

THE CARNIVALESQUE ELEMENTS IN ANGELA CARTER'S LATER NOVELS NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS AND WISE CHILDREN

Bindu.R
Associate Professor
Department of English
Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur.

Abstract

Angela Carter's later novels *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* are highly subversive with their carnivalesque diffusion of feminine energies. As a proclaimed feminist, Carter effectively links gender politics with the skilful use of carnival elements in these novels. This paper examines in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on the Carnavalesque, the ways in which Carter employs carnivalistic features in these novels to subvert and undermine the monologic authority of patriarchal culture.

One of the most brilliant and bold writers of the last century, Angela Carter allured the readers and academicians more strongly after her death and this posthumous acclaim established her literary reputation in the twenty first century. A writer endowed with daringly original and densely 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. Judiciously employing certain strategies to subvert and undermine the patriarchal discursive practices, Carter points towards possibilities of change through her unconventional fictional world. It is precisely an attempt to articulate the repressed and silenced residing in the margins and to envision experiences from various subject-positions that was undertaken by Angela Carter in her anti-realist fictional works. Playing with myths, fairy tales and other popular traditions and subverting the canonical texts of official culture, she undertakes a kind of de-stabilizing endeavour in her novels and short stories. In this paper, I attempt to examine the ways in which she judiciously employs the features of the Carnavalesque in her last two novels *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*.

The term 'the Carnavalesque' obviously comes from Mikhail Bakhtin, the philosopher of 'becoming' who traced the polyphonic character of the novel, back to its historical roots in popular carnival practices and various verbal genres associated with it. Bakhtin was particularly interested in the interface between the official and the non-official and in *Rebelais and his world* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he discusses the concept of 'carnivalization' where the encounter between the official and the unofficial takes place.

The concept of 'carnivalization' has its origins in the social institution of the carnival, 'the synthetic pageantry', the festival of the folks characterised by freedom and laughter, opposed to the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. Carnival embodied common people's aspiration for freedom from the rigidity of the existing system and monotony of the official routine. People enthusiastically assembled at the carnival square, eager to have a release from the shackles of order and sense, to enjoy a period of play and complete freedom. As Katherina Clark and Michael Holquist note in their famous commentary on Bakhtin, "Carnival celebrated the freedom that comes from inversions in social hierarchy, suspension of sexual restraints and the possibility of playing new and different roles." (251)

The notion of identity as performance and subject-in-process involved in the process of carnivalization makes it attractive for feminist writers and artists. Even though Bakhtin remained silent on questions of gender, carnival's potential for undoing social and conceptual hierarchies serves for feminism's political purpose of resisting monologic patriarchal authority. The characteristic toppling and inversions of the carnival situations with their curious combination of critique and indecency make it an apt tool for feminists. The capacity of

carnival to disrupt and remake official public norms urges feminists to appropriate it for their purposes. The process of carnivalization proves to be helpful for them to change and reform the old images and concepts associated with femininity and masculinity. The feminist artists and writers have infinite scope in utilizing the carnival's potential for recasting old image which serve to maintain the existing inequalities implicit in the hierarchies of gender and other social stratifications. The carnival involves the destruction of old concepts by a new use or shocking juxtapositions of the old and the new.

This is exactly what is being done by Angela Carter in her last two novels. *Nights at the circus* and *Wise children* are wonderful distillations of the carnival spirit and many of her earlier works use carnival motifs and situations. But in spite of her Rabelaisian sense of humour and Dionysian temper, Carter bears an ambivalent attitude towards Carnival. In an interview with Lorne Sage in 1992, Carter made it clear. Sage presents it like this:

Not with standing her pleasure in Bakhtin and her feeling that he's right to claim Dostoevsky as a polyphonous writer, she is characteristically sceptical about the vogue for the carnivalesque. It is interesting that Bakhtin became very fashionable in the 1980s, during the demise of the particular kind of theory that would have put all kinds of question marks around the whole idea of the carnivalesque. I am thinking about Marcuse and repressive desublimation, which tells you exactly what carnivals are for. The carnival has to stop. The whole point about the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before after it stopped. (Angela Carter interviewed by Lorna sage, 188)

Carter recognizes carnival as a risky strategy and so in her works, bacchanalian revels are accompanied by rational and careful analysis. Carnivalistic anarchism is closely followed in by accurate pragmatism. She never takes carnival as simply oppositional but as an intermediary between the dominant and the marginal. But nobody can ignore her interest in the popular tradition. It is difficult to overlook the dialogue which Carter makes in her works not only with narratives that predate the novel form (genres like myths, folklore, legends, fairy tales, travel narratives and other forms of oral traditions) but also with its twentieth century technological allies – the radio, T.V. and the film.

