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Gender in Performance: Alternate Gender Identities in *Nights at the Circus***Dr. Raji Ramesh***S.K. Somaiya College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Vidyavihar, Mumbai, (M.S.) India***Abstract**

*The paper makes an attempt to prove how Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is loaded with metaphors of theatre and cinema. These performance tropes help her characters in masking both identity and otherness in performances. Further, the novel puts under erasure father figures, suggesting their insignificance or by presenting them as comic ciphers. It also subverts marriage, the site of patriarchal authority, by making it a comic spectacle or by making it an occasion for role play and masquerade.*

Key Words: Performance, gender, gender identity

Nights at the Circus [1984] is, arguably Carter's greatest work, because of its exuberant language and protagonist Fevvers who changes the very concept of woman. Perched on the cusp between the nineteenth and twentieth century's, it provides a historically rich, fantastically laden exploration of ways in which women are mythologized, and constructed as saints or whores. The novel offers new potential for woman in the volatile period of the New Woman at the nineteenth century's end, leading to suffragettes and social changes in the next century. Fevvers, a winged woman and high wire performer, is the novel's central character and we move through her various exploits and adventures as she travels from Paris to Russia to England, protecting herself from predatory men, seeking ways to be successful while developing and retaining her sense of identity. All through the novel, the notions of reality and fantasy are questioned, critiquing oppressive gender stereotypes and relationships of power.

A major part of the novel's liveliness is embodied in Fevvers, the winged aerialist whose feathered appendages give rise to her slogan —Is she fact or is she fiction?||31

Fevvers' actions reflect the novel's actions, and the way we respond to her directs our response to the novel. Her slogan points out that fact and fiction may be discrete and easily discernible, and to bring out that exactly, is the main purpose of journalist Jack Walser as he tries to solve some of Fevvers' mystery. Apart from her wings the story of her life as a child – she is hatched from an egg, grows up in a brothel, and sells herself into willing slavery so as to provide money for her new foster family – gives Walser serious doubts. Fevvers is a woman who makes a spectacle of herself.

In the novel, the women who sell their bodies are used to being looked at as objects, but in spite of Fevvers' control over her audience's response, she cannot prevent herself being exhibited if the right price is quoted. Fevvers appears to be an altruist, but for the major part she also looks into her benefits. The gifts showered on her by enthusiastic fans are deposited in the bank, and she goes to any length to procure these gifts, as is seen in her encounter with the Grand Duke. In spite of the risks in her isolated meeting with him, she is concerned only with the diamonds he has promised her and also the chances of other riches to be

paid for the evening of entertainment she may be required to provide. The Duke has strategically positioned a life-size ice sculpture of Fevvers in full flight, and around the sculpture's neck is the diamond necklace with which he has lured Fevvers to his house. Fevvers feels little uneasy when thrown into this possibility of her appearance as a commodity, though to some extent she is responsible for the way in which he sees her. The wickedness of the encounter is also enhanced by the Duke's weird toys, a group of clockwork musicians and a collection of jeweled eggs containing curious figures. When Fevvers sees the egg with a vacant perch, she realizes that she will be the Duke's next possession, and while she distracts him with a sexual caress, she quickly plans her escape. One of the eggs contains a model of the Trans-Siberian Express, and while the Duke is otherwise engaged, she throws the toy onto the carpet, runs down the platform, and throws herself into the first-class compartment. In the space of a few sentences, Fevvers is whisked away from the Duke's house to the reality represented by the toy train, closes with Fevver's laughter, the laughter that engulfs the globe at the expense of Walser. On the train across Siberia, Fevvers begins to fade. The vast emptiness of the snowy, wasteland, like a - blank sheet of fresh paper|| [NC-218], deprives Fevvers of her audience, and in her absence she has no purpose. She becomes sulky, and the dying.

