism of myths is that feminist criticism of myths erases 'gender' and its partial narrations in classical myths. This is an apparent sign that male scholars ignored the forms of gender in the myth-making process. The same understanding is expressed by Funda Başak Dörschel as follows, "[m]ost of the feminist scholars agree that the academic tradition of theories of myth is dominated by male scholars. Male critics thence are criticized for ignoring gender in their classification of myths and archetypes" (2011: 99). As it is seen in the quotation, the common point among feminist writers is the absence of the female perspective in myths in general and the female archetypes in these writings in particular. Thence, male writers are denounced for influencing myths since they take no notice of gender representations in their restricted productions.

Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) is considered to be a manifesto for the feminist criticism of myths in which Cixous introduces Medusa⁷ as the empowered, beautiful and laughing rather than being revengeful and deadly. Cixous' aim is to erase the image of the dark continent⁸ of women in which the male discourse shows it as undiscoverable, unreachable and that which is as dark as women. As Sarah Cornell states in her "Hélène Cixous and les Etudes Féminines" (1990): "'The Laugh of The Medusa,' exposes and explores the difficulties that confront women and keep them away from their own femininity [...]" (1990: 35). So, women have to bother man-made obstacles and tackles in myths which remove their real femininity. Cixous clarifies her intended politics for women through the image of 'The Dark Continent' as follows:

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. (1976: 884-885)

In other words, Cixous, through "The Laugh of The Medusa," wants show women's mysterious existences which are neither deadly nor monstrously dark as depicted in Medusa; but 'beautiful and laughing' showing the factual essence of the females. It is also stated that "Hélène Cixous, in her seminal essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" refutes Freud's reading of the Medusa myth [...] Cixous encourages women to reclaim the Medusa ..." (Dörschel, 2011: 99). It is through Medusan power that women are able to get their true representations. Regarding that, Cixous proclaims that one "only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly, she's beautiful and she's laughing" (1976: 885). The male representation of Medusa might seem dark

⁷ The same thematic point is also expressed by Gillian M. E. Alban in her article entitled: "Medusa as Female Eye or Icon in Atwood, Murdoch, Carter, and Plath" (2013) in which Alban explores Medusa as "the electrifying archetype, with her starring eyes and snakes for hair, petrifies her object" (2013, p.163). According to Alban, Medusa's mythological story makes her a powerful female icon in which woman's psychic power is expressed.

⁸ For further details on men's intended purpose in the image of 'Dark Continent', see Cixous' "The Laugh of The Medusa" (1976), p.877.

and monstrously evil; however, women should present and represent the beautiful and enchanting parts and views of Medusa. Furthermore, Gregory Staley in his article entitled “Beyond Glorious Ocean: Feminism, Myth, and America” writes that “Cixous’ ‘Dark Continent’ of course, is most immediately borrowed from Freud’s characterisation of woman as equivalent to Africa; but in her use of Medusa and myth, Cixous ultimately takes her Dark Continent beyond Freud, back to an essentially classical topography and mythology of woman and the world” (2006: 210). As it is further stated, Freudian sense of Africa is used metaphorically to represent it as the dark continent and unexplored territory which is resembled to women; however, Cixous puts it further by representing it within the scope of feminist mythmaking. Depending on it, the same thematic point of the “Dark Continent” image of women is discussed in Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*, especially in the case of Leilah. In *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Leilah is defined by (Eve)lyn as follows: “[...] She was black as the source of shadow and her skin was matt, lustreless and far too soft [...]” (Carter, 1982: 14).

Moreover, Kari Jegerstedt in her article titled “The Art of Speculation: Allegory and Parody as Critical Reading Strategies in *The Passion of New Eve*” (2012) writes that Leilah’s name “comes from the Arabic Layla, meaning ‘night’” which is also related to “the female sexuality in constituting a ‘dark continent’” [my comment added] (2012: 135). Besides, according to Staley, Cixous’ purpose in her work depends upon showing the significance of the Dark Continent. As he puts it, “[i]n characterizing Woman as a continent to be explored, Cixous is simply using the dominant metaphor” (2006: 211). This metaphor is the placement of powerful women seen as continents. According to Staley:

[i]n antiquity women had long been seen as continents, as one Renaissance commentator noted in explaining the name ‘America’: ‘I do not see why anyone should object to its being called, from its discoverer Americus, ... Amerige, meaning land [Greek] of Americus, or America, since Europe and Asia have acquired their names from women.’ The three original continents, Europe, Asia, and Libya, had derived their names from mythical women. (2006: 211)

Therefore, as it is depicted in the quotation above, empowered and mythical women have even been used as an inspiration for continents, most importantly, for all humanity. Thusly, ‘America’ is shown as a counter argument to the ‘Dark Continent’ in a mythical sense. Throughout history, America is aimed to be represented as the powerful female, whose power comes from her mythological female ancestors. As Staley contends:

[t]he indoctrination had already begun with Hesiod: Woman as Night, as Abyss, as land in the West. It was only after the discovery of the New World that the dark continent thought of as Woman came to be Africa. Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci worked within this tradition, representing America in their narratives as a mythologized and feminine place. (2006: 212)

As it is seen in the quotation above, the mythological depiction of the woman as the dark continent goes on with the discovery of America through which it is still used in the narratives with its mythological and feminine qualities. In a similar vein, America, as ‘the almighty female,’ is also depicted by Emma Lazarus in her poem entitled: “The New Colossus” (1883) as follows:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles.
 [...] ("The New Colossus")

Here, the significance of female power is associated with America. Furthermore, the same thematic point, related to the metaphor of the powerful female body, can also be explored abundantly in Carter's narratives, especially in *The Passion of New Eve*. Carter shows the impressions of such almighty female myths in *The Passion of New Eve* as Emma Lazarus does in her "The New Colossus." Carter makes use of those powerful female sources to depict and represent body politics of her female characters. In other words, Carter's purpose is to distort mainstream ideology for the purpose of demythologising and dephilosophising the androtexts in which women are depicted as powerless beings.

CONCLUSION

Consequently, depending upon overall expressions, it is stated that feminist criticism of myths strongly rejects the male-dominated discourse in which myths are produced and at the same time, feminist criticism of myths does not favor the usurpation of gender or gender representations. Therefore, through women writers like Carter, old myths are challenged and they are re-written to demythologise and to dephilosophise traditional man-made discourse in which the females are depicted solely by patriarchal scope in androcentric myths. Thereby, Carter and other women writers re-write, deconstruct and subvert the traditional writings of men. Lastly, it is also within the purpose of feminist criticism of myths to depict the female body as the core of the argument in these re-writings since the female body is considered to be the powerful tool in which women, throughout history and in mythology and literature, have performed their powerful female body politics.

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