

## **I. Angela Carter's Journey through the Female World**

This research outlines female assertiveness in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) against the harsh material conditions under which the so-called members of 'second sex' are obliged to live. Set in 1899, *Nights at the Circus* provides research question of female playfulness in this research. Carter's depiction of the past is strikingly familiar, however, which suggests that the present is effectively her target and that 1899 and the 1980s are not worlds apart. The novel is set not only in the past but also in places that are out of the ordinary—a whore-house, a museum for women monsters, a circus, and Siberia—which enables Carter to engage in flights of imagination. This research follows the insights of Marxist feminism to discuss the structure of *Nights at the Circus*. This chapter is the critical analysis of Angela Carter's work and criticisms. The second chapter follows theoretical insights of Marxist feminism and feminist movements and their impacts in the recreation of female self in general. The third chapter uses *Nights at the Circus* as a text to textually exemplify the theoretical insights developed earlier with proper citations from the text. The chapter that follows concludes the whole research work and its findings.

Carter's works posit female characters and their activities at the centre of attention. She advocates for a society that would free human beings from the hierarchical relations in which Western culture, with its binary logic, has entrapped them. In order to both 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 picks female characters and their socio-historical position in her works.

Far from being gentle, Carter's texts are known for the excessiveness of their violence and, latterly, the almost violent exuberance of their excess. Many critics have found the savagery with which she can attack cultural stereotypes disturbing, even alienating. Margaret Atwood's memorial in the *Observer* opens with Carter's "intelligence and kindness" and goes on to construct her as a mythical fairy-tale figure: "the amazing thing about her, for me, was that someone who looked so much like the Fairy Godmother . . . should actually be so much like the Fairy Godmother" (12). Lorna Sage's obituary in the *Guardian* talks of her "powers of enchantment and hilarity, her generous inventiveness" while J. G. Ballard calls her the "white witch of English literature" (47). Salman Rushdie has claimed that "English literature has lost its high sorceress, its benevolent witch queen . . . deprived of the fairy queen we cannot find the magic that will heal us" (18). But this recurrence of white witch/fairy godmother mythologizing of Carter is problematic. As Carter herself argued strongly in *Sadeian Woman*,

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). The books are not by some benign magician. The strengths and the dangers of my texts lie in a much more aggressive subversiveness and a much more active eroticism than perhaps the decorum around death can allow. (42)

Carter's works consistently deal with representations of the physical abuse of women in phallogocentric cultures. Her texts deal of women alienated from themselves within

the male gaze, and conversely of women who grab their sexuality and fight back, of women troubled by and even powered by their own violence.

Angela Carter is best known for her feminist re-writing of fairy-tales; the memorials blurring stories with story-teller stand testimony to that. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, published in 1979, is also midway between the analyses of patriarchy of the 1960s and 1970s. This follows the publication of *The Magic Toyshop*, *Heroes and Villains*, *Passion of New Eve*; and the exuberant novels of the 1980s and early 1990s, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. The strategy of latter novels is different. The violence in the events depicted in the earlier novels (the rapes, the physical and mental abuse of women) and the aggression implicit in the representations, are no longer foregrounded. While similar events may occur in these two last texts, the focus is on mocking and exploding the constrictive cultural stereotypes and in celebrating the ability of the female protagonists to survive, untouched by the sexist ideologies. The tales in *The Bloody Chamber* still foreground the violence and the abuse, but the narrative itself provides a cheerful re-writing of the fairy-tales that actively engages the reader in a feminist deconstruction. Merja Makinen therefore focuses her discussion on Carter's fairy-tales to allow a specific analysis of Carter's textual uses of violence as a feminist strategy. She writes in "Angela Carter's Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality":

Fairy-tale elements have been present in Carter's work as early as *The Magic Toyshop* in 1967, but she didn't come to consider them as a specific genre of European literature until the late seventies. In 1977 she translated for *Gollancz* a series of Perrault's seventeenth-century tales, and in 1979 published *The Bloody Chamber*, her re-writing of the fairy-tales of Perrault and Madame Leprince de Beaumont. In 1982 she

translated another edition, which included the two extra stories by Madame de Beaumont, 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Sweetheart.' Three of the stories from *Bloody Chamber* were rewritten for Radio and she took part in adapting one of them, 'Company of Wolves', into the film by Neil Jordan (1984). Finally, she edited the Virago Book of Fairy-Tales in 1990, and the Second Virago Book of Fairy-Tales for 1992. Carter saw fairy-tales as the oral literature of the poor, a literature that spanned Europe and one that encoded the dark and mysterious elements of the psyche. (4)

Makinen argues that even though the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aristocratic writers fixed these tales by writing them down and added moral tags to adapt them into parables of instruction for children, they could not erase the darkness and the magic of the content. She argue that both literature and folklore were “vast repositories of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be a la mode and find the old lies on which new lies are based” (4). But folk-tales, for Makinen, are straightforward devices whose structures could easily be re-written with an informing, feminist tag, where the curiosity of the women protagonists is rewarded and their sexuality is active.

Feminist critics who have written on Carter's *Bloody Chamber* argue that the old fairy-tales were a reactionary form that inscribed a misogynistic ideology, without questioning whether women readers would always and necessarily identify with the female figures. They argue that Carter, in using the form, gets locked into the conservative sexism, despite her good intentions. Patricia Duncker uses “Angela Dworkin's Pornography: Men Possessing Women” to argue that Carter is “re-writing the tales within the straitjacket of their original structures” and therefore reproducing

the “rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic” (141). Avis Lewallen agrees, “Carter has been unable adequately to revision the conservative form for a feminist politics, and so her attempts at constructing an active female erotic are badly compromised” (21). It is the critics who cannot see beyond the sexist binary opposition. In order to do this, two issues need to be addressed: whether a reactionary form can be re-written; and the potential perversity of women's sexuality.

The discussion of the first issue will lead to an argument for a feminist strategy of writing and also of reading, and hence throw some light on Carter's potential audiences. Makinen further writes:

Narrative genres clearly do inscribe ideologies (though that can never fix the readings), but later re-writings that take the genre and adapt it will not necessarily encode the same ideological assumptions.

Otherwise, one would have to argue that the African novels that have sought to decolonize the European cultural stereotypes of themselves, must always fail. One would need to argue that Ngugi's or Achebe's novels, for example, reinforce the colonial legacy because they use the novel format. (5)

This is clearly not true. When the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology, then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions. Carter argued that *Bloody Chamber* was “a book of stories about fairy stories” and this ironic strategy needs to be acknowledged. Lewallen complains that Duncker is insensitive to the irony in Carter's tales, but then agrees with her assessment of the patriarchal inscriptions, seeing the irony as merely “blurring the boundaries” of binary thinking. Naomi Schor in an essay on Flaubert's ironic use of Romanticism, states that “irony allows the author to reject and at the same time re-appropriate the discourse that s/he

is referring to” (47). That is to argue Romanticism as both present and simultaneously discredited in Flaubert's texts. Schor historicizes the continuity between nineteenth-century and modernist irony as inherently misogynistic (linked to the fetishization of women) and calls for a feminist irony that incorporates the destabilizing effects, while rejecting the misogyny. She cites Donna Haraway's opening paragraph from “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”: “Irony . . . is a rhetorical strategy and political method, one I would like to see more honored within socialist feminism” (87). Thus it can be argued that Carter's tales do not simply rewrite the old tales by fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists.

Carter is insistent that her texts are open-ended, written with a space for the reader's activity in mind. She disliked novels that were closed worlds and described most realist novels as etiquette manuals. And she placed the novels of Jane Austen in such a category. Carter's own fiction seems always aware of its playful interaction with the reader's assumptions and recognitions. “*The Bloody Chamber* is clearly engaging with a reader historically situated in the early 1980s (and beyond) informed by feminism, and raising questions about the cultural constructions of femininity,” (102) contends Jeffrey Roessner. Rather than carrying the heavy burden of instruction, “Carter often explained that for her a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms (102). Roessner further writes:

Many of Carter's works draw on a feminist discourse--or at least an awareness that feminism is challenging sexist constructions. You can't make art for everyone. And if you're enjoyed within a particular movement or organization, then the work is going to participate in its debates. Carter goes on to suggest that art extends the level of discourse within the art audience for all those who see the art

experience as an exchange, a collaboration between artist and audience--the active audience an active art deserves. (103)

Roessner argues that Carter's tales evoke a similar active engagement with feminist discourse. At first sight, such a conclusion may sound odd, because if anyone has taken feminist fiction into the mainstream, it is Carter. But if a feminist writer is to remain a feminist writer (rather than a writer about women) then the texts must engage, on some level, with feminist thinking. There is a wide constituency of potential readers who satisfy the minimum requirement of having an awareness that feminism challenges sexist constructions. One does not need to be a feminist to read the texts, far from it, but if the reader does not appreciate the attack on the stereotypes then the payback for that level of engagement will be missing.