Her hair and on her wings loses colour. When the train is blown up by outlaws, who escort the travelers to a shack in the forest, however, the possibility of an audience appears bleak, and Fevvers' broken wings indicate that she can neither perform nor fly for help. Walser, who has joined the circus as a clown, and whose love for Fevvers ultimately exceeds his desire to prove her a hoax, is buried in the train wreck. Though he is discovered, he has lost his memory, which

begins to return when he is in the company of a Shaman and his people. Only when Fevvers sees Walser again does she begin to recover. Akin to the landscape in *Heroes and Villains*, the Siberian wilderness provides an opportunity for philosophical and political speculation. Almost all of the characters whom the travelers encounter are victims of or refugees from political manipulation. Lizzie has been secretly sending bulletins home from Russia in the diplomatic mailbag, having promised a gentleman she had met in the British Museum, most probably Karl Marx, to send news to exiled comrades. In the Siberian part of the novel, Lizzie attains her individuality and her frequent expositions amidst political injustices points out her disagreement to romantic idealism. She appears to be highly pragmatic. The colonel moves towards the railroad track, while Mignon, with her lover, the Princess, and Samson, the repentant strongman, remain in the Musical Academy of Transbaikalia, and only Lizzie and Fevvers arrive at the village where Walser is slowly regaining his memory.

Carter associates Fevvers with the matter of emergent, Women's Rights, and even the period of the late nineteenth century. It is noteworthy that when Fevvers first spreads her wings she is described by Ma Nelson, the mistress of the brothel. Fevvers was brought up in, as —the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground||[NC-25].

Carter feels that the late nineteenth century was a critical phase in the dawning of consciousness about and agitation for women's rights. The main concern of the period was definitely women's suffrage. But, it was only during 1918 that women of a particular age [thirty and over] finally gained vote. An important part of Carter's appropriation of masculine iconography in

Nights at the Circus is her opposition to the idea that there is such a phenomenon as essential womanly nature. Fevvers declares that she is not born in the normal way of human beings but is hatched. She even compares herself with Helen of Troy, whom classical legend describes as born from an egg brought forth by her mother Leda after Leda has been 'embraced' by Zeus in the form of a swan: —I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no, but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched|| [NC-7]. Carter observes in this concept of 'hatching' a metaphor for the idea that gendered identity is something that is not given but is made and can be remade. Ricarda Schmidt comments that Fevvers' idea of having been hatched means that she —fantasizes a beginning for herself outside the Oedipal triangle, outside the Law of the Father|| 35— and outside all the essentialist determinations prescribed by that Law. The anti-essentialism of this metaphor of hatching means, definitely, those men can be remade, just as women. The concept is evident in Fevvers' thinking of the way in which she will reconstruct Walser's masculinity: Let him hand himself over into my safe keeping, and I will transform him you said yourself he was un hatched, Lizzie, very well – I'll wit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him: I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman. [NC-281]

Fevvers portrays the essence of New Woman since she has been constructed as the New Woman. Her slogan as the winged trapeze artist reads: —Is she fact or is she fiction? || [NC-7].

This question is repeatedly put forth by the people amongst the audience.

But, the question appears to be misconceived as she is both fiction and fact. She appears to be constructed and has been

written into being, hence is a fictional entity. Again, the fiction seems to be true now and a fact. Fevvers is the new, reconstituted woman. She is the product of Lizzie's radicalism, who says. —I raised you up' comments Lizzie to Fevvers, 'to fly to the heavens|| [NC-282]. Lizzie's radical act of bringing up Fevvers eludes the matter of reason. Fevvers observes towards the final part of the book, testifying this point: —I am a rational being and, what's more took in my rationality with her [Lizzie's] milk|| [NC-225]. In the portrayal of Fevvers there is an appropriation of a significant aspect of masculine iconography involving women, and her story as a whole in *Nights at the Circus* appears at once as an appropriation of conventional 'his-story', masculine history. In the final part of the novel, when Fevvers speaks of Walser as someone she can turn into a —New Man|| [NC-281], she remarks to Lizzie: Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis... And not of my trajectory, alone, but of yours, to, Lizzie; of your long history of exile and cunning which you've scarcely hinted to him, which will fill up ten times more of his notebooks than my story ever did. Think of him as he amanuensis of all those tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history, as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow. [NC-285] Fevvers' belief in the reconstructed Walser is amplified in her words. She appears to be absolutely sure that through Walser an alternative history could be written of all the voices of women unheard of in the world. It is a notable aspect that *Nights at the Circus* weaves together elements of carnivalesque and fantastic with those of harsh material realism as vehicles for feminist aims. The Feminism