Carter's fiction is couched in a serio-comic vein and Bakhtin considers the entire realm of the serio-comic discourses as examples of carnivalized literature. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he acknowledges their characteristics like this, "Characteristics of these genres are a multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, serious and comic; they make wide use of inserted genres – letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies of the high genres, paradoxically reinterpreted citations: In some of them we observe a mixing prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons." (108)

Most of these characteristics can be traced in Carter's narratives. In the last two novels the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, the serious and the comic are welded together adroitly. The dominant mood of these novels is the ambivalence of carnival laughter and their dominant locales are those of circus and the vaudeville theatre which obviously have got the touch of the carnival with them. Representations of circus, fairs, popular theatrical performances and amusement parks often function as residual indicators of the carnival context.

As early as in *Fire Works* (Carter's collection of short stories), Carter shows the fairground as her favourite site. She finds it as a suitable locale to fulfil her predilection for the grotesque. In one of the stories included in this collection, titled as 'Loves of Lady Purple', she wrote:

A universal cast of two-headed dogs, dwarfs, alligator man, bearded ladies and giants in leopard skin loin clothes reveal their singularities in the sideshows and wherever they come from, they share the sullen glamour of deformity, an internationality which acknowledges no geographic boundaries. Here the grotesque is the order of the day. (21)

In his introduction to Carter's collected short stories, *Burning Your Boats*, Salman Rushdie rightly observes:

Carter's other country is the fairground, the world of the gimcrack showman, the hypnotist, the trickster, the puppeteer. 'The Loves of Lady Purple' takes her closed circus world to yet another mountainous middle European village, where suicides are treated like vampires.... while real warlocks 'practiced rites of immemorial beastliness in the forests.' As in all Carter's fairground stories, 'the grotesque is the order of the day...' Lady purple is a female, sexy and lethal rewrite of Pinocchio and along with the metamorphic cat-women in 'Master', one of the dark (and fair) ladies with unappeasable appetites to whom Angela Carter is so partial." (Introduction to *Burning Your Boats*, xi)

And among all these ladies with ‘unappeasable appetites’, Sophie Fevvers, the bird-woman aerialist of *Nights at the Circus* is the most wonderful and amiable one. Courted by the Prince of Wales and painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, she is an *aerialiste extraordinaire* and star of Colonel Kearney’s circus. She is part woman, part swan. Unlike the lady purple, cat woman and the executioner’s daughter who have a sinister quality about them, she is sunny and embodies playful exuberance. “She is coarsely lively and lovely. She is the Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states..... Virgin and whore, reconciles of fundament and firmament, reconciles of opposing states through the mediation of ambivalent body” (*Night at the Circus*, 77)

With the sprouting wings on her shoulders, hers is the typical grotesque body, the body of the carnival. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin speaks of the speciality of the grotesque body.

The sense of ambivalence, incompleteness and becoming which is involved by the grotesque body is best expressed by Bakhtin's reference to the terracotta figurines of Kerch, depicting the ‘senile pregnant hags. Transcending the biological barriers between the state of being a bird and the state of being a human, Fevvers is an accurate example of the grotesque body. In size she is of Gargantuan proportions. – ‘a giantess’, ‘a big girl’, ‘six foot two inches in her stockings’. She has a gargantuan appetite also. During Walser’s (a young journalist obsessed with Fevvers) interview with her, she orders for eel pick, bacon sandwiches and tea. And gorges and stuffs herself with ‘Gargantuan enthusiasm. Offers champagne to Walser, but drinks most of it. Then she belches and farts without inhibitions. She is fond of entertaining herself with all the activities connected with the ‘material bodily lower stratum’

The acts of masking and clowning which recur in his novel also point towards surpassing the boundaries set by nature. The mask and disguise constitute an important category of the carnival. Carnival and the grotesque bear ambivalence and uncertainty with them, as their hallmarks. They stress on contradictions and relative nature of all kinds of discriminatory systems. It is in this context, the mask becomes important for them. As Clark and Holquist observes:

The mask which is ‘the most complex theme of the folk culture’ is connected with the joy of change and incarnation with joyful relativity and happy negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to one’s own self. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, and the violation of natural boundaries.’ The mask is the very image of ambiguity, the variety, and the flux of identities that otherwise, unmasked, are conceived of as single and fixed.” (Clark and Holquist, 304)

Mask and disguise lend a kind of fluidity to identity and put the subject in process. Identity becomes performance and the recognition of this fact gives freedom to the bearer of the mask. Walser enjoys this freedom when he wears the make up for the first time:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognise himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom that during all the time he spent with the colonel, never quite evaporated; until that last moment when they parted company and Walser’s very self, as he had known it, departed from him he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and indeed with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque. (*Nights at the Circus*, 103)

Fevvers herself feels this vertiginous sense of freedom of self-making as she soars upwards with the wings. This self-burlesquing heroine “defies the laws of gravity as well as feminist decorum” as she spreads her wings.

