

## Portrayal of Deprived in Angela Carter's Novel *Nights at the Circus*

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### Abstract

Angela Carter is one of the most brilliant and bold writers of the late twentieth century. Angela Carter allured the readers widely and established her literary reputation in the twenty-first century. She received much reputation, wide appreciation and critical acclaim as a writer posthumously and quite paradoxically, she who always resisted all kinds of canonizations and engaged in all sorts of de-canonization businesses became a canonical figure in British academic circles as soon as her unfortunate demise at the age of fifty-one prompted diverse obituaries praising the magical and talismanic qualities of her life and works. A writer gifted with daringly original and compactly intellectual genius, she walked ahead of her times and her fiction amazed the reading world with their subversive potential. Carter's anti-realist fiction, where she articulated power relations in terms of gender, strongly challenges the established notions of gender, constructed to suit the purposes of patriarchal system which facilitates the supremacy of the male. She has depicted the deprived conditions of women in her novels and also patriarchal system prevalent in the society. Judiciously employing certain strategies to subvert and undermine the patriarchal discursive practices, Carter points towards possibilities of change through her unconventional fictional world. She has depicted the patriarchal system and conditions of women in the novel *Nights at the Circus*.

**Keywords:** Deprived, feminism, patriarchy, gender relations

Angela Carter depicted all sorts of authorities in her writing and she has purposefully paid attention to question and challenge the traditional and conventional social assumptions associated with the hierarchical nature of class and gender relations. Blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the decent and the obscene. She has involved herself in destabilizing the rigid, hegemonic nature of patriarchal discursive practices and the resultant social inequalities. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* assumes a project of both demythologizing and re-mythologizing in its effort to fly in the face of patriarchy through its bird-woman heroine

Fevvers. It unshackles the New Woman from the old conventions, re-vision the world and monies women's space (s) within it. Fevvers's superiority of the limitations forced by her gender through her potential for flight is metaphoric and suggests the possible ways of emancipation for women. Flight proposes power and freedom, not a passive escape. Helen Cixous clarifies on the importance of flight for women:

The gesture that characterizes the relation of women to the cultural is one

of flying and stealing (volor). Women, Cixous argues must steal what they

need from the dominant culture, but then fly away with their cultural

booty to the 'in-between', where new images, new narratives and new

subjectivities can be created. (Shiach, Cixous 23)

In the novel *Nights at the Circus*, she commences an ironic critique of the power games played through transplanting myths and symbols to late nineteenth and twentieth century situations, attaching universal value to the ideas conveyed through these myths and symbols. As we go through various experiences met by Fevvers in her life, we come across many references to Yeatsian images and symbols which have mythical associations. Lorna Sage comments in this regard in her study on Carter's fiction titled *Angela Carter*:

The image of the woman with wings has served throughout the centuries as a carrier of men's meanings, and at the turn of the century in particular this time-honoured icon had a new lease of life.

As part of her project of analyzing the male versions in her novel, Carter takes her indication from the line "Did she put on his knowledge with his power?" Fevvers, through her knowledge creates her power as a reply to the embarrassments suffered by generations of women. By applying her wisdom and resourcefulness, she grips the perils encountered by her in her life's path deftly and appears victorious. In *Ma Nelson's* brothel, Fevvers the kid, painted white all

over her body, poses herself as cupid with bows and arrows, the white paint indicating not only cupid's position as an angel but the chastity and associated virtues expected from a girl child. Next in *Madam Schreck's* museum of female monsters, she is one of the 'tableaux vivants' of women in the 'profane altar' where punters came to worship, helping to re-enact different perverse male sexual fantasies. For the Duke, women are art pieces and his collection includes woman as Aeolian harp. Fevvers is turned into a precious golden bird to be placed on the empty golden bough of a golden tree in an empty golden cage.

