

ANGELA CARTER'S *NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*: THE OTHER SIDE OF
PROSTITUTION

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Abstract. The feminist postmodern writers have always attempted to depict the struggles of underrepresented categories and reveal the injustice committed against them. In this context, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* studies the condition of British women of the 19th century, mainly the prostitutes as an undermined category. Carter unveils the patriarchal misjudgment of prostitutes and puts forth a new view. She presents to her readers Ma Nelson's brothel as a historical and cultural site rather than a promiscuous place. The economic necessity behind prostitution does not hinder the girls from positively engaging in political activism and contributing to rewriting the historical path of the new woman.

Keywords: feminism, postmodernism, patriarchy, prostitution, the new woman

INTRODUCTION

The feminist postmodern literary theory represents a new alliance between the cherished tenets of feminists and postmodern principles that support women's development and endeavour them to achieve gender equality. It tends to pay tribute to the previously marginalized and silenced categories to which subjectivity has been denied. Thus, the previously voiceless groups are voiced and given an opportunity to reveal their sufferings and inner struggles. The patriarchal atrocities, which have troubled their psyches and crippled their personal freedom and self-esteem, are ironically exhibited to the readers in order to highlight the inherent injustice with which the underprivileged classes have been treated. More

specifically, the women writers who adhere to feminist postmodernism work hard to raise the status of women. At the time when philosophers underwent a crisis of subjectivity that culminated with the announcement of the death of man, feminist writers were eager to achieve their own female presence and personal subjectivity, far distinct from the shuttered masculine one. During the bygone ages, the subject has always been tied to maleness, while the object designates femaleness. The latter has been relegated to an inferior position and has always been denied a subjective presence. This binary division is refuted by contemporary feminists who believe in gender equality and aspire to achieve it. The feminist postmodern writers depict women as both subject and object, passive and active. Within this literary realm, men and women are equal partners and overcome the metaphysical rigid binary oppositions. Among the writers who have appealed strongly for the principle of gender equality, Angela Carter stands as the most prominent advocate of women's rights and their political and social improvements. She has been known as a strong feminist who dedicated her entire literary career for the benefit of women's development and the birth of female subjectivity.

Carter does not empower one part over the second, rather she aims to equate both males and females. Although she provides her readers with a multitude of feminist escapes, she usually ends her narrative by reshaping the traditional heterosexual marriage relationship. Her writings fluctuate between revealing the patriarchal atrocity that has been exercised on women and the advancement of her feminist postmodern model of new women and men. Carter's writings start by displaying women's suffering only to justify their insurrection. Her vision provides females with a chance to regain their previously denied sexual, social, political and historical rights. More specifically, the writer dwells on the different socially-excluded members, such as the prostitutes, the circus aerialists, the physically disabled and the sexually and psychologically unbalanced. In contradistinction with the widespread metaphysical view of

prostitution, Carter unveils the real social and economic causes behind it, within the London society.

1. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REASONS BEHIND PROSTITUTION

Carter's masterpiece, *Nights at the Circus*, unfolds numerous epitomes of suffering female characters, penalized by the males due to their belonging to underprivileged categories. Carter provides her female heroines with an unprecedented loud voice to divulge their troubles. Throughout the narrative, they reveal their inner struggles caused by atrocious masculine figures in order to overthrow their despondency and declare their independence from the patriarchal realm. The reader witnesses the metamorphosis from the traditional woman dominated by the men's power to the new one, who searches for gender balance, economic independence and a unique subjectivity. Carter's literary pursuit for political, social, and sexually empowerment astounded most feminists, who have blamed her for pornographic writing and inclination towards revealing the world of prostitution and sexual liberation. The writer emancipates her heroines by insisting on their autonomous sexual practices, with or without masculine involvement. She dwells on those marginalized categories who have been stigmatized as socially unfit and inappropriate to be represented in the mainstream literature. The heroine of the novel, Fevvers, is brought up in a brothel and has been adopted as the common daughter of numerous prostitutes. She is conveyed as a half fantastic woman with imaginary wings, which symbolically connote her liberated self. She represents Carter's model of a postmodern new woman able to surmount the barriers. Introducing herself to the American journalist Walser, Fevvers says:

“As to my place of birth, why I first saw the light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the ‘Cockney Venus’, for nothing, sir, though they could just as will’ve called me ‘Helen of the High Wire’, due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore - for I never docked via what

you might call the normal channels, Sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched (Carter 1984, 3).

Presenting herself as being hatched rather than humanly born, Fevvers was raised by a dozen prostitutes in a whorehouse after being found at the threshold of the brothel managed by Ma Nelson. Carter challenges the male discourse by bringing forth the excluded social categories via a fantastic way of writing. She not only works to liberate women in general but attempts to reveal the mysterious lives of prostitutes who have been denied morality and positive political, historical and social contributions. Indeed, one appealing literary feature in her work is the ceaseless efforts to show the masculine role in perpetuating prostitution within society.

The writer is mainly concerned with divulging the economic necessity lurking behind this phenomenon. If they still cling to prostitution, this is due to their harsh economic necessity rather than their sexual drives. In *Nights at the Circus*, prostitutes are conveyed as honoured ladies who behave according to the accepted social norms and polite manners. In this context, Fevvers proclaims:

Only poor girls earning a living, for, though some of the customers would swear that whores do it for pleasure, that is only to ease their 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. (Carter 1984 42)

Fevvers' admission of the prostitutes' material pursuit provides justification for their demeanour and accuses the male customers who make a profit from their weak position. In the absence of decent professions in British society, underprivileged females have been forced to follow alternative ways to ensure their survival. This fact does not necessarily ascertain their sexual perversion as much as it reveals the masculine manipulation of the economically and socially weak women. Carter's characters prove to be intellectual and refined. They practice their daily life activities similarly to any other

high-class woman. During the day, they engage in reading books and participate in the current social and political lives.

[Fevvers] never saw a single blow exchanged between any of the sisterhood who reared [her], nor heard a crossword or a voice raised in anger. Until the hour of eight, when work began [...] the girls kept to their rooms and the benign silence might be interrupted only by the staccato rattle of the typewriter as Grace practised her stenography or the lyric ripple of the flute upon which Esmeralda was proving to be something of a virtuoso (Carter 1984, 42).

For these female characters, prostitution is a mere work and a means to cover their living expenses, knowing that they are struggling in life alone without the supposed husband breadwinner. Thus, digging beneath this phenomenon, we detect that the material level is the prior cause behind the female presence in such brothels, though we have to acknowledge as well the male' search for sexual gratification, which is intended to be uncovered by feminist postmodern writers. Carter wants to negate the female role in keeping prostitution in society, as it is claimed by the male supporters of patriarchy.

As such, prostitutes are misjudged as immoral and violent women who don't adhere to ethical values. "When we refer to somebody's virtues, what we usually have in mind are relatively stable and effective dispositions to act in particular ways, as opposed to [prostitutes'] inclinations which are easily lost, or which do not consistently lead to corresponding kinds of action" (Porter 2001, 96). From a social perspective, prostitutes are viewed as vicious sexual psychopaths and almost never as victims who search for material interests. Meanwhile, masculine sexuality has never been talked about or judged as an important cause beneath their ubiquitous existence. This fact is highly acknowledged by the writer, who searches to disclose it and circulate the female innocence.

Though Fevvers insists that she has never been subject to prostitution, her presence within the brothel as a fetishist body can be interpreted as a means of male sexual gratification. She produces

“the eroticization of the commodity, which finds its ultimate expression on and in the body of a woman” (Tonkin 2012, 14). Without engaging in sexual intercourse, Fevvers implicitly posits as a sexually arising female body. She has behaved as the object of masculine fetishism while exhibiting her supernatural winged body. Thus, while the other girls have been the subject and object of prostitution, Fevvers symbolically impersonates prostitution without its concrete realization. Subsequently, she admits:

(...) as for myself, I worked my passage on Ma Nelson’s ship as a Living statue, and, during my blossoming years, from fourteen to seventeen, I existed only as an object in men’s eyes after the night-time knocking on the door began. Such was my apprenticeship for life since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world?

Fevvers’ life journey has usually been dominated and guided by the male gaze, from Ma Nelson’s brothel to Madame Schreck’s museum of monsters, to end by being an aerialist in the Circus. She stands for the perfect fetishist body. She submits herself to men’s gaze without being physically engaged. However, the other prostitutes explicitly represent the sexual object, “the form of the commodity and its content” (Buck-Morss 1898, 185). As a result, they are spiritually alienated and physically exploited by the customers. However, within society, the prostitutes’ economic endeavour has never been recognized or dealt with as a serious problem, which is the root of a perverse social calamity.

Consequently, prostitutes should be saved from the bad reputation which has clung to them all along the bygone ages. Literary speaking, through the deployment of her characters, Carter provides them with the opportunity to reveal their inner self and divulge their secret thoughts. As part of the narration, Lizzie, the ex-prostitute and Fevvers’ foster-mother, recounts the life events within Ma Nelson’s brothel to the journalist Walser who joins Fevvers’ circus to query about her mysterious origin and deflate her claimed real winged body.

Ironically, in Carter's works, the prostitutes are the subject of the writing rather than its object, as women used to be before. Moreover, bringing the topic of prostitution into the feminist literary realm is considered to be a daring initiative from the part of a writer who has been accused of supporting pornography. This point is implicitly alluded by Fevvers when she addresses Walser: "Come on, sir! Now, will they let you print that in your newspapers? For these were women of the worst class and defiled" (Carter 1984, 20). The characters seem to have internalized the masculine prejudices and act according to them. Through Fevvers' speech, Carter alludes to her own position as a female writer who risks being rejected due to her daring literary topic. As such, she has been aware of the critics' reaction to her book and has expected its literary harsh criticism.

What Carter attempts to achieve in *Nights at the Circus* is the birth of both the new woman and new man who go beyond the western metaphysical minds and linguistic limitations to attain gender equality regardless of the crippling patriarchal society. Her exemplary models are Fevvers, the winged girl able to fly over the wreckage of the despotic masculine reign and Walser, who represents the best epitome of the new man succeeding to detach himself from the traditional masculine characteristics. As a response to Fevver's underestimating depiction of prostitutes, Walser answers:

Manners in the New World are considerably more elastic than they are in the old, as you 'll be pleased to find, ma am, ' [...]'And I myself have known some pretty decent whores, some damn'fine women, indeed, whom any man might have been proud to marry'(Carter 1984, 20).

His attitude towards women in general and prostitutes, in particular, is more tolerant and lenient than of the past generations. Similarly, we can interpret, Walser's answer as a hint to postmodern literature, which is more tolerant and inclusive to endorse all the previously casted out people.

Nights at The Circus is set at exactly the moment in European history when things began to change. It is set at that time quite deliberately and [Fevvers] is the new woman. All women who have been in the first brothel with her end up doing these new women jobs, like becoming hotel managers and running typing agencies, and so on (Gamble 1999, 144).

Consequently, Fevvers' hunger for money is understandable at the dawn of the twentieth century, when women have started to be as economically and politically active as males. Similarly, Ma Nelson's prostitutes search for their economic satisfaction, which would save them from the masculine conquest. After the death of Ma Nelson and the burning of the brothel, all ex-prostitutes set up their own businesses.

2. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF PROSTITUTES

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter unveils a series of hidden aspects of British society at the threshold of the twentieth century. She tackles intricate political issues, which are of high importance to women. The setting of the novel is extremely meaningful since it sketches the political milestones under the Thatcherite term.

[It] is associated with the issue of emergent women's rights, and was a critical phase in the drawing of consciousness about and agitation for women's rights. The late nineteenth century laid the ground for what would be, in part at least, consolidated and crystallized and turned into British parliamentary legislation in the twentieth century. The issue then at centre-stage was, of course, women's suffrage. (Day 1998, 59)

Carter situates her narrative within this period because of its positive outcome regarding women's civil rights in order to achieve a realistic historical novel intermingled with fantastic happenings. She attempts to regain the usurped historical achievements by rewriting them via an imaginary literary style that fuses authentic historical events and landmarks with fantastic ones. Thus, with her fairy

wings, Fevvers discloses the veiled occupations within the mysterious atmosphere of Ma Nelson's brothel, situated at the heart of London.

While scrutinizing the novel, the readers are surprised to discover the prostitutes' hidden interests. The brothel, which is supposed to be a place for sexual practices, proves to be a site for historical achievements and political engagements. The prostitutes are actually militants who inform their clients about the current political and historical issues. At daylight, they engage in reading and debates to teach what they have learned to their night visitors.

The girls relegated to the lowest social class are secretly preparing their feminist insurrection. Although they have internalized the masculine and social grudge, they work to overcome their denied subjectivity and erased history. Hence, their sexual pursuit is a means to an end rather than a goal in itself. Prostitution provides them with economic satisfaction and enables them to fulfil their historical status. These attempts to attain an egalitarian gender relation and achieve a female subjectivity have been mocked by most male conservatives. This fact is made explicit by Carter in her essay titled *The Language of Sisterhood*, where she observes that “[a] good deal of harmless fun has been poked at certain neologisms coined by the Women's Movement in its sexually egalitarian or sometimes even female supremacist zeal” (Carter 1997, 226). Nonetheless, the feminist alliance has made it possible to achieve their common goals, mainly the principle of gender equality. As Fevvers announces to Walser: “We are all suffragists in that house; oh, Nelson was a one for ‘Votes for Women’, I can tell you!” Does that seem strange to you? That the caged bird should want to see the end of cages, sir?” queried Lizzie, with an edge of steel in her voice” (Carter 1984, 38).

Carter compares them with “the caged birds” (*Ibid.*) due to their real imprisonment by the patriarchal institution. The fact that they are prostitutes does not negate their strong will to be liberated and obtain sexual, economic, social and political autonomy. Albeit

Carter's writings instils in women sexual liberation, they nonetheless unveil the hidden economic and political reasons behind prostitution and sex trade. The writer advances the example of the brothel to shutter the social misconceptions surrounding the prostitute's body and female existence. Despite their necessitous condition, they are looking for redemption beyond the masculine realm. Their political and historical engagements elevate their status to the British political figures whose names sprinkle all along the novel. The goal is to debase their fake grandeur and equate them to the prostitutes' status. The writer deploys their names as an intertextual aspect of postmodern writing and as a feminist weapon to execute the principle of gender equality.

One of them is the parliamentary Rosencreutz, who has been known for his fierce opposition to women's right to vote. This particular figure is presented to the reader as a psychologically troubled man who looks to purchase Fevvers from Madame Schreck's museum in order to kill her and extract from her body a substance that would procure him eternal virility. He utilizes his richness and political power to possess the female body as a fetishist object. His perversions have been divulged by Fevvers to the American journalist, Walser, as part of her autobiographical story.

You must know this gentleman's name!' Insisted Fevvers and, seizing his notebook, wrote it down. [...] 'Good God,' said Walser. 'I saw in the paper only yesterday how he gives the most impressive speech in the House of Votes for Women. Which he is against. On account of how women are of a different soul-substance from men, cut from a different bolt of spirit cloth, and together too pure and rarefied to be bothering their pretty little heads with things of this world, such as the Irish question and the Boer War (Carter 1984, 90).

Ironically, his eternal masculine virility depends on the death of Fevvers and the spilling of her blood. Carter implicitly refers to his negative political attitude towards the extension of the franchise to women. To secure his powerful image, Rosencreutz seeks to exclude women from the political arena. To describe Ma Nelson's task in

the brothel, Fevvers has never referred to her prostitution. On the contrary, she highlights the following:

(...) her habit of lecturing the clients on the white slave trade, the rights and wrongs of women, universal suffrage, as well as the Irish question, the Indian question, republicanism, anti-clericalism, and the abolition of the House of Lords. With all of which Nelson was in full sympathy but, as she said, the world won't change overnight and we must eat. (Carter 1984, 272)

Ma Nelson's insistence on food displays the prostitutes' immediate need for money. Though they are strongly aware of the current political debates and the urgent feminist intervention to gain their rights, the girls are bound to prostitution to ensure their livings prior to these rights. Besides, apart from her economic goal, Lizzie's secret activism is made explicit only at the end of the novel, when she reveals her belonging to the English Radical Movement. During their Circus tour in Russia, Lizzie asks Walser to send her private letters together with his own professional ones to Britain. The American journalist sent them thinking they were only her personal letters. Unexpectedly, "[i]t turns out that these were not just personal communications but news of Russian internal politics to Russian dissidents in exile; dissidents who would eventually produce the Revolution of 1917" (Day 1998, 175).

During this journey, both Fevvers and Lizzie have been politically engaged but they have never announced their plan to their companions. Subsequently, the activism of the prostitutes has not been acknowledged although it has been of paramount importance for the male historical success. What is conspicuous throughout the book is Carter's aim to equate her female prostitutes to famous political male figures. According to the narrative, the brothel's owner is named after the famous British naval Horatio Nelson. To present Ma Nelson to Walser, Fevvers explains that she was: "called Nelson, on account of her one eye, a sailor having put the other out with a broken bottle the year of the Great Exhibition" (Carter 1984, 22). This depiction is drawn from Lord Nelson's authentic

biography. As a matter of fact, during a historical battle, he “had lost his right eye and right arm, and been severely wounded and bruised in his body” (Rhys 1906, 100). The parallel physical description of the prostitute Nelson and the soldier Nelson is purposefully deployed to connote equality.

In addition, by attributing the name of a great male historical figure to that of a prostitute, Carter alludes to his notorious love affair with the married lady Emma Hamilton, who has inspired him to stand for women’s liberation and civil rights. What Carter aims to attain through this comparison is equality of human beings regardless of their gender or sex. Whether it is a male or a female, people are both positive and negative, object and subject. Like the prostitute, Horatio Nelson has lived a socially unaccepted love relationship. Ma Nelson, on the other hand, has taken part in the political activism and embraced women’s rights, mainly the franchise.

CONCLUSION

Although Carter calls for women sexual liberation, she does not encourage prostitution or pornographic writing, rather she aims to make explicit the female drives behind these acts. The main reason behind them is economical. The girls are obliged to work in a brothel to earn their living. Besides, the writer exposes how prostitutes marked British history so pertinent and helpful in respect to female subjectivity. In *Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter pays tribute to this marginalized category of people. She empowers it by drawing to the light their socially disregarded virtues. She brings forward the positive attributes of prostitutes and highlights the vice of some male figures, seeking to show the injustice they committed to women. This novel proves, therefore, to be a literary tool to promote a cherished feminist program and democratic gender equality.

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