



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2.S.1.,2015

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DELIBERATELY DISPLACING THE PATRIARCHAL CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS –
FEMININITY, MASCULINITY AND SEXUALITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF
ANGELA CARTER

NEETHU JOHN

PG and Research Department of English
St.Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli



ABSTRACT

Deliberate Displacement attempts to reveal that displacement of existing master codes, conventions and institutions created by patriarchal society is merely a false notion. Angela Carter through her writings explains that male hegemony can take place only if there is a major shift in the way of understanding the key concepts femininity, masculinity and sexuality. This work mainly focuses on deconstructing the old patriarchal cultural constructs of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by opening a new possibility for constructing femininity according to women's own taste and desire. The term *New Eve* is shaped by Carter according to her desire and imagination and to portray how a liberated woman in the future should be.

Key Words: Femininity, Masculinity, Sexuality, Postmodernism, Patriarchy

Article Info:

Article Received:10/04/2015

Revised on: 21/04/2015

Accepted on:24/04/2015

©COPY RIGHT 'KY PUBLICATIONS'

INTRODUCTION

The phallographic social order is maintained by the strict subordination of women. The secret of liberation from this tyranny is revealed by Angela Carter through Postmodern Strategies. Subversion is an effective literacy used by Carter to create a kind of disturbance that would lead to a re-visioning of the dominant ideology that the feminists struggle against. It is necessary to establish that the oppositional polarities that position women as inferior in their relationship with men are patriarchal political motive of subjugation. It is a false position created by patriarchy. One of the major components of postmodernism is the decanonization of all existing master codes, conventions, institutions and authorities. This warrants that any text that seeks to displace the dominant discourse becomes postmodern. "We deconstruct, displace, demystify the logocentric, ethnocentric, phallographic order of things" (*Hassan 445*).

Hence Carter too turns the whole system upside down. The postmodern perception as enunciated by Derrida attempts to emphasize difference not in terms of binary oppositions but in multiplicities and pluralities. This provides a radically new way of talking about femininity, masculinity and sexuality. Such a concept breaks down the opposition between masculine and feminine and substitutes them as elements that represent multiple differences.

This work is going to focus on the feminist theme of construction of femininity in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Passion of New Eve*. Carter breaks down the socially constructed patriarchal norms 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by making a process of transformation from an 'Frail- women' to an angelic excellence of a liberated 'New woman'.

Patriarchal Oppression and Construction of Femininity in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*

The word *patriarchy* literally means the rule of the father or the 'patriarch', and originally it was used to describe a specific type of 'male-dominated family'. Patriarchy refers to the male domination both in public and private spheres. It is a social system where women are dominated by men. Feminist use the term 'patriarchy' to describe the power relationship between men and women. Thus patriarchy is more than just a term, feminist use it like a concept and like all other concepts it is a tool to help us understand women's realities.

Angela carter has created situations and societies where women are not only equal to men but even better than men. They break away the fetters forged for them by patriarchal domination. Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop* and Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* are women who pose a challenge to the patriarchal conceptions of women. As suggested by Julia Kristeva in *Women's Time*, feminism today must deconstruct all identity, all binary oppositions and all phallogocentric logic. Women must "reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical" (*The Feminist Reader* 128).

Patriarchy wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness called *femininity*. Feminist on the other hand try to disentangle this confusion and insist that though women undoubtedly are *female* this in no way guarantees that they will be *feminine*. Patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order to make them believe that the chosen standards of femininity are natural. According to the feminists 'femininity' is a cultural concept. Julia Kristeva considering the question of femininity, flatly refused to define 'femininity' and preferred to see it as a *position*. She saw femininity as *marginality*. To posit all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine, is to enable the patriarchal powers to define, not femininity, but all women as marginal to the symbolic order and to society. This rational definition is as shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself and allows arguing that men can also be constructed as marginal to the symbolic order. Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of positionality rather than of essences. It is this position which has enabled male culture to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos.