To absorb Angela Carter's texts, readers need to position themselves outside phallogentric culture. Her novels, with their lighter tone and more exuberant construction of interrelationships, probably have the widest readership of all. This smoothness of textual aggression is not the only explanation for the increasing popularity of Carter's later texts. Helen Carr notes that the mid-eighties saw the arrival of South American magic realism on the British scene. From that moment, "Carter's readers could assign her anarchic fusion of fantasy and realism to an intelligible genre" (32). Nicci Gerrard in her examination of how feminist fiction has impacted on mainstream publishing, argues that Carter along with Toni Morrison and Keri Hulme, have been more widely read because "while still remaining explicitly feminist, they have brought feminism out of its narrow self-consciousness" (14). In Britain, Angela Carter--like Morrison and Hulme--has been published by mainstream publishers from the beginning. Her fiction's reputation was made from mainstream publishing houses and was reinforced by the awards of mainstream literary prizes: the John Llewellyn

Rhys Prize for *Magic Toyshop*; Somerset Maugham Award for *Several Perceptions*; Cheltenham Festival of Literature Award for *Bloody Chamber*; and the James Tait Black Award for *Nights at the Circus*. The shortlisting of the 1984 Booker Prize caused a minor dispute when *Nights at the Circus* was not included.

Even many of the individual tales from *The Bloody Chamber* first saw the light of day in small but fairly prestigious literary reviews such as *Bananas*, *Stand*, *Northern Arts Review*, and *Iowa Review* (the only academic journal), none of them notably feminist in their editorial policy. And *The Courtship of Mr Lyon* was first published in the British edition of *Vogue*. Clearly her texts that employ a feminist irony, that engage actively with a feminist discourse, do not automatically confine themselves to a feminist ghetto.

There is a wide and growing audience for at least some kinds of feminist fiction. But what also sells in this commodified age of ours, as everyone knows, is sex, and Carter's texts have always engaged with eroticism. The quotes included by Penguin on the book covers invariably make reference to “the stylish erotic prose,” “erotic, exotic and bizarre romance.” And this clearly also has a lot to do with her popularity. In order to counter Lewallen and Duncker's perception of her work as pornographic, Jennifer Gustar examines the feminist strategies of her (Carter's) representations of sexuality, particularly the debate surrounding the construction of sexuality within the *Bloody Chamber* stories. Gustar believes that “Carter is going some way towards constructing a complex vision of female psycho-sexuality, through her invoking of violence as well as the erotic” (339). But that women can be violent as well as active sexually, that women can choose to be perverse, is clearly not “something allowed for in the calculations of such readers as Duncker, Palmer and Lewallen” (339). Gustar writes:

Carter's strength is precisely in exploding the stereotypes of women as passive, demure bodies. That she therefore evokes the gamut of violence and perversity is certainly troubling, but to deny their existence is surely to incarcerate women back within a partial, sanitized image only slightly less constricted than the Victorian angel in the house. Carter was certainly fascinated by the incidence of 'beast marriage' stories, in the original fairy-tales, and she claimed they were inter-national. (340)

In discussing how the wolves subtly changed their meaning in the film of the story, Gustar comments that nevertheless they still signified libido. Fairy-tales are often seen as dealing with the 'uncanny', the distorted fictions of the unconscious revisited through homely images, and beasts can easily stand for the projected desires, the drive for pleasure of women. "Particularly when such desires are discountenanced by a patriarchal culture concerned to restrict its women to being property," Gustar contends, "not only is femininity constructed as active, sensual, desiring and unruly, but successful sexual transactions are founded on an equality and the transforming powers of recognizing the reciprocal claims of the other" (342).

In *The Finale to Sadeian Woman*, Carter discusses the word flesh in various meanings: "the pleasures of the flesh are vulgar and unrefined, even with an element of beastliness about them although flesh tints have the sumptuous succulence of peaches because flesh plus skin equals sensuality" (Carter 137-8). Carter writes: "but, if flesh plus skin equals sensuality, then flesh minus skin equals meat" (138). This motif of skin and flesh as signifying pleasure, and of meat as signifying economic objectification, recurs throughout the ten tales, and stand as an internal evaluation of the relationship shown. The other recurring motif is that of the gaze, but it is not

always simply the objectification of the woman by male desire, as we shall discover. In each of the first three tales, Carter stresses the relationship between women's subjective sensuality and their objective role as property: young girls get bought by wealth, one way or another. But in the feminist re-write, Bluebeard's victimization of women is overturned and he himself is vanquished by the mother and daughter. The puppet master, open-mouthed, wide eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their stirrings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves (Carter 139). In the two versions of the beauty-and-the-beast theme, the lion and the tiger signify something other than man. For a lion is a lion and a man is a man' argues the first tale. In the first, Beauty is adored by her father, in the second, gambled away by a profligate drunkard. The felines signify otherness a savage and magnificent power, outside of humanity. In one story, women are pampered, in the other treated as property, but in both cases the protagonists chose to explore the dangerous, exhilarating change that comes from choosing the beast. Both stories are careful to show a reciprocal awe and fear in the beasts, as well as in the beauty, and the reversal theme reinforces the equality of the transactions: lion kisses Beauty's hand, Beauty kisses lion's; tiger strips naked and so Beauty chooses to show him the fleshly nature of women. In both cases the beasts signify a sensuality that the women have been taught might devour them, but which, when embraced, gives them power, strength and a new awareness of both self and other. The tiger's bride has her 'skins of a life in the world' licked off to reveal her own magnificent fur beneath the surface. Each of the three adolescent protagonists has been progressively stronger and more aggressive, and each has embraced a sensuality both sumptuous and unrefined. With the fourth story, 'Puss in Boots', the cynical puss viewing human love and desire in a lighthearted comedy demythologizes sex with humor and gusto. If

the wild feelings have signified the sensual desires that women need to acknowledge within themselves, the three fictive figures signify the problematics of desire itself. This is a complex rendering of a subjective collusion with objectivity and entrapment within the male gaze. The woman narrator both fears and desires entrapment within the birdcage which represents the two competing desires for freedom and engulfment, in a tale that delineates the ambivalence of desire.

The main problem of critics involved in Angela Carter's works is that they place pleasures and tortures of sexuality at the heart of Carter's works. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is complex in that it brings together more than one strand of feminism, an engaged and a subversive utopian feminism. Lizzie and her adopted daughter Fevvers serve, respectively, as mouthpieces for each of these two feminisms. The novel's omniscient narrative voice strives to conjoin these two strands of feminism in order to a Marxist feminist realism against postmodern forms of tall tales or autobiographies. 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. In contrast, her novel emphasizes the material world in which women are daily oppressed as women and situate their analyses of women's oppression within specific political, cultural, historical, economic, and ideological contexts. This research flows through this vein in interpreting Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. The following chapter accumulates the theoretical thrusts of Marxist feminism in order to textually exemplify in the upcoming chapter.

## **II. Theoretical Modality**

### **Emergence of Feminism**

Feminist movement can be divided into three broad categories, or waves: defiance of patriarchy, celebration of female self, and recognition of equal rights. Movements in the first category endeavored to show that the roles and behaviors believed to be acceptable and appropriate for women had also entrapped them and limited their opportunities. The women's movement was not a unified force with a single ideology or goal. Some activists fought for equal job opportunities; others focused on changing relations between men and women. They questioned traditional gender roles and tried to change society's view that a woman's worth was based on her physical attractiveness. An important issue for many women was control over their bodies. Abortion was illegal in almost all states, rapes were rarely prosecuted, and domestic violence was widely accepted as a private matter. Some radical activists believed that English society would have to be entirely remade. They rejected what they called patriarchal values, or men's values, such as competition, aggressiveness, and selfishness. They believed that women were naturally more nurturing and compassionate and advocated a society based on women's values. Millions of women who never attended a public demonstration used feminist rhetoric and legal victories won by women activists to create greater equality in their marriages and personal lives and to expand their economic and political opportunities.