Fevvers's first attempt of flight at *Ma Nelson's* whore house is compared to the fall of Lucifer in the bible. "Like Lucifer I fell. Down, Down, down, I tumbled being with a bump on the Persian rug below me." Like Lucifer who agitated against God, Fevvers is able with an indomitable will to fight against subjugation of women. Like Lucifer who rebelled against God, the father for securing his rights, Fevvers is invested with the revolutionary ardour for fighting for the rights of women. Fevvers represents the causes upheld by the suffragette movement which protested against patriarchy and argued for the rights of women in society. She is, like Lucifer, a fallen angel who rebelled against centres of authority to safeguard rights and dignity.

Through the character of Fevvers, Carter questions the received notions of femininity as she represents the Free Woman who is wise enough to take decisions for herself. Located within the matrices of both fact and fiction, she is a combination of the contradictory versions of women as virgin and whore, angel and witch, fact and fiction.

Combating conquering myth with liberating myth, Carter tests both demythologization and re-mythologization in *Nights at the Circus*. Angela Carter assumes the deconstruction of the Mother figure as the incarnation of selflessness and sacrifice. The myth of Motherhood, for Carter, is another 'consolatory non-sense' cunningly used by the patriarchal society to make women compliant and docile. During the 1960s and 70s, when the energies of the suffragette movement were in the air, many of the feminists used to attack the mother figure as the tool of patriarchy, accusing her of taking a key role in taming her daughter to fit into the mould carved out by patriarchy. Mothers often assist the interests of the male-centred system by channelizing their daughters' socialization to limit them to the secondary roles. It is highly absurd that mothers opted to become the mediators of patriarchy by making their daughters for a life of disparity. Mothers' role becomes essential as they try to hold back the girl child's needs to be a powerful, independent self-directed, spirited and prolific human being.

Carter shares this feminist aggression towards the mother figure who takes a principal role in socializing her daughter as the support of the patriarchal status quo. In her personal life Carter had many reasons to spurn the mother image valued by patriarchy. Like many other children of her generation, Carter also had to endure the experiences of flight and the succeeding enforced separation from her mother. Even in her state of infancy, she was displaced from London to the coal-mining village called Wath-upon-Deane in South Yorkshire, where she had to live with her imposing and patronizing grandmother

who never let Carter's mother herself to grow into an autonomous individual.

Carter continues to describe her grandmother's disciplinarian attitude which put her mother under repression:

Her personality had an architectonic quality;  
I think of her when I see

some of the great London railway termini,  
especially St. Pancras, with its

soot and turrets and she overshadowed her  
own daughters, whom she did

not understand my mother who liked things  
to be nice; my dotty aunt. But

my had not the strength to put even much  
physical distance between them,

let alone keep the old monster at an emotional  
arm's length. (9)

Carter found her mother as "ever-infantilized" by the "old monster", the grandmother "who nagged her daughter's apparent weakness". (9). Carter's mother considered her mother's death "as a great blow since the umbilical cord had been ill-severed" (13).

She has inheriting her mother's domineering nature, Carter's mother also, with her middle class, orthodox values, put certain limitations upon her juvenile daughter. She, even, restrained Carter from reading fiction, considering fiction as something which would vilify her daughter. So, when she undertook the job of writing novels, she had to settle some accounts – not directly with her mother or grandmother but with the system which makes mothers tools of patriarchal repression of girls. Mothers and grandmothers in her fiction are deftly and quickly got rid of. Most of the female

characters in the Carterian piece are orphans or motherless.

In almost all novels written by her, there is the absence of mothers who assume the role of the friendlier who prepares the girls according to the demands of the unequal system of power in patriarchal society. Some characters experience the loss of their mothers at an early age. This Mother is Crater's dislike towards the society, In Nights at the Circus, Fevvers is hatched out of the

egg, and nothing is known about her actual parentage. She was received by Ma Nelson who runs a brothel as a new born child left in a basket amidst broken egg shells. In the brothel she gets many foster mothers, mainly the unbelievable Lizzie, the surrogate mother who escorts her throughout her adventures as a faithful friend. The women are deprived in the patriarchal society which is reflected in the novel of Angela Carter through the various characters.

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