Based on these theories, Angela Carter attempts to create the 'New Women' of her own style by breaking down the existing patriarchal constructions of *femininity*. Many critics and reviewers have seen the portrayal of fevers "as a prototype of the 'New Woman' whose wings help her to escape from the nets of a patriarchal nineteenth century culture into a twentieth century feminist heaven of freedom" (*Brian Finney, Tall Tales par.i*).

In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers is given masculine qualities, whereas Walser is deprived of them. Walser, the American reporter, who follows Fevvers in her tours as an aerialiste is wholly in her powers. He is so passive that he is forced to play the clown, the Human Chicken and tigress gigolo. And the worst of it all is that the strong Man beat Walser to a pulp and only the timely intervention of the aerialiste saved him. Moreover Walser is fooled to such an extent by Fevvers that no masculinity can ever be attributed to him. Fevvers chooses Walser as her "New Man, fitting mate for the New Woman" (*Nights at the Circus* 282). Walser is in a state of 'redefined masculinity'. It is a masculinity characterised by passivity and weakness and deprived of the tendency to dominate. When women are on the road to liberation, men are determining to retain the

past and thereby perpetuate patriarchy. So a woman's path of transformation from the Old Women to the New Women does not run smooth.

Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* loses her identity when her father dies in an air crash. The adolescent Melanie is forced to take up her residence in Uncle Philip's household where the law of the Father reigns supreme. But there she is turned into a puppet by the tyrannical male figure called Uncle Philip. Melanie is just one of the toys in his collection. Not only Melanie, but also Aunt Margaret represents women suffering under male tyranny. Uncle Philip is a toymaker and a puppet master. His house is a veritable 'doll's house' where women are merely dolls and puppets in the hands. He has imposed several restrictions on his women. "He can't abide a woman trousers" (*The Magic Toyshop* 62). There is a dreadful silence in the house when he is there. Finn tells Melanie about certain things she ought to know about him. "No make-up, mind. And only speak when you're spoken to. He likes you know, silent women" (63).

Aunt Margaret is pictured as a dumb woman. Uncle Philip's tyranny is the real cause of her dumbness. The authority of Uncle Philip in the household is stifling. "Aunt Margaret, frail as a pressed flower, seemed too cowed by his presence even to look at him" (75). She always wears a collar of dull silver which was Philip's wedding present to her. "He made it himself. To his own design" (114). This collar worn by her is not crippling but symbolic of his authority on her. She cannot eat properly wearing that collar. Uncle Philip's tyranny over Melanie goes to the extent of forcing her to play the role of Leda during a puppet show in which an artificially made, wild, phallic bird, rapes her. As if to counter this tyranny Melanie's lover, Finn destroys the swan and challenges Philip's authority. Aunt Margaret too falls in love with Francie, committing incest. Challenged by these actions Uncle Philip sets fire to his house. But Melanie and Finn escape the fire and the catastrophe and emerge free from tyranny.

According to Carter, women are no more the property or the commodity of a man. She is not bound by any patriarchal rules or regulations which are socially constructed. She feels that women in a patriarchal society are in need of a physical and psychological transformation. She makes her women break silence and overcome disabilities. She shows the way for becoming independent of them. Carter's 'New Women' is capable of challenging and defying patriarchy.

Bisexuality Vs Liberation in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*.

The term *bisexuality* means showing sexual attraction or sexual behaviour towards both males and females. The postmodern feminist utilises 'bisexuality' to counter the oppression of women by patriarchy. Postmodernism highlights 'in-betweenness' and 'indeterminacy'. There is a blurring of boundaries between male and female. The feminist dream of 'wholeness' is expressed by Angela Carter through her women who are "made spirits confined by mistake in female frames" (*Sadeian Woman* 106). The feminine woman is the 'other', the defining opposite of male, not quite human, less than human, a deformed and disabled version of woman. 'Bisexuality' in its biological sense means having characteristics of both sexes. Feminists like Cixous are not satisfied with the unity of two halves but they want 'bisexuality' which is the unity of two wholes. For them bisexuality means an individual made up of two genders. It is the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes. (*The Feminist Reader* 104). That an individual is purely 'feminine' or exclusively 'masculine' is a patriarchal myth.