of *Nights at the Circus* is complex in that it —brings out an engaged Marxist Feminism or Materialist Feminism and a subversive utopian Feminism||.36 Lizzie and her adopted daughter Fevvers serve, respectively, as mouthpieces for each of these two strands, though there is an overlap as the two characters influence each other. The novel's ubiquitous narrator tries to bring together these two strands of Feminism so as to posit a Feminism that would be liberating at the same time retaining a socio historical grounding —something that would liberate humanity from the hierarchical relations in which Western Culture, with its binary logic, has entrapped them, without becoming disengaged from the material situation||.37 So as to analyze the status of women and of existing relationships between women and men within Western culture and, more radically, propose possible avenues for change, Carter pits a Marxist feminist realism against postmodern forms of tall tales, carnivalization and fantasy. Though disruptive strategies generally linked with post modernism appear in *Nights at the Circus*, these strategies are employed to amplify its feminist goals. Alison Lee comments on the ideological aspect of the novel: —Even as she appropriates extraordinary and fantastic elements Carter retains certain conventions of realism and a firm connection to the historical material situation as means of securing her novel's feminist political edge and ensuring that her novel remains accessible to most readers.

Definitely, the novel succeeds in deconstructing the masculine/feminine hierarchical opposition itself by portraying Fevvers as co-opting both masculine and feminine characteristics to assert her monopoly over Walser. Fevvers starts her career by posing as a —tableau vivant||, thus constructing herself as an object to be seen but not touched: as a child she is —cupid|| [NC-23] and then —Angel of Death|| [NC-

70]. Though Fevvers objectifies herself she continues as a subject by constructing her own objectified image. By shaking but at the same time maintaining the conventional opposition between subject and object, the novel takes a path of non hierarchical and nonbinary note on of subjectivity while at the same time engaging and stressing matters of power relations. *Nights at the Circus* clearly foregrounds the ways in which postmodern ideas of subjectivity can be used for feminist aims without completely losing the concept of subjectivity. Carter's novel never moves away from the material oppression of women as it attempts to offer new forms of subjectivity that does not depend on the binary thought system that has enabled to oppress women in Western culture.

One of the methods by which the novel questions the status quo and constructs new opinions of the subject is through its inversion of accepted views of prostitution and marriage. When Fevvers calls upon Walser to write in his newspaper that she is raised by women of the worst class and defiled|| [NC-21], Walser's reply reveals his firm belief in Western binary thought: - And I myself have known some pretty decent whores, some damn fine women, indeed, whom any man might have been proud to marry|| [NC-21]. Walser continues and even stresses the dichotomy between good women and bad women, wives and whores, by pointing out that some whores are good enough to become wives. The novel resists these oppositions through the voice of Lizzie, who stresses that wives and whores have more in common than not and, hence, brings down the Western ideology of marriage: —What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?|| [NC-21] Lizzie's words echo Carter's own discussion of the subject in her book-length essay *The Sadeian Woman*. It brings out that —sexual relations|| are —necessarily an

expression of social relations|| and that, like prostitutes, —all wives of necessity fuck by contract||.51 Carter undermines the conventional hierarchical opposition between wives and whores by pointing out that —prostitutes are at least decently paid on the nail and boast fewer illusions about a hireling status that has no veneer of social acceptability||.52 *Nights at the Circus* fictionalizes this criticism of the bourgeois notion of marriage and of the traditional dichotomy between wife and whore by using prostitutes as its positive female characters, thus decreasing marriage to nothing more than an unquestioned custom grounded in a false ideology of happiness: —The name of this custom is a happy ending|| [NC–281]. Lizzie sarcastically defines marriage as forcing a woman to give to a man both herself and her —bank account|| [NC–280], thus bringing out the economic exploitation of women within the institution of marriage that is brought out by fictions of romance.