The struggle for women's rights began in the 18th century during a period of intense intellectual activity known as the Age of Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, political philosophers in Europe began to question traditional ideas that based the rights of citizens on their wealth and social status. Instead, leaders of the Enlightenment maintained that all inequalities that existed among citizens result of

an inadequate education system and an imperfect social environment. Enlightenment philosophers argued that improved education and more egalitarian social structures could correct these inequalities. However, the ideas of the Enlightenment initially had little impact on the legal and political status of women. In response to Rousseau and others who belittled the role of women in society, English writer Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The great pioneer figure of British feminism was the writer Mary Wollstonecraft, her chief work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is one of the major feminist documents of the 18th century. A major breakthrough occurred in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher became the first woman prime minister of the United Kingdom; she served three successive terms before leaving office in 1990. With the widespread extension of the franchise to women, the women's rights movement broadened its scope during the 20th century. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), British novelist, essayist, and critic, who helped create the modern novel. Her writing often explores the concepts of time, memory, and people's inner consciousness, and is remarkable for its humanity and depth of perception. Woolf contends in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), "the history of man's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting than the history of emancipation itself" (qtd. in Adams 823).

The contemporary women's movement began in the late 1960s. During the 1950s and early 1960s, society pressured women to marry, have children, and then remain at home to raise those children. Women were expected to stay at home and to depend on men to provide their financial support. As a result women were routinely excluded from high status or well-paying jobs. In 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Friedan, was published and became a best-seller. This book spoke to many women's dissatisfactions with the role that society expected of them. The book

encouraged women to work for change.

A pioneering work in this category was *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan, which challenged several long-established American attitudes, especially the notion that women could find fulfillment only as wives and mothers. Friedan's phrase *feminine mystique* refers to the idealization of the traditional female role of wife and mother; Friedan contended that this idealization constituted a conspiracy to prevent women from competing with men. The second category of feminist writing focused on direct social action, such as protesting against male-dominated institutions and forming advocacy groups to represent and promote women's interests politically and socially. Two representative works of activist feminist writing, both published in 1970, are *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett and *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* by Shulamith Firestone. The third and most recent trend in feminist writing focuses less on criticisms of society and more on the establishment of full, flourishing women's cultures, where such subjects are literature, politics, and art are reassessed from a specifically female viewpoint or ideological framework.

By the mid-1970s, feminists had achieved some change. Among the rights sought currently by feminist groups throughout the world are the right to serve on juries, the right to retain earnings and property after marriage, the right to retain citizenship after marriage to an alien, and the right to equal pay and equal job opportunity.

### **Marxist Feminism**

Just after Marxism prevailed through Europe, scholars celebrating female self sat together to theorize those new but often old--implicit and disguised in Victorian novels, mostly by Jane Austen, Emily Bronte and George Eliot--women tendencies.

The significance became quite clear and symbolic suggesting a silver line around dark cloud. A torrent of feminist theories came to front to assimilate resistance against closure, center seeking tendency and this blurring visage of structure that the white-male-elites fermented. Female consciousness that was once a far cry became the primary concerns to unlid the vast mass of female experiences, not excluding those works by male writers almost endowed with clerical and evangelical beliefs on females of the spices.

The nexus in between Marxist-Feminist theories emerge to question the previous theories that elide racialized, gendered, and class processes, and underwrite hierarchies with their focus on great power politics and security, reading narrowly, naturalizes these hierarchies and thus reproduces the status quo. Such attentiveness leads to different kinds of questions in the literature and constitutes an effort to generate an alternative critique of power hierarchies and relations. These theories argue that mainstream feminist theories premised on an understanding of power that privileges hierarchy, and a predominantly male-centric worldview, mystifies the ways in which states and the social system are anchored in social relations. Second, although critical feminist theories interrogate many of the assumptions of conventional feminism, they nevertheless fail to address the woes and eerie of females of English midlands and country with some exceptions, to systematically of race, class and gender in the production of power in recent feminist theories challenge the gendered assumptions of both mainstream and critical feminist theories, it generally neglects to address the relationship of gender to neo-imperialism and race. We begin with an exploration of power in mainstream feminism, followed by discussions of critical and feminist approaches to power.

Power has been the foundation of feminist theories' scholarship, particularly

realist scholarship, whose treatment of power is exemplified in the classical realism of feminist politics. The novels by women writers of nineteenth century import male ideology in the guise of somebody's wife, mother, mistresses, and patrons. M.A.R. Habib in *A History of Literary Criticism* contends:

Habib in *A History of Literary Criticism* contends:

In her seminal text *women's oppression today*(1980), Michele Barrett outlines some of the central problems facing any attempt to forge a coalition of Marxist and feminist perspective flow can a Marxist analyses, conceived on the basis of "a primary contradiction between labor and capital," be reconciled with a feminist approach, which must begin with the relations of gender? In general terms, suggests Barrett, the object of Marxist feminism must be to "identify the operation of gender relations" as they relate to the "process of production and reproduction understood by historical materialism." Marxist feminism must "explore the relations between the organization of sexuality, domestic production . . . and historical changes in the mode of production and systems of appropriation and exploitation." Such an approach will stress the "relations between capitalism and the oppression of women" (WT, 9). (qtd. in Habib 693)

M.A.R. Habib's emphasis is on Barrett's focus on three concepts that have been central to the Marxist feminist dialogue: "patriarchy, reproduction, and ideology," she begins by noting the "enormous problems inhering in the concept of patriarchy"(693). Habib further sites Radical feminists such as Kate Millett who have used this concept as "an over-arching category of male dominance" (693). He writes:

Millett sees patriarchy as a system of domination that is analytically independent of the capitalist or any other mode of production; its

apparent mediation by class is merely tangential. Shulamith Firestone goes even further and aims to ground the analysis of class in the biological division of the sexes, her aim being to substitute sex for class as the prime motor in a materialist account of history. Barrett objects to these uses of patriarchy as a universal and transhistorical category of male dominance, grounded in biological determinants. Such uses are reactionary (treating social arrangements as somehow naturally given) and regressive since they overlook one of the early triumphs of feminist analysis, namely, a distinction between sex as a biological category and gender as a social one. (qtd. in Habib 694)

Other feminist have formulated a materialist analysis of patriarchy, such as Christine Delphy. Habib quotes of Delphy, "however, stressing social rather than biological relations" (694). Habib argues that Delphy's assessment argues that the "material basis of women's oppression lies not in capitalist but in patriarchal relations of production" (Habib 694). He further quotes Barrett:

[. . .] most recent theorists, says Barrett, attempt to represent contemporary capitalism as patriarchy. Such an endeavor not only poses patriarchy as a universal and transhistorical mode, but also reveals confusion between two meanings of patriarchy, between patriarchy as the rule of the father and patriarchy as the domination of women by men. This is the case, according to Barrett, with Annette Kuhn's theory that the crucial site of women's oppression is the family, which has a relative autonomy from capitalist relations. Kuhn argues that patriarchy unites psychic and property relations. (694)

Another concept used by recent theorists to relate women's oppression to the organization of production in society is "reproduction." Habib assimilates Barrett's contribution on the theorization of feminism, "Interest in this concept derives from Engels's formulation that the "determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of immediate life" (694). Habib says that those versions of feminist theories give themselves to the primary formulation of Marx and Engels who is referring here both to "the production of the means of subsistence" and "the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species" (694).

Also important is Louis Althusser's treatment of social production in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Again, part of the problem with this concept is its range of definition: women's role in biological reproduction can have only a highly refracted relationship with their role in economic and social production. Habib writes: In fact, the fundamental problem" faced by Marxist feminism is "to combine an analysis of social reproduction with an analysis of patriarchal human reproduction." Habib writes:

The third important but problematic notion in Marxist feminism is that of ideology. As Barrett points out, feminists have insisted that Marxism take account of the sexual division of labor and the familiar ideology that sustain women's suppression; this insistence has coincided with a revolution in the Marxist theory of ideology. This shift in Marxist theory was largely occasioned by Louis Althusser's rejection of ideology as a distortion or manipulation of reality by the ruling class, as well as of the vulgar Marxist view that ideology is simply a mechanical reflection(in ideas) of a determining economic base. While Althusser's accepts the basic Marxist premise that the

economic substructure determines the ideological superstructure in the last instance, he nonetheless sees ideology as having a relative autonomy, and stresses its experimental character as the imaginary relationship of individual's to their real conditions of existence. (694)

Habib is enthusiastic over Barrett's theorization of Marxist feminist impulses: "Barrett revisits the three essential components of Marxist feminist analysis" (696). She began arguments concerning the reproduction thesis--that capital supports the reproduction of labor power through domestic labor should be historicized. And, while the concept of patriarchy should not be jettisoned, its use might be restricted to context where male domination is "expressed through the power of the father over women" (696). Habib further elaborates Barrett's conclusion, "as for ideology, our recognition of its role in gender construction most move to deeper analysis of subjectivity and identity, effectively continuing the work of earlier feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir" and that "in general, Barrett stresses that there is no "programmatic answer" (696) to the question of whether women's liberation can be achieved under capitalism." For which Habib further quotes Barrett as

She does affirm, however, that such liberation would require: first a redivision of labor and the responsibilities of childcare; second, the extrication of women from dependence on a male wage or capital; lastly, the ideology of gender would need to be, transformed. Non of these changes, she observes, is compatible with capitalism as it exists at present. Hence, although the women's movement needs to be autonomously organized, it can profitably collude with socialism on the basis if overlapping political objectives. These might include the need to improve women's wages and working conditions, and to

abolish the use of female labor as a means of keeping general wages down. Since women's oppression is entrenched in the structure of capitalism, the struggle for women's liberation and the struggle for socialism cannot be disengaged. (qtd in Habib 697)

Habib's assimilation of Berrett highlights the need for revisiting feminist literary tradition on the yoke of Marxism.