Angela Carter has presented several characters who can be termed 'bisexual' not only because of the presence of both male and female sexual organs, but also other characteristics which are masculine or feminine combined in a single individual. In Carter's novels, woman is considered 'bisexual'. For several historic-cultural reasons, it is woman who really benefits from bisexuality. Man is always determined to retain his glorious phallic monosexuality. There is a longing in woman to achieve manhood which finds expression in being like female men or male women.

"In Beulah, myth is a made thing not a found thing" (*The Passion of New Eve* 57). The mother of Beulah decided that Evelyn who claims to be a man should be made a woman too. The New Eve is rebuilt out of a male body using parts from other female ones. It is a creative manipulation of conventions. The desire for totality that inevitably harbours a yearning for patching together distinct fragments and sections is there in every individual. The name 'Evelyn' incorporates the name 'Eve'.

It is same with Tristessa, another character in *The Passion of New Eve*. Though Tristessa was believed to be the perfect woman, it was understood that she was hiding her insignia of maleness. Zero realized that she was a female man. Albert/Albertina, one among the prodigies of nature in the museum of monsters kept by Madame Schreck, was yet another bisexual being – “half and half and neither of either” (*Nights at the Circus* 59). The juxtaposition of weak male figures with masculine women is yet another excellent method adopted by Carter to bring about deliberate displacements of conventions and establish norms. Placed beside the Mother of Beulah who has prominent masculine traits, Zero whose impotency is highlighted dips to a Zero. Thus Carter deliberately exposes sexual identity as something that is unfixed. To be a woman is to be automatically at a disadvantage in man’s world. As Cixous points out:

Accepting the sex as a component makes them richer, more various, stronger and – to the extent that they are mobile- very fragile. It is only in this condition that we invent. Thinkers, artist who create new values, ‘Philosophers’ in the mad Nietzschean manner, inventors and wreckers of concept and forms, those who change life cannot help but be stirred by anomalies-complementary or contradictory. (*The Feminist Reader* 102-103).

Sisterhood and women’s community according to feminists, provide the best refuge from the oppressive facets of a patriarchal society. It is a way of achieving political solidarity by focusing on the common aspects of female experience. Besides providing personal fulfilment, through social, such women – bonding has a great public import since they constitute a challenge to patriarchal attitudes.

Radical feminists say that:

Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and in relation to men... for this we must be available and supportive to one another, give our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. Our energies must flow toward our sister, not backward toward our oppressors (*Koedt* 246).

Women’s communities are sites of the development of femininity with reference to women themselves and not in relation to men. Such deviations from the patriarchal paradigm are encouraged by the radical feminists. They advocate a bonding between that is both emotional and political. Woman bonding has been created by the falsehood inherent in patriarchal norms.

The women’s community formed by the Mother of Beulah is indeed a militant one. It is diametrically opposite to the community of wives maintained by Zero the poet in his ranch house in *The Passion of New Eve*. But the women’s community in Beulah undergo military training every night. They make preparations for establishing a totalitarian rule of women. They had “a look in their eyes of the satisfied Calvinist who knows he has achieved grace”. (*The Passion of New Eve* 79). This contrast between the two communities shows the ideal one that Carter wants her New Eve to join.

The novel *Nights at the Circus* has three communities of women which are beautiful illustrations of feminist approaches to sisterhood. The first two communities inscribe the conventions of feminine representations as is hated by patriarchy. The third community deliberately subverts and displace the conventions highlighted through the first two communities. Carter shocks us by suggesting a new way of forming a women’s community. The first two communities are not fully women’s communities because men where the focus of women as prostitutes and therefore their codes and conduct were to a certain extent decided by man. But Carter advocates a total switch over to a woman-centered women’s community where women love women and not men. It is an effective subversion of conventions with a precise feminist objective. Women say an emphatic ‘no’ to sex without love. It is a part of the politics of women- centered resistance.