The novel's Materialist Feminism and its stress on the economic as well as ideological oppression of women again is revealed in the portrayal of prostitutes as —working women doing it for money||, as —poor girls earning a living|| [NC–38-39]. Fevvers challenges the myths of whores as nymphomaniacs by stressing that economics rather than pleasure describes the prostitute's work: —though some of the customers would swear that whores do it for pleasure that is only to ease their own consciences so that they will feel less foolish when they fork out hard cash for pleasure that has no real existence unless given freely – oh, indeed! We knew we only sold the simulacra. No woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity, sir|| [NC–39]. Fevvers' words weaken the conventional link of sex with pleasure or desire by bringing out the contractual nature of all sexual relations. Carter observes that both the prostitute and

the wife engage in sex as an economic exchange; the only demarcation is in the prostitute's overt acceptance of the contract. The prostitute comes out the winner in the novel, specifically since she is presented as more aware of her position within the economic system in which all women definitely partake.

Carter converts the —wholly female world||, a 'sisterhood' of active, ambitious women, whose lives are —governed by a sweet and loving reason||. The prostitutes are —all suffragists|| [NC–38-39] – not 'suffragettes' and professional women. They involve in —intellectual, artistic or political|| [NC–40] activities before the whorehouse starts in the evening and they are thus active subjects as well as sexual objects. By presenting the prostitute in a positive light, the novel, challenges the conventional views and binaries – including the accepted views of the feminists. The word 'whore' itself is ambivalent as it is distanced from its position as extreme of wife, good woman, and even feminist. Again, Fevvers' use of the word 'honour' to indicate selfhood is normal; her vociferous questioning of the common reduction of women to their bodily orifices questions traditional stereotypes: —Wherein does a woman's honour reside, old chap? In her vagina or in her spirit|| [NC–230]. Fevvers' observation stresses the manner in which the biological body has been utilized for the benefit of man. Further, in the novel, Carter asserts her feminist position through the use of a series of destabilizing strategies. The novel's subversion of the idea of prostitution, for instance, goes much beyond its overt analysis through the voices of Fevvers and Lizzie; it is stressed by an overall carnivalization of the whore house itself. Definitely, Carter's use of carnivalization and her creation of carnival spheres strengthen the novel's subversive Feminism. *Nights at the Circus* utilizes a post modern

aspect of carnivalization as a means for its subversive feminist goals. The novel's use of extraordinary and fantastic characters and situations and its creation of actual and surrogate carnivals definitely destabilize the existing norms and the binary logic which percolates the Western culture.

Nights at the Circus presents the whorehouse, the circus, and Siberia as versions of carnival and challenges the Western notions of reality and brings out an aesthetic vocabulary for indicating means of change. As the carnival is a space within which the dominant hierarchical system and its laws are suspended, the carnival provides ambivalence and even new form of interrelationships. The whorehouse in the London' part of the novel, act as a surrogate carnival and, stresses the novel's disruption of the accepted notion of prostitution and even the binary logic on which it depends.