Despite a bourgeois upbringing and early philosophical interests (or perhaps, finally, because of these), Simone de Beauvoir produced perhaps the greatest classic of post world war second feminism. Hazard Adams, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, introduces Beauvoir and her most acclaimed critical work *The Second Sex*: "when *The Second Sex* first appeared in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir was attacked by those who felt her account of women's lives was too heavily based on her personal experience and her middle class values" (993). Adams writes: "Indeed, it was encyclopedic in its coverage, offering historical, biological and psychological perspectives on women, a consideration of the prevailing patriarchal myths about them, and all account of female love and sexuality in virtually all of its form" (qtd in Adams 993). Simone de Beauvoir contends in *The Second Sex*:

It is to be seen from these examples that each separate writer reflects the great collective myths: we have seen women as flesh; the flesh of the male is produced in the mother's body and recreated in the embraces of the woman in love. Thus woman is related to nature, she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose[the rose of Jericho], siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the shape, the material beauty and the soul of the world. She can hold the keys to poetry; she can be mediatrix between this world and beyond: grace or

oracle ... praying mantis, an ogress. In any case she appears as the privileged other, through whom the subject fulfills himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness. (qtd. in Adams 994)

The myth of women plays a considerable part in literature; but what is its importance in daily life? To what extent does it affect the customs and conducts of individuals? In replying to this question it will be necessary to state precisely the relations this myth bears to reality. There are different kinds of myths. "This one, the myth of woman, sublimating an immutable aspect of the human condition—namely, the "division" of humanity into two classes of individuals—is a static myth," *The Second Sex* holds, "It projects into the realm of platonic ideas as reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience; in place of fact, value, and significance ... timeless, unchangeable, and necessary" (qtd in Adams 996).

Feminist approaches have taken to task feminist scholarship for rendering gender and women invisible. Although there are important distinctions among the various feminists, who address what may be broadly termed "post positivist" feminist contributions to the debate on power, focusing specifically on the arguments advanced by feminist theories. One of the key contributions of feminist thought has been to draw attention to the necessity for a "deconstruction of gender-biased knowledge claims." And in the "Reconstruction of Gender Sensitivity Theory," Spike Peterson has pointed out that "this has followed feminist theories to unsettle the gendered foundations of mainstream thought and to introduce gender into the analysis of key constructs in feminist theories such as the state and sovereignty" (44). Feminist theories also show how and to what effect mainstream and also non feminist critical theory has ignored gender hierarchy. While this problem is more explicitly associated

with the masculine assumptions of realists and neo liberal feminist theories. It is also something that eludes those theorizing from a Marxist or Gramscian perspective.

Feminist point out that theories of structural violence pay little attention to "male violence against women" and gendered power and domination. Postmodern feminist point out the marginalization of feminist voices in between the positivist and post positivist, where feminists are represented "with out giving one among us voices, interpretations, writings, words, brushes, and canvases. In the feminist view, it is imperative that give women voice and take seriously the feminist critic of the gendered sources of organization of labor among other concerns. While feminists have contributed much to envisioning theories, they seem more hesitant to confront directly the exclusion of country women in feminist theories. Catharine R. Stimpson acknowledges *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millet for the book's publication "symbolized the beginning of feminist criticism" (251) in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literacy Studies*. The wave of this theoretical uprising became "like air and language" (251). The awakening shaft his "women and representation of women and gender everywhere" (251). Stimpson holds:

[ . . . ] mark of otherness is one's inability to shape one' psychological, social and cultural identity, Beauvoir analyses men's depictions of women in biology, psychoanalysis, history and literature ... read Hamlet and Shakespearean criticism to find a new Gertrude, a queen both lustful and 'intelligent, penetrating ... gifted.' A decade later, Katharine Rogers had traced the representation of misogyny from Genesis and the classical Greeks to Faulkner. (252)

Stimpson's observation penetrates through the narratives of women's existential otherness, "the discrepancy between a woman's decorous appearance and flaring

subjectivity-in a Jane Eyes, for example was to become a theme for feminist criticism" (252). In an answer to the question why female self remained a mystery, Stimpson puts, "indeed, a women's movement, whatever it's specific name and historical context ... women have always been educated in the general language, roles, and customs of their culture." For her history of educating women itself is itself flawed set of female marginalization. "My female ancestors, in the damp peasant cottages and wet fields of Wales and the English midlands, learned how to speak, stitch, plant, cook, give births, and pray" (254). Stimpson doesn't fail to examine the cause of late feminist uprising which is because "some converts were centers of learning for women" (254). Stimpson rejoices in feminist criticism which is "oppositional" in terms of politics, psychology and epistemology. Pointing out to the male minds who often access feminist critical uprising as "so esoteric and yet so vulgar", and as "the grim agenda of a bunch of man-hating women's libbers," Stimpson argues, "there are no values out there that human beings have not created ... our conversation will examine our cultural, intellectual, and literacy traditions in order to ground and then regrind the values" (258-259).

Stimpson compares the wave of female consciousness throughout history with "Piagetion Child" or a "fashionable creature putting on one set of cloths for breakfast in 1970, another for lunch in 1980, another for dinner in 1990" (259). However, Stimpson agrees with three activities that constitute feminist criticism: the defiance of difference; the celebration of difference; and, the recognition of difference.

Marxist feminism has generally rejected postmodernism on the grounds that its tendency toward abstractions gives way to a disconnection from the material world and from history, that it rejects metanarratives (such as Marxism and gender theory), and that it dissolves the subject. In contrast, Marxist feminists emphasize the material

world in which women are daily oppressed as women and situate their analyses of women's oppression within specific political, cultural, historical, economic, and ideological contexts. As Toril Moi explains, "patriarchy itself persists in oppressing women as women" (36), so that "as feminists we need to situate our deconstructive gestures in specific political contexts" (43). Materialist feminism thus takes as its point of departure "the oppression of women" and asserts "the social origins" of that oppression, employing both micro and macro analyses. Furthermore, as "a social movement," a "revolutionary movement" actively seeking to change the world (Delphy 215). Marxist feminism requires active agents/subjects. Nancy Hartsock argues that "rather than getting rid of subjectivity or notions of the subject, as Foucault does, we need to engage in the historical, political, and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects as well as objects of history" (3).

Postmodernism, however, is a slippery area of contention that cannot be reduced to any oversimplified characterization. Indeed, many critics argue that postmodernism is not inherently antithetical to feminism and Marxism and is very much tied to the material world. Fredric Jameson, for example, views postmodernism as a "cultural dominant" linked to "a whole new type of society" (3), a "new social formation," "multinational capitalism" ("Postmodernism" 4). Andreas Huyssen explains postmodernism as a cultural and historical phenomena, as "a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies" (181). Critics like Linda Hutcheon argue that rather than being ahistorical, postmodernism "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining" at the same time that "it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (Poetics 89). In addition, some critics assert that postmodernism does not necessarily invalidate all metanarratives. Jameson suggests that, as a cultural dominant, postmodernism is inherently political and that

"Politics has to operate on the micro- and the macro-levels simultaneously" ('Afterword' 386). Likewise, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson argue that "postmodern critique need forswear neither large historical narratives nor analyses of societal macrostructures," so that "postmodern feminists need not abandon the large theoretical tools needed to address large political problems" as long as their theory remains "explicitly historical" (34). Furthermore, critics like Huyssen assert that postmodernism seeks to reconstruct and reconceptualize rather than negate the subject by challenging "the ideology of the subject (as male, white, and middle class) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity," "working toward new theories and practices of speaking, writing, and acting subjects," and questioning "how codes, texts, images, and other cultural artifacts constitute subjectivity" (213). Similarly, Carter's novel aesthetically engages and conjoins Marxist feminism and postmodernism in an effort to construct an engaged feminism with liberatory potential.