The first community is the community of whores in Ma Nelson's Academy. It was a wholly female world within Ma Nelson's door. Even the dogs and cats there were females. The second community called the Museum of Monsters is the one established by Madame Schreck. There were several prodigies in the 'Museum Monsters' who earned their living through prostitution. The third community called the House of Correction is almost a prison for those who have murdered their husbands. It is a penitentiary for female criminals. This community is conservatively making reparations for their sins against patriarchy. But Carter strikes a change through the third community. She deliberately displaces the conventions of forming communities pleasing to patriarchy and inscribes a deviation in the intension of the inmates. Carter goes on to say that the purpose of the formation of the House of correction was soon spoiled by the setting in of lesbianism. Lesbianism caught on like wild fire. The inmates woke up to the knowledge that on either side of their own wedge shaped cubes of space lived other women just as vividly alive as themselves. So an army of lovers finally rose up against the Countess and "found a primitive Utopia in the vastness around them, where none might find them" (*Nights at the Circus* 218).

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter displaces the already existing myth of the creation of Eve that forms the basis of subjugation of women. It challenges the masculine notions of femininity. A deliberate displacement of this subjugating myth is brought about when Carter makes a female goddess, the Mother of Beulah, create the 'New Eve' in a woman's land. It is a psycho-surgery performed on a man to transform him into a woman. She is in no way inferior to man, but superior in many respects. The New Eve thus created develops herself further through continuous military training. She is a perfect specimen of womanhood. Thus *bisexuality*, *lesbianism* and *subversion of myth* are effective techniques in Carter's hands to inscribe a deliberate displacement of the realities and conventions established by patriarchy. Such techniques prepare the minds of women for emancipation.

CONCLUSION

Angela Carter's novels have challenged the established notions and definitions of women that are biased and patriarchal. It is patriarchy that has determined the kind of life that she should lead. Deliberate displacement of the dominant patriarchal discourse, which is politically motivated, is necessary to create a kind of disturbance that would lead to revolutionary changes. The kind of 'New Women' shaped by Carter out of her imagination has turned a challenge for patriarchy. Carter's women characters like Eve, Fevvers and Melanie becomes the prototype of 'New Eve'. By creating her own characters known for their unfemininity, Carter breaks down the monopoly of man in the construction of femininity. She erases 'femininity' as is constructed by patriarchy, from her texts and reveals her female characters as possessing masculine attributes. She juxtaposes weak male figures with masculine women. Having established that sexual identity is quite unfixed, she redefines masculinity in character like Walser and Evelyn. Social displacements are achieved through formation of sisterhood and women's communities which give ample space for the growth of women with reference to themselves and not in relation to men. Existing myths are displaced by the notions that woman can be masculinised and men can be feminised through psycho-surgery. Such deviations from patriarchy paradigms pose a challenge to conventions set by the male-dominated society.

Taking advantage of the space created by the postmodern condition which breaks down the opposition between 'masculine' and 'feminine', Carter expresses the feminist dream of 'wholeness' by inventing bisexual women. Carter's attempt is to present woman as a bisexual being forced to suppress her essential maleness. Carter traces the family as the unit in which women are forced to submit themselves to male oppression. Her novels give a death-blow to the concepts of an all-powerful father and subjugating husbands by providing that these are not natural but only cultural concepts.

Work Cited

- Carter, Angela. *The Magic Toyshop*. London: Virago Press Limited, 1981.
 _____. *The Passion of New Eve*. London: Virago Press Limited, 1982.
 _____. *Nights at the Circus*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1984.
 _____. *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. London: Virago Press Limited, 1979.
 Hassan, Ihab. "Making Sense: The Trials of Post Meridinsm" *New Literary History*, 1987.

- Cixous, Helene. "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/ ways out/ Forays". *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. London: Macmillan, 1990.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Living on Border Lines". *Deconstruction and Criticism*. ed. Harold Bloom et. al. New York: Continuum, 1979.
- Finney, Brian. "Tall Tales and Brief Lives: Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus". 1998
<<http://www.csulb.edu/bhfinney/angelacarter.htm>>.
- Koedt, Anne. *Radical Feