

Contextualizing Bluebeard Patriarchy through Grotesque: Feminism and Sexuality in Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance* and *Heroes and Villains*

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ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this research paper is to bring awareness to the students of post-colonial fiction of Angela Carter. She won Nobel Prize for literature for her revolutionary feminism and deconstruction of patriarchy. Carter gives the image of the wolf to characterize the monstrous quality of his Bluebeards in her novels. The wolf is a deadly; in each plot of her novels there is a deadly conflict between wolf and the dove. Carter uses all the elements of the Gothic novels of Mrs. Anne Redcliff to create an atmosphere of horror and supernaturalism. The forces of darkness are in tune with the threatening atmosphere of the novel symbolizing death and destruction. Carter has used this tool in her short stories *The Bloody Chamber* as well. Carter uses the images of mirror, snow, blood, moon, fire, forest and old castles to depict the presence of her Bluebeards symbolic of bloodthirsty traditional patriarchy. In this study the main issues of sexuality of women, gender discrimination are investigated in detail.*

KEY WORDS: Traumatic, Holocaust, Community, Barbaric, Trilogy, Strategy

The themes of power, gender, and sexuality dominate the novels of Angela Carter; she belongs to the Second Wave of feminism and wanted to launch a crusade against male hegemony. Carter has observed the role of the oppressive and destructive power of patriarchy which inhibited the growth of women in society. Male domination is a reality in all societies and since antiquity man had been enslaving women like the Bluebeards. The critics observe that Angela Carter is a modern novelist appearing in different guises in her novels. She has imitated Bakhtin's theory of grotesque and Barth's philosophy of the carnivalesque. In her novels there is a strange juxtaposition of levity and seriousness as we find in the novels of Dickens and Fielding. Rebecca Munford observes that "Carter's work sits uneasily in relation to both Gothic and feminist discourses, especially as they converge through the category of the

'female Gothic'" (Munford 61). Gamble contends that "Her heroines cover the whole range from objectified victims to oppressors of others" (Gamble 68). Carter uses the technique of deconstruction in the novels so as to explore the complicity of myth, desire, and social control. Carter uses the image of mask to depict the character of Honeybuzzard who is the chief villain of the novel. He is a demonic protagonist belonging to the Gothic tradition and horror films of Hollywood. Paul Magrs investigated the stylistic techniques of Angela Carter employed in her novels. He comments thus: "The apocalyptic thresholds into personal interrelations that feature so strongly in D. H. Lawrence's work have, in Carter's writing, become invitations to deconstruction and reinvention" (Magrs 185). Carter uses the technique of disruption depicting hero as a villain, a boy is devolved into a speaking dog

and a landscape subsumes a character. She gives binary perceptions; protagonists and antagonists, and feminine and masculine.

In this research paper Carter employs the technique of grotesque employed in her novels *Shadow Dance* and *Heroes and Villains*. Mikhail Bakhtin investigated the positive elements of grotesque in his analysis of Romantic literature. Bakhtin argues thus:

The grotesque theme of the mask is the most complex theme of folk [carnival] culture. The mask is connected with the joy and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself (Bakhtin 39-40).

Bakhtin believes that the grotesque is positive and may be used as a source of empowerment. Carter employed the Bakhtinian theory of the “carnavalesque” in her novels. Fellini used the images of carnival in his horror films. In Fellini’s films the grotesque is used to depict the alienation of women from the real world. Carter was greatly impacted by the theory of Bakhtin and the horror films of Fellini. Angela Carter’s first novel *Shadow Dance* (1966) depicts the tale of violence, gruesome murder and insanity. Angela Carter declared that the plot of the novel *Heroes and Villains* (1969) deals with myth making in the “Barthesian sense of culturally constructed collective fictions or clichés” (Katsavos 12). Allan Bloom called *Heroes and Villains* as a Dystopian Romance:

The dystopian romance proves to be a suitable vehicle for Carter’s didactic allegory of the relationship between the sexes, an allegory, one might add, that uses the Utopian ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in order to rewrite the

myth of the Fall as it structures Western representations of the social order and sexual difference (Bloom 4).

Throughout Carter has employed the images of dirt and vile life creating an uncanny atmosphere in the novel. Carter gives the background of the Nuclear War which led to the unprecedented death and destruction. Three societies survived the war; the Professors who protected the old culture and civilization. Then there were the Barbarians who survived and lived outside the bunkers. They raided the Professors’ villages for supplies and food. Then there were the Out People who were crippled by the radio activity of the nuclear war. As Marianne observes, “If time was frozen among the Professors” (*Heroes* 34), the Barbarians function outside time, living their lives as an existential “peregrination which is an end in itself” (*Heroes* 107).

Heroes and Villains is set in the future but the imagery of past gives new meaning to the plot of the novel. Carter has taken images from many sources: folklore, Gothic tales and other supernatural material to give an insight to the disintegration of civilization and the emergence of the forces of destruction. Like *The Magic Toyshop*, the Bluebeard is powerful and the atmosphere is gruesome and uncanny. The bloodshed, murders and savage lust for power controls all the events of the plot. Marianne loses her mother, brother and father; she is raped and sexually oppressed and is forced to run away with her rapist. There are so many sensational episodes in the novel which continue the suspense. The plot of the novel *Shadow Dance* begins in an unconventional manner as Carter borrows the images from the Gothic tales and mythical folk tales. The first scene takes place in a bar where Ghislaine is introduced. Carter uses the images of “the green tiles”, and “dropping of

coins” to dramatize “a soft and dewy young girl” (*Dance 2*). She is vividly described as “a picture book” possessing “soft baby cheeks”. Carter builds up an atmosphere of horror and terror of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe to describe the supernatural beauty of Ghislaine. Carter introduces the triangle relationship of three persons: Morris, his friend Honeybuzzard and Ghislaine. Honeybuzzard is presented as a “decorative man” wearing a “very white, very frilly shirt with sleeves as wide as swan’s wings” concealed under his jacket (*Dance 69*).

Carter has presented Ghislaine with the ugly image of a scar symbolizing her sexiness, and mutilation of female body. Physically she looks like a doll, appearing as a young and lovely painting hung on the wall or like a beautiful picture of a book. Carter describes her thus: Ghislaine is highly sexually charged, “a burning child, a fiery bud” (*Dance 3*). Carter turns to the art of surrealism in painting her beauty and sexual body. Her childhood and adulthood, beauty and innocence and its destruction, her scarred face is described in a manner characteristic of surrealism. The scarred Ghislaine is a New Woman of Carter who dares to challenge the power structure of patriarchy. Carter has used the “scar” image in a multidimensional way symbolizing the “mythical wound of female castration” deconstructing patriarchal discourses on femininity and female sexuality. Ghislaine is the product of surreal elements as Carter employs the stylistic techniques of surreal art. She is presented as “an ambiguous blend of sexiness, innocence, victimhood and provocation. She is a doll-like child-woman, “like a young girl in a picture book, a soft and dewy young girl” (*Dance 2*).

The world of *Shadow Dance* is populated by haunted castles, women in distress dark dungeons and vampire women struggling to survive in terrifying environment. The story of

the novel is narrated by Morris who is one of the best friends of Honeybuzzard. Morris is also a business partner of Honeybuzzard dealing in antique things. He makes living by collecting and selling old antiques and kitschy pieces from the old ruins and demolished and dilapidated houses and castles. Honeybuzzard is presented as a lover and victim in the opening scene of *Shadow Dance*. Morris is a puppet of Honeybuzzard; partner in business and criminal activities. Morris feels guilty but lacks the moral courage to resist the commands of Honeybuzzard. Morris is full of contradictions; he wants to correct Honeybuzzard but Morris “had always wanted but never defined” (*Dance 177*). His gruesome act of violence intensifies terror in the novel. Like Uncle Phillip, the title of the novel refers to “Honeybuzzard as a puppet master” (Peach 43). He controls the activities of all the characters in the novel. Lindon Peach contends that “Honeybuzzard refers to the characters affected by his violent acts as ‘shadows’” (Peach 43).

Gamble observes that the name of Honeybuzzard has wider implications. He is “an irreconcilable combination of the sweet and predatory” (Gamble 52). Carter has taken special pains to portray his violent and malignant character. He is a sexual anti-hero. He is conceived as a monstrous villain of the Gothic novels. He is the “fledgling figure” of Carter, who emerges into a sexual predator of her later novels. Honeybuzzard and Uncle Philip are callous, oppressive and cruel to women. Carter portrays Honeybuzzard and Uncle Philip with Gothic eeriness. Their “shadow” existence humanize and to destroy their identities. Carter gives the images of hooting of an “owl”, “deserted cemetery” and “old churchyard” to intensify the horror of the story. Ghislaine’s supernatural personality is so imposing that Morris is haunted by her presence: “The fresh

green breath of the night moved and shivered around him and chilled him to the bone. He was afraid when he heard footsteps behind him; was she coming after him, like a fury...?" (*Dance* 12).

Carter wrote *Heroes and Villains* which conforms to the tradition of magic realism or fantasy. The plot of the novel explores the construction of feminine identity employing the psychoanalytical approach. Carter takes the readers to a post-apocalyptic world ruled by the Barbarians. Carter also presents the Professors who symbolize culture and civilized values. Then there are "Out people" who are living in destroyed cities. Carter has given three categories of people: the Professors, Barbarians and the Out People who are deformed and crippled. They are different in colors also; Professors are "browns and sepias, black, white and various shades of grey" (*Heroes* 39). Carter introduced the Barbarians to the power of myth and ritual. When Jewel is killed in an ambush, Marianne decides to become a new leader of the Barbarians. Carter borrowed from Rousseau's *Second Discourse* the idea of the organization of society. They lead a different life like the primitive tribal lords with their horses "caparisoned with rags, small knives, bells and chains dangling from manes and tails" (*Heroes* 5) and the Professors think in terms of words and linear time holding philosophical ideas and thoughts. The Barbarians run rampant in a chaotic and amorphous landscape in quest for food and ammunition.

Dr. Donally is expert in manipulation like the Bluebeard as he can plan well to entrap others. He represents the power of the patriarchal law and his cryptic pronouncements bewilder all the Barbarians. Marianne is the only educated person in this group who understands him. The plot of the novel is structured around the opposite of civilized and barbaric and masculine and feminine. The main metaphor of the

migratory journey of Marianne forms the core of the novel. Marianne lives in the colony of Professors; her patriarchal home colony is divided into Professors, soldiers and workers. Life is peaceful except the occasional raids of the Barbarians. Her father claims that the Professors were "the only ones left who could resurrect the gone world in a gentler shape, and try to keep destruction outside, this time" (*Heroes* 8). The death of her father brought tremendous change in Marianne; she fell lonely and desperate since she has no purpose in life. Marianne is sent to live with her uncle the Captain of the soldiers. Her uncle is a Bluebeard like Uncle Phillip; his main task is to protect the borders. Marianne is kidnapped by Jewel who is a Barbarian; she is raped and forced to marry her rapist and giving birth to a child. She wears an oversized wedding dress in a ritualistic manner like Melanie of *The Magic Toyshop*. At the end of the novel, Marianne emerges as a fully assimilated Barbarian woman: "I'll be the Tiger Lady and rule them with a rod of iron" (*Heroes* 150). Carter borrows the metaphor of tiger lady from Blake's poem depicting the supernatural powers of Marianne. Dr. Donally domesticates Marianne teaching her his bizarre philosophy of destiny. Like Uncle Phillip the sole purpose of Dr. Donally is to dominate her. She recollects the views of her father as she finds herself trapped in history of the tribal Barbarians.

"We are all arbitrary children of calamity", he said in his academic voice.

"We have to take the leavings"

"I don't see why!" she explained (*Heroes* 11).

To conclude, Marianne and Jewel are the victims of the oppressive forces patriarchy. They fail because they don't put a united fight against Dr. Donally and remain delirious and alienated. "They looked at one another with marvelling suspicion, like heavily disguised members of a

conspiracy” (*Heroes* 148). They struggled to find a space in the inimical world of the Barbarians.

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