This research takes Carter's novel as a point of departure to engage theoretical propositions outlined above. Carter conjoins Marxist feminism and postmodernism in an effort to construct an engaged feminism with liberatory potential. Carter's novel highlights its own textuality with its three labeled parts and its presentation of a metafictional narrative in which so many other narratives are embedded that notions of authorship and single-leveled reality are undermined. One of the novel's central preoccupations is its challenge to the traditional Western opposition between reality and fiction. The novel's rejection of any neat demarcation between reality and fiction functions as the pivotal strategy for undermining the Western conception of the subject and of traditional gender categories and for offering forms of liberating power. This liberating power carries with it possibilities for change in the realms of

subjecthood and the relations between the sexes and also anticipates potential new forms for feminist fiction. Thus Carter's novel exemplifies the critical thrusts of Marxist Feminists which is also the fundamental concern of this research.

### III. Marxist Eve: Revolutionary Females in *Nights at the Circus*

*Nights at the Circus* is divided into three parts in terms of geographical location: "London," "Petersburg," and "Siberia." Although the omniscient narrator concentrates on the central male character's point of view, the narrative's perspective continually shifts as it is appropriated by women characters telling their stories—histories-- in long monologues that often include vivid dialogue. The novel's focus and central character is Fevvers, a huge female "aerialiste" with wings, whose fame rests on her identity and origins: her slogan reads, "is she fact or is she fiction?" (7). Lizzie, a staunch Marxist feminist, is Fevvers's adopted mother and companion who took her in as a foundling.

The "London" segment of the novel consists of an interview of Fevvers, in Lizzie's presence, by a young American journalist, Jack Walser. Walser's initial purpose is to expose Fevvers as "a hoax," as one of the "Great Humbugs of the World" (11). Although Walser is the interviewer, Fevvers and Lizzie control the session by telling Fevvers's life story and challenging his disbelief and skepticism. Walser's curiosity is only awakened by the women's "performance" (90) during the interview, and he decides to join the circus in order to follow up on this story. The second part, "Petersburg," focuses on Walser's transformation into a clown as he becomes subsumed within the magical circus world and recognizes that he has fallen in love with Fevvers. By the novel's last section, "Siberia," the train carrying the circus crashes and the various characters wander around Siberia in various groups, meeting extraordinary people and situations. Walser and Fevvers are separated, and the novel ends when they are reunited. In this segment the narrative shifts among Fevvers's and Walser's stream of consciousness, dialogue, embedded stories, and

authorial narration. Feminist elements are so vivid in *Nights at the Circus*. From its first page, Carter's novel begins to undermine conventional notions of gender construction and sexual hierarchy. Fevvers asserts authority over her own story and evades attempts by Walser to fix an identity upon her. Although Walser is intent upon naming and thus objectifying Fevvers, the fact that his quest begins rather than ends the novel announces from the start the subversion of his attempts to appropriate her. Sally Robinson argues that Carter "disrupts an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender" but at the same time "foregrounds gender as constitutive of subjectivity by tracing the processes by which 'official' women-that is, individuals sexed female-are socially and discursively constructed as Woman according to the needs of the dominant, 'official' sex, men" (77).

Carter begins to call into question accepted notions of identity and the binary logic on which they depend, as she attempts to create a new female subject that seeks to satisfy feminist aims. Fevvers defies Walser's attempt to prove her a fake not by refusing to answer his questions but by taking command of her own self-definition as she tells him her story and thus assumes a position of authority. As Teresa de Lauretis asserts, "strategies of writing and reading are forms of cultural resistance" (7), and this argument surely can be extended to oral storytelling. By having Fevvers read her own life and write, or rather tell, her own story-history as she chooses, the novel challenges the traditional appropriation of women's lives and histories endemic in Western, male-centered culture. Furthermore, Fevvers deliberately flirts with the boundary between truth and non-truth. Her story is both an autobiography and a tall tale and, as such, destabilizes both male definitions of women and notions of identity, truth, and reality.

The novel opens with Fevvers's assertion that she "never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched" (2); and the narrative specifies that she accompanies her statement with direct eye contact "as if to dare him: 'Believe it or not!'" (2). The reference to the mythical Helen, engendered by Zeus in the form of a swan and Leda, ironically links Fevvers's self-definition to the history of Western culture, as it raises her to mythic level. The narrative normalizes the comparison, however, by playfully debasing it to the level of ordinary family resemblances: "evidently this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts" (7). Moreover, Fevvers's claim that she was hatched suggests that she "fantasizes a beginning for herself outside the Oedipal triangle" associated with the nuclear family and subject formation (Schmidt 67). Along the same lines, Toril Moi argues that "to name is to exercise power" and that although "definitions may well be constraining: they are also enabling" (37). Sally Robinson notes that Fevvers "places herself as the subject of her own story" (23). Carol Siegel also notes that Fevvers is "hatched in defiance of biological genre" (12).

Fevvers further asserts that she was a foundling. As a half-woman, half- swan orphan, Fevvers challenges prevailing notions of identity that are grounded in verifiable origins and binary logic. By allowing her origins to remain a mystery and encouraging speculation about them, Fevvers maintains her status as "Heroine of the hour" (8). Her fame depends precisely on her being suspect, whether or not her wings are real.

Although Walser is skeptical of Fevvers's claim that she is a "genuine bird-woman," he "contemplates the unimaginable" while watching her perform on the trapeze and recognizes the "paradox" that "in a secular age, an authentic miracle" would have to "purport to be a hoax in order to gain credit in the world" (17). Walser's

reflection highlights the precarious nature of the opposition between reality and fiction by suggesting that the concepts are intertwined. Fevvers's indeterminate identity and her insistence on preserving its mystery threaten the dichotomy between reality and fiction. 'At six feet two in her stockings' (12), Fevvers disrupts the conventions of female characters. She asserts her authority by simply taking up space:

"Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she intended to fill up the entire mirror, all the room with her bulk." (13)

Walser is threatened by her appropriation of space and attempts to escape the room so that "he might recover his sense of proportion" (52), which is clearly male-defined.

The novel's insistence on Fevvers's bodily presence and on her self-construction frustrates the traditional Western dichotomy between soul-self and body in which the body-and in turn the material world-is relegated to irrelevance. Nancy Hartsock argues in "Money, Sex, and Power" that, within "masculinist ideology," "the body is both irrelevant and in opposition to the (real) self, an impediment to be overcome by the mind" (242) and "that the body and "material reality" are devalued by Western societies since these are the realms with which women are in closer contact" (235-36).

At a specific context; Fevvers fills the room as well, fulfilling the feminist insistence that representation retain a firm link to the material situation. Fevvers's "raucous" voice and her "grand, vulgar gestures" (12, 13) indicate that she is comfortable with herself and has chosen her own codes of behavior. She takes up a traditionally masculine role by asserting herself as the author of her own actions and words.

Having internalized conventional categories, Walser describes Fevvers as having a

"strong, firm, masculine grip" (89) when she shakes his hand. The narrative also stresses her femininity, however, by describing her dressing room as "a mistress piece of exquisitely feminine squalor" (9), using deliberately feminized language. Moreover, the depiction of one of her feminine flirtatious gestures, when "she batted her eyelashes at Walser in the mirror" (40), again presents Fevvers through the mediation of a mirror. Fevvers is altogether an ambivalent figure who threatens traditional binary categories: she possesses both masculine strength and authority as well as feminine charm. The interview reduces Walser rather than Fevvers to a passive state: "It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice" (43). Carter's novel thus challenges the traditional association of female with femininity and of male with masculinity through the depiction of characters who confuse accepted gender norms and polarity. As Sally Robinson suggests, "for Carter, gender is a relation of power, whereby the weak become 'feminine' and the strong become 'masculine'" (77). Indeed, the novel does reject the masculine/feminine hierarchical opposition itself by presenting Fevvers as co-opting both masculine and feminine characteristics to establish her power over Walser.