The novel's portrayal of prostitutes in a positive way and prostitution in an acceptable way and also the presentation of an extraordinary heroine with wings function as carnivalesque disruptions of established views. Then, Fevvers appears as an ambivalent figure of carnival stature, shaking established conventions of female characters. At the outset her identity and origins are vague, and even her fame as —Virgin Whore|| [NC-55] disrupts the strong categorization between virgin and whore used by western culture to name, objectify, divide and marginalize women. By asserting that she is —the only fully feathered intact in the history of the world|| [NC-294], Fevvers takes an active part in her own social definition. The exceptional portrayal of Fevvers as the protagonist intensifies the novel's challenge to Western culture's view of women as highly passive entities. The novel utilizes Lizzie's views to stress, morally and theoretically, the observation that selves are constructed rather than essential. She denies the notion

—soul' as a —thing that don't exist|| and believes that it is history —that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present in the first place||. Based on her staunch Marxism, Lizzie asserts that the chances of change rest on a complete dismantling and restructuring of society: —It's not the human soul' that must be forged on the anvil of history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to change humanity|| [NC-239-40]. Lizzie's assertion gives a Marxist touch to the novel's Feminism, with its effect that women's oppression will not stop till social structures are radically changed. Carter engages the novel's two female protagonists Lizzie and Fevvers, to foreground a material analysis of existing means of subject construction and a carnivalized version of female self-construction, as means of exploring the possibility of a new female pornography and daily life.

Nights at the Circus ends on the highly refreshing and liberating note of Fevvers' carnivalesque laughter. Her loud, uncontrollable laughter problematizes the meaning of the novel's ending. But at the same time it also releases a liberating energy. It is even ambivalent in that its meaning is plural and dynamic. Ambivalent laughter is a vital element of the carnival, described by Bakhtin as embracing both —death and rebirth' and as —directed toward something higher-toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders'.⁵⁸ Fevvers' laughter marks the end of Walser's skepticism and disengagement, as well as her feelings of diminishment, and welcomes the fresh winds of change. The laughter that physically ends the novel virtually paves the way for a fresh start. Uncontrollable, it —spilled out of the window|| and infects everything. —The spiraling tornado of Fevvers|| laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant

comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, - was laughing|| [NC-294-95]. The ending, which also marks the 301 beginning, provides ambivalent laughter as a means of approaching twentieth-century life, as Fevver's laughter sweeps in as midnight ends and welcomes the new century. Fevver's laughter over her triumph in fooling Walser into believing that she is a bird-woman challenges male domination as well as western binary logic. She challenges male-centred definitions of hereby assuming control of her own self-construction and bypassing the conventional opposition between reality and fiction. The ending also anticipates potential new forms for feminist fiction. Bakhtin's argument that carnivalesque laughter possesses —Enormous creative, and therefore genre-shaping, power||,59 proves the view that a feminist appropriation of carnival laughter opens up avenues for the formation of new types of feminist fiction that would be subversive and liberating both at the level of narrative and of politics.

By subverting expectations, carnivalization both exposes the deep-rooted male-

dominated system and brings out possibilities for change. But, Carter takes utmost care to keep her narrative firmly rooted in the material situation by maintaining a balance between presentations of day to day life and fantastic events, though they are interrelated. While carnivalization steers forward the novel's utopian Feminism, other techniques like tall stories, and inverted norms, also have subversive potential mainly as vehicles for the novel's materialistic Feminism. Carter adopts Marxist Feminism's emphasis on the material situation, which utopian Feminism tries to ignore; and it takes up utopian Feminism's creative and hopeful dynamism that Marxist Feminism misses. By situating a materialist, socio historical grounding for its utopian vision of new women and men, and by creating a world that would be better in feminist terms, the narrative comes up with the observation that the world is definitely far away from being a utopia, but offers much hope for the future.

Carter ends the novel with her post feminist notion that the new woman and man need to co-exist with their available talents.

Notes:

1. Angela Carter. *Nights at the Circus*. London: Pan Books, 1985, p.7.
2. Angela Carter. *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* London: Virago Press, 1979, pp.60-61.
3. Paulina Palmer. From Coded Manequin to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight. *Women Reading Women's Writing*. Ed. Sue Roe. New York: St. Martin's 1987, pp.179-205.

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