Everyone and everything in the carnivalesque world of *Nights* are referred to in terms of the carnival spirit – Ma Nelson is ‘the madams of the revels’, Buffo, the chief clown is the ‘Lord of misrule’ and God himself is ‘the great ringmaster of the sky’. In colonel Kearchy’s Circus, where Fevvers performs, life is a ‘ludic game.’

Another carnival dimension of the novel is its free amalgamation or juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane. Carter creates a polyphonic terrain where scholastic allusions from canonical writers (Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, Ibsen, Joyce et al.) meet with the experiences of cockney culture.

If the whole atmosphere of the novel is steeped in the joyful relativity, its grand finale, the ending of the novel, is crowned by the hilarity of the carnival laughter. It becomes contagious and every living thing in the universe takes part in it.

“The spiralling tornado of Fevvers’ laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unneeded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed everywhere was laughing.” (*Nights at the Circus*, 295)

This gay and affirmative laughter has the regenerative quality of the carnival laughter about which Bakhtin speaks in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

Carnivalistic laughter is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. Such is the specific qualities of ambivalent carnival laughter” (127)

Carnival laughter anticipates transformation and renewal and here the ‘New Woman’ Fevvers, through her laughter, professes a ‘New age in which no woman will be bound down to the ground.’”

In tune with the penultimate novel’s thrust on the marvels of the abnormal, the last novel written by Carter, *Wise children* highlights the romantic aura of the non-official, the illegitimate. “It is a wise child that knows its father.” – Thus goes the saying. But the Chance twins – Dora and Nora – have an ambiguous relationship with theirs. They live their illegitimate lives on the bastard side of old father Thames’, ‘wrong side of the tracks’, the South London, across the river Thames. They are the unacknowledged identified twin offspring of the thespian Shakespearian actor sir Malchoir Hazard and the foundling ‘pretty-Kitty’. They are “Chance by name, Chance by nature.” They make their way in the theatre of music hall, vaudeville, pantomime and movies, in antiphonal relations to the serious drama. Carter sees pantomime as ‘the carnival of the unacknowledged and the fiesta of the repressed and the novel tests the limits of serious literary heritage at the same time alluding to it. As Malcolm Bradbury puts in *The Modern British Fiction*, “As in all pantomime – the Shakespearian theatre too – theatrical performances and impersonations open the Utopian forest of story out into cross-dressing and the ambiguities of role and gender.” (442)

The questioning of legitimacy of cultural forms seems to be central to *Wise Children* in particular. If Dora and Nora Chance are officially known as the children of Peregrine Hazard, (the Falstaffian twin- brother of Melchoir Hazard), they are in fact the illegitimate offspring of Melchior Hazard. The respectable twins Imogan and Saskia Hazard, who are the legitimate daughters of Melchoir Hazard are but, biologically the daughters of Peregrine Hazard. With a family tree full of twins and the repeated pairing of illegitimate and legitimate, the novel establishes a parallel between family lineage and culture and embraces and celebrates the undersides of official culture. The search for true parentage accompanied, by disguises, false trials and improbable revelations the novel is engaged in the problematization of identity.

With a lineage of twins, *Wise children* consciously creates confusion of identity and paired images chosen either for their contrast or for similarity are characteristic of carnival thinking. According to Bakhtin, “Parodying doubles have become a rather common phenomenon in carnivalized literature.” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 127)

The unexpected collusions and collisions with circus, music hall, pantomime, T.V. game show, popular song and Hollywood musical constitute the theme of *Wise children*. The novel asserts that the kind of joyous fecundity which it projects could be identified only on the wrong side of the tracks, ‘the side (of London that) the tourist rarely sees’. The veracity of the Chance story cannot be verified and the confusing details of family history awe the readers; still the hilarious levity of the tale intertwined with sharp and witty analysis and the serio-comic manner of narration create the atmosphere of the carnivalesque with perfect ease.

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