Fevvers and Lizzie assume control of the narrative in the novel's "London" section as they unfold Fevvers's life story through long monologues, interrupted by dialogues between the two women. The customary association of activeness with the male is here reversed: Fevvers and Lizzie are the active speakers and Walser is the passive spectator. Fevvers is able to "challenge and attack" (54) Walser's attempt to fix her identity, and thus objectify her, by controlling and thus constructing her own self and story. Fevvers exhibits herself as object for an audience's gaze; yet, as the author of herself as object: "Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvelous present

too good to be played with. Look, not touch" (15). Fevvers begins her working career by posing as a "tableau vivant," thus actively constructing herself as an object to be seen but not touched: as a child she is "Cupid" (23), and as she matures she becomes "Winged Victory" (25) and then "Angel of Death" (70). Although Fevvers objectifies herself, she remains a subject by constructing her own objectified image. By destabilizing and yet retaining the conventional opposition between subject and object, the novel moves toward a non-hierarchical and non-binary notion of subjectivity while simultaneously engaging and highlighting issues of power relations. *Nights at the Circus* illustrates ways in which notions of subjectivity can be tapped for feminist purposes. Fevvers actively creates herself as subject and object; she is not passively placed as the object of various male gazes. As Carol Siegel suggests, "Carter gives us woman as someone other than Other, someone who is not defined by and absorbed into the patriarchal power structure" (12).

Carter never loses touch with the material oppression of women even while it attempts to offer new forms of subjectivity that are not based in the binary thought system that has helped to oppress women in Western culture. The novel thus does make way for feminism to move forward. Fevvers's existence as both subject and object challenges the type of objectification by which "male-subjectivity creates its other precisely to designate itself as its superior, its creator-spectator-owner-judge" (Finn 91). Fevvers vehemently rejects her own objectification by men: "I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my appearance for ever!" (39). The threat of being forced into the position of static object to be viewed and dominated is all too tangible for Fevvers, who is again and again faced with attempts to fix the ambivalent figure she presents to the world. The novel contains two separate instances in which men literally attempt to

objectify Fevvers. In both cases, the men seek to dominate her by depriving her of control over her own life. Their attempts to transform her into a corpse in one instance and into a toy in the other support the notion that "you can only objectify the living by taking away its life; by killing it either in fact or fantasy" (Finn 89).

In the first episode, a wealthy gentleman purchases Fevvers from the museum of women monsters and attempts to kill her with a blade. Viewing her as a "reconciler of opposing states" and as his "rejuvenatrix" (81, 82), he tries to sacrifice her on May Day to ensure his own life and power. But Fevvers rejects the role of passive victim and of male-constructed object and pulls out her own sword to save her life. She thus asserts her authority and subject-hood by matching his phallic power-located in his weapon rather than in his penis-sword for sword. The novel in this way emphasizes the violence that is part of male domination and that is tied to the realm of sexuality. As Michele Barrett argues, "sexual relationships are political because they are socially constructed and therefore could be different" and because of "the unequal power of those involved in sexual relationships" (42, 43). After all, sexuality is "one of the fields of confrontation" or "struggle" between "social men and social women," so that oppression within the realm of sexuality is just "as material as economic oppression" (Delphy 217). Later in the novel, a Russian grand duke attempts to cage Fevvers among his collection of exotic toys, but again she fights against objectification. After the Grand Duke breaks her sword and thus deprives her of phallic power, Fevvers resorts to feminine tricks to distract him: "a deep instinct of self-preservation made her let his rooster out of the hen-coop for him and ruffle up its feathers" (191). She masturbates him and makes her escape at the moment "the Grand Duke ejaculated" (191-92). The novel does not get rid of the conventions of realism, since it ultimately grounds seemingly extraordinary incidents--such as her narrow escapes from the

wealthy gentleman and the Russian grand duke--in the daily victimization of women and thus challenges accepted notions of women as naturally and inevitably passive objects. Although Fevvers is presented as a fantastic being whose experiences encompass the extraordinary, the novel never severs the connection between her exploits and the material situation: Fevvers is fantastic but recognizable. Her relationship with Lizzie is in this respect crucial, since Lizzie functions as the novel's didactic feminist voice. As a staunch feminist and former prostitute, Lizzie keeps the novel's focus from diverging too far from the economic aspects of material existence. Lizzie provides the novel with a feminist standpoint which can allow us to descend further into materiality to an epistemological level at which we can better understand both why patriarchal institutions and ideologies take such perverse and deadly forms and how both theory and practice can be redirected in more liberatory directions.

Fevvers's story also indicates that Lizzie's politics have influenced her adopted daughter, particularly in the depiction of the whorehouse in which Fevvers was raised as "the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers" (21) and which disrupts the nuclear family developed under capitalism. Indeed, one of the means by which the novel begins to call into question the status quo and construct new notions of the subject is through its inversion of accepted norms in its treatment of prostitution and marriage. When Fevvers challenges Walser to print in his newspaper that she was raised by "women of the worst class and defiled," (22) Walser's reply reveals his firm entrenchment 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" (23). Walser retains and even re-emphasizes the dichotomy between good women and bad women, wives and whores, by asserting that some whores are good enough to become wives. The novel rejects these oppositions through the voice

of Lizzie, who asserts that wives and whores have more in common than not and, thereby, undermines the Western ideology of marriage: "What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?" (21). Lizzie's words echo not only Friedrich Engels's discussion of bourgeois marriage in *The Origin of the Family* but also Carter's own discussion of the subject in her book-length essay "The Sadeian Woman." Her essay proposes that "sexual relations are necessarily an expression of social relations and like prostitutes, all wives of necessity fuck by contract" (9). Carter undermines the conventional hierarchical opposition between wives and whores by stressing 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" (9).

*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 reducing marriage to nothing more than an unquestioned custom grounded in a false ideology of happiness: "The name of this custom is a 'happy ending'" (281). Lizzie defines marriage as forcing a woman to give to a man both herself and her "bank account" (280), thus highlighting the economic exploitation of women within the institution of marriage that is covered over by fictions of romance. The novel's Marxist feminism and its stress on the economic as well as ideological oppression of women surface in the descriptions of prostitutes as "working women doing it for money," as "poor girls earning a living" (38, 39). Fevvers challenges the myths of whores as degenerates or nymphomaniacs by asserting that economics rather than pleasure informs 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. (39)

In addition, the assumption that sexual favors can be both "real" and "simulacra" of themselves calls into question the opposition between reality and fiction. Fevvers's words undermine the conventional association of sex with pleasure or desire by highlighting the contractual nature of all sexual relations. Sex is designated as a business transaction rather than a moral category. Carter suggests that both the prostitute and the wife engage in sex as an economic exchange; the only difference lies in the prostitute's explicit acknowledgment of the contract. The prostitute comes out ahead in the novel, precisely because she is depicted as more aware of her position within an economic system in which all women necessarily participate.

Carter transforms the whorehouse into a "wholly female world," a "sisterhood" of active, ambitious women, whose lives are "governed by a sweet and loving reason" (38). The prostitutes are "all suffragists" (39)-not "suffragettes"-and professional women. They engage in "intellectual, artistic or political" (40) pursuits before the whorehouse opens each evening and are thus active subjects as well as sexual objects. By making the prostitute its version of the feminist, the novel disrupts accepted norms and dualisms--including conventionalized notions of feminists. The term "whore" becomes ambivalent as it is dislocated from its position as polar opposite of wife, good woman, and even feminist. Furthermore, although her use of the term "honor" to denote selfhood is conventional, Fevvers's explicit questioning of the common reduction of women to their bodily orifices challenges traditional stereotypes: "Wherein does a woman's honour reside, old chap . . . in her vagina or in her spirit?" (230). Fevvers's words also emphasize the ways in which the biological body has been

co-opted in the service of those in power. Although some of the ideas Carter espouses in “The Sadeian Woman” find a voice within *Nights at the Circus*, the latter shapes Carter's ideas into a web of creative and overtly fictionalized narratives. In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter strengthens her feminist position through the use of various destabilizing aesthetic strategies. The novel's subversion of the notion of prostitution, for example, goes far beyond its overt analysis through the voices of Fevvers and Lizzie; it is reinforced by a thorough carnivalization of the whore-house itself. Indeed, Carter's use of carnivalization and her creation of carnival spheres strengthen the novel's more subversive feminism. This co-optation is particularly evident in attitudes and laws concerning women's reproductive capacities. The carnival attitude challenges the status quo by sanctioning unofficial behavior and by celebrating the “joyful relativity of everything” (107), so that the “behavior, gesture and discourse of a person are freed from the authority” of “the all- powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life” (123). *Nights at the Circus*, for example, utilizes carnivalization as a vehicle for its more subversive feminist aims. The political potential of Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is a prime example of a carnivalized novel, whose ultimate aim is to expose current feminist concerns and offer possibilities for change. The novel's use of extraordinary and fantastic characters and situations and its creation of actual and surrogate carnivals begin to destabilize existing norms as well as the binary logic which undercuts Western culture. By constructing the whorehouse, the museum for women monsters, the circus, and Siberia as versions of carnival, the novel disrupts and challenges traditional Western notions of reality and provides an aesthetic vocabulary for delineating possibilities of change. Since the carnival is a space within which the dominant hierarchical system and its laws and prohibitions are suspended, the carnival allows for ambivalence and relativity as well as for new forms

of interrelationships--a primary feminist aim. The whorehouse in the "London" section of *Nights at the Circus*, for example, functions as a surrogate carnival and, as such, reinforces the novel's disruption of the accepted notion of prostitution and of the binary logic on which it depends. The novel's presentation of prostitutes in a positive light and of prostitution in non-moral terms as well as its use of an extraordinary heroine with wings are carnivalesque disruptions of established norms. The physical description of the whorehouse itself further establishes its carnival status. The house's "staircase that went up with a flourish like, pardon me, a whore's bum" (39) and its "drawing room [that] was snug as a groin" (39) are comic touches that transform conventional imagery by inserting a whorehouse world view within a traditional descriptive style. Fevvers's outrageous depiction of the house as having an "air of rectitude and propriety" and as being "a place of privilege" in which "rational desires might be rationally gratified" (26) further challenges the status quo by deploying adjectives generally reserved for officially sanctioned institutions. The novel thus brings together high and low culture. Paulina Palmer has observed the connection between Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization. In a discussion, "woman-identification and female collectivity," Palmer argues that "Carter adopts carnivalistic perspectives to perform an analysis of patriarchal culture and the representation of female community" (197). The whorehouse of the novel's "London" section is a carnival sphere, in the sense that it defies established conventions and codes; it becomes other than what it is generally thought to be and thus challenges the ruling order. Fevvers is herself an ambivalent figure of carnival stature, disrupting established conventions of female characters. Not only are her identity and origins vague, but her reputation as "Virgin Whore" (55) defies the highly charged opposition between virgin and whore used by Western culture to name,

objectify, categorize, and marginalize women. By claiming that she is the "only fully feathered intacta in the history of the world" (294), Fevvers participates in her own social definition. Her admission at the end of the novel that she is after all not an "intacta" demonstrates that, in the absence of an essential self or soul, the possibility of self-construction exists alongside construction by others; Fevvers is able to create the being that others see her to be. The outrageous nature of Fevvers as a character thus heightens the novel's challenge to Western culture's version of women as passive objects.

The novel uses Lizzie's voice to reinforce didactically and theoretically the claim that selves are constructed rather than essential. Lizzie rejects the notion of "soul" as "a thing that don't exist" (11) and asserts that it is history "that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present in the first place" (11). In line with her staunch Marxism, Lizzie argues that the possibility of change rests on a thorough 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" (239- 40). Lizzie's declaration lends a Marxist tinge to the novel's feminism, with its implication that women's oppression will not end until social structures are radically altered. Carter uses the novel's two central female characters, Lizzie and Fevvers, to conjoin a material analysis of existing means of subject construction in much the same way, the Amazon warrior woman has often been created as a figure that threatens the status quo. *Nights at the Circus* is Carter's version of female self-construction, as a way of exploring the possibility of a new female subject. As a fantastic and indeterminate being, Fevvers can never be pinned down as a subject; her status is always in the process of becoming other than itself. Her identity is unstable, since she is a site of apparent contradictions: woman and bird,

virgin and whore, fact and fiction, subject and object. Fevvers begins to lose her power and her subjecthood, however, when she questions her own status—"Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?" (54)-- and regains it only when she reasserts her indeterminate identity by spreading her wings and recognizing herself through "the eyes that told her who she was" (290). Once again, she creates herself as the object of her spectators' desires and is thus both subject and object of desire. Fevvers's subjectivity pushes toward the liberation in the sense that her multifaceted and fluid identity destabilizes the rigid boundary between subject and object. Her indeterminate nature challenges these dichotomies and heralds the advent of new female subjectivities that are not grounded in binary logic and are thus released from the hierarchical relations implicit in binarism.

Desire is linked to a new version of subjecthood, as delineated by Fevvers, and to feminist liberating powers. By the end of the novel, Fevvers defines herself as a "New Woman" (273) in relation to- not in opposition to-both Walser, as the object of her desires, and desire itself. Her linking of Walser's "beloved face" to "the vague, imaginary face of desire" (204) suggests that the novel posits desire as an elusive but life-affirming notion. The novel rejoins desire and love, which it depicts as divorced from sex in most instances--since it depicts sex as most often nothing more than pornography. Linda Hutcheon suggests in more general terms that in the fiction of writers such as Carter, "subjectivity is represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history . . . it is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation" (Politics 39). Although she does not explicitly assert that Fevvers creates herself as both subject and object simultaneously, Ricarda Schmidt does note that

Fevvers does not simply become men's passive object, for her wings ensure that she herself constitutes a formidable subject which others must react to. But as the eye metaphor indicates, she does nevertheless need the reaction of others to have her own conception of herself confirmed. (68)

Thus, Carter presents love and desire as containing emancipatory potentials in her novel. Carter ends "The Sadeian Woman" with the claim that "it is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women" (150). In *Nights at the Circus*, she takes a step further and creates a world in which human beings are freed through love and desire, by learning not to fear love and not to equate desire and sex with pornography. The novel distinguishes between pornography and desire. The pornographic nature of the "museum of woman monsters" (55), in which Fevvers is forced to work for a time, lies in its scene of sexuality. As the 'Angel of Death,' Fevvers claims that she does not engage in sexual intercourse itself; she merely poses as one of the "tableaux vivants" (60) staged on "stone niches" in a "sort of vault or crypt" (61). The museum's male visitors indulge in a pornographic voyeurism; they don costumes and look at the female "prodigies of nature" arranged as spectacle (59). The gentleman who favors Fevvers, for example, never touches her but, rather, looks at her while "playing with himself under his petticoat" (71). The male engages in sexual actions without the female in this pornographic situation and thus remains in control; she serves merely as a visual stimulus. The novel's depiction of pornography as a staged representation of sexuality rather than as sexuality itself supports view of pornography as a sexual spectacle, its reproduction or its representation.

The museum of women monsters in Carter's novel reinforces the notion that pornography is a representation of male domination. The museum is an artificial arena in which men occupy the position of dominance with no hindrances, since women are literally cast as museum objects to be viewed and consumed: Fevvers claims that the men visitors "hired the use of the idea of us [the women]" (70). Carter's depiction of the pornographic museum functions as a critique of male domination and the oppression of women. It supports her claims that pornography has a liberating potential, if it is used "as a critique of current relations between the sexes," and that

Sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer. (19-20)

In other words, if pornography is a representation of male domination, then it is implicit that pornography can be used to criticize that very domination. As Susan Gubar has pointed out, the divergent feminist arguments about pornography suggest that "an explicitly misogynist representation cannot automatically be equated with a sexist ideology" (730). Indeed, *Nights at the Circus* depicts the misogyny inherent in pornography as a means of criticizing male domination and its sexist ideology in general. Fevvers's assertion that the women freaks in the museum had "hearts that beat, like yours, and souls that suffer" (69) is a reflection of a society that objectifies women and treats them as less than human. The association of pornography and the dominant male-centered ideology surfaces through Fevvers's statement that "there was no terror in the house our [male] customers did not bring with them" (62). The novel denounces male dominance with its depiction of men who are so fearful of losing their positions. The position of mastery in the hierarchy of conventional heterosexual

relationships that they are reduced to jerking themselves off while looking at women freaks in a damp basement. *Nights at the Circus's* strategy of turning pornography on its head manifests feminist impulses: feminist in the sense that it uses a conventionally misogynist discourse--pornography--to criticize the male-centered ideology that produces it. Fevvers's assertion, for example, that it was "those fine gentlemen who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones, not we . . . for what is 'natural' and 'unnatural,' sir?" (61) both criticizes and calls into question the conventional dichotomy between that which is natural and that which is unnatural. Carter thus exposes the opposition as an ideological construction. Within the world of the museum, sexual gratification occurs through staged means and is devoid of interpersonal connections or, in some cases, contacts. In the "Black Theatre," for example, the woman freak's task is to place "a noose around his [the client's] neck and give it a bit of a pull but not enough to hurt, whereupon he'd ejaculate" (61). The portrayal of the museum and its offerings thus demonstrates pornography's dehumanization of sex and sexuality. The novel's depiction of pornography exceeds the bounds of the museum scenes, however, which heightens its criticism of male domination in its suggestion that sexual relations are for the most part pornographic in a culture that objectifies women. The attempted rape-murder by sword of Fevvers by a gentleman is a good case in point; it is a pornographic scene of a sexual act. He makes her "Lie down on the altar" naked and approaches her with something that "was a sight more aggressive than his other weapon, poor thing, that bobbed about uncharged, unprimed," and that "something was-a blade" (83). This scene demonstrates the utter divorce between sexuality and interpersonal love and/or desire and the explicit link between sexuality and violence that exist in a male-dominated world. Fevvers's description of the gentleman's useless

and passive organ both ridicules the notion that man's dominating position is grounded in his natural aggressiveness and exposes the means by which men dominate in actuality: through violence. The gentleman dominates the situation only through his possession of a lethal sword, a phallic power that Fevvers appropriates-- she has her own sword--to extricate herself from his power. Fevvers also uses her wings to escape the gentleman's grasp by simply flying out of his window and, therefore, uses a power that is not phallic in nature. The fantastic enables Carter to bypass and undermine phallic power and to posit other forms of power. Although flying away from an aggressor is not a practical solution for most women, Carter's use of the image indicates the liberating quality of strategies of empowerment that are not phallic and violent. Fevvers's use of her wings is a form of power similar to her use of storytelling, which she rids of its phallic associations--pen as penis--as well as of its reliance on strict distinctions between fiction and nonfiction; in both cases, self-empowerment is achieved through means that are nonviolent and that subvert Western binary logic.

The life stories of various abused women, which are retold by Fevvers within her own narrative, also contain depictions of events that are both part of everyday life and pornographic. Carter in this way makes explicit the link between pornography and the system that produces it. The story of the diminutive Wonder, one of the museum's women monsters, is punctuated by a description of how a company of comic dwarfs mistreated her: "I travelled with them seven long months, passed from one to another, for they were brothers and believed in share and share alike [. . .] I fear they did not treat me kindly, for, although they were little, they were men" (141).

The dwarfs' passing around of Wonder highlights the objectification of women inherent in Western culture. For the male dwarfs, Wonder is a commodity to be used

by all and then discarded, "abandoned" (68). Mignon's story is more explicit in its depiction of the violence inflicted on women by men to assert their authority. Mignon is a battered circus wife, who is literally treated as an object: "the Ape-Man beat his woman as though she were a carpet" (115). She is also "abandoned to the mercies of a hungry tiger by her lover" (127), the Strong Man, when an escaped tigress intrudes upon their sexual encounter. Mignon's body itself, with its skin that was "mauvish, greenish, yellowish from beatings" and showed "marks of fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruises" (129), testifies to the horrifying violence that daily ensures male dominance.

The novel does not merely point out the oppression of women by a male-dominated system, however; it offers potential solutions. Mignon, for example, acquires self-confidence and steps beyond her role as eternal victim. Fevvers and Lizzie help clean her up and find her a new position free of "The cruel sex [that] threw her away like a soiled glove" (155). Mignon is teamed up with the Princess in the dancing tigers act:

The Princess plays the piano and Mignon sings. The two women quickly become friends and lovers, cherishing in loving privacy the music that was their language, in which they'd found the way to one another. Mignon is strengthened through the music that she believes they have been brought together, here, as women and as lovers, solely to make. (275)

The novel thus offers lesbian relationships as a possibility for women to find love and purpose in a world in which violence dominates heterosexual relations and women are kept from assuming control of their lives and talents. Fevvers reacts to this flowering of Mignon by asserting that "Love, true love has utterly transformed her" (276), in the

sense that love has enabled Mignon to reject the role of victim and create herself as an active subject. The transformative powers of love and the potential of lesbianism take on a larger and more fantastic force in the novel's depiction of a Siberian asylum for women who murdered their husbands and the revolt of these prisoners sparked by the vitality of desire. Designed and run by a countess who "successfully poisoned her husband" and sought to assuage her conscience by serving as "a kind of conduit for the means of the repentance of the other murderesses," the prison is a "panopticon":

A hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows. In that room she'd sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her. (210)

Carter playfully presents this paradox in the depiction of the countess who is "trapped as securely in her watch-tower by the exercise of her power as its objects were in their cells" (214). The wardresses are also imprisoned and watched, so that everyone within the system of the asylum is, in effect, a prisoner, regardless of her official position. Carter's depiction of the prison configuration implicitly serves as a parallel to the existing social structure, in which all human beings are effectively imprisoned.

In the prison chapter, the novel's omniscient narrative voice is totally separated from the voices of Fevvers and Walser, who are not present. Although the narrative does not condone murder, it analyzes the murderesses' acts as responses to the historically specific condition of women:

There are many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband; homicide might be the only way for her to preserve a shred of dignity at a time, in a place, where

women were deemed chattels, or, in the famous analogy of Tolstoy, like wine bottles that might conveniently be smashed when their contents were consumed. (210- 11)

The narrative voice's feminism surfaces in this discussion of the murderesses as victims of an inequitable system. The tone emphasizes the absurdity of a world in which violence is the only recourse for women, since they are dominated and oppressed by men through violence. Later in the novel, Carter provides evidence of this conventional devaluation of anything to do with women's reproductive selves in the depiction of a tribal woman banished to a "primitive hut" outside the village to give birth to her child. Lizzie aptly describes the scene with the submissive "prone woman" and her baby alone in the freezing hut as a "tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system" (282- 83).

Carter thus uses one of the most overt emblems of femaleness, traditionally used to set women apart as inferior to men, as a means of empowerment. This specific instance of a woman's assertion of power through an innovative writing process is linked to the novel's general presentation of creative storytelling as a strategy for empowerment and self-construction that challenges the established order. Moreover, desire has generative powers within the world of the prison. It engenders love, which in turn feeds desire. The novel depicts desire as a force strong enough to destroy the artificial divisions that culture establishes between human beings to uphold a given hierarchical social order. Carter's novel uses this extraordinary situation to assert the possibility of change. The new sisterhood of women sets out to forge a new social order. Carter highlights the connection between women's reproductive capacities and women's oppression.

#### IV. Conclusion

Angela Carter's female characters in *Nights at the Circus* transcend the heresies of history and therefore must fly, or flee, into a new heaven and a new earth of her own invention. This is what Carter's heroine literally does and what the other characters in the novel accomplish, at least symbolically--all flee and fly into new paradigms of experience. Further, they transgress history and received modes of representation, in order to explore a new invention, a new story imagined differently, a new signifier, which enables them to construct subjectivities of their own.

Lizzie's question highlights the impossibility of severing ties between the sexes if humanity is to continue, since both sexes are necessary for reproduction. While the narrative voice cannot be equated with Lizzie's specific words, Lizzie's challenging of the female utopia indicates that the novel does not view a separatist lesbian community as a final answer to the problems faced by women within a male-centered culture. The novel clearly seeks to go beyond separatism to a restructuring of the whole system in such a way that men would no longer dominate and women would no longer be oppressed.

The novel ends on the rejuvenating and liberating note of Fevvers's carnivalesque laughter, brought on by Walser's question as to why she went "to such lengths" to convince him that she was the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world." She is delighted by this question, to which she gleefully retorts, "Gawd, I fooled you" (294). Fevvers's subjecthood is assured through Walser's question, since it proves that she has the power to construct her own version of herself. She attributes

her ability to fool even a skeptic, such as Walser was at the start of the novel, to her spirited determination to define herself. Fevvers's laughter thus functions as a liberating strategy that is useful in the process of developing new versions of the subject. The laughter that physically ends Carter's novel thus creates a sense of beginning.

The novel's ending with laughter also anticipates potential new forms for feminist fiction. A feminist appropriation of carnival laughter opens up the way for the formation of new types of feminist fiction that would be subversive and liberating both at the level of narrative and of politics. Carter allows a space for change and for the future without divorcing themselves from the material situation, they make ideal strategies for the furthering of subversive feminist aims. By subverting expectations, *Nights at the Circus* both exposes and challenges the established male-centered order and offers possibilities for change. Carter is careful to keep her narrative grounded in the material situation by maintaining a balance between depictions of daily life and of fantastic occurrences, even if they are intermingled. While carnivalization propels forward the novel's more utopian feminism, other strategies, such as embedded stories-autobiographies and inverted norms, also serve subversive functions, notably as vehicles for the novel's Marxist feminism. A variety of strategies usually associated with liberation thus enable Carter to bring the strands of subversive feminism together and to posit a feminism that blends their best qualities and avoids their pitfalls. *Nights at the Circus* adopts Marxist feminism's emphasis on the material situation, which utopian feminism tends to ignore; and it adopts utopian feminism's creative and hopeful dynamism, which Marxist feminism often lacks. By establishing a materialist, socio-historical grounding for its utopian vision, of new women and men creating a world that would be better in feminist terms, the narrative explains why the present

world is still far from being a feminist utopia and, yet, still offers some hope for the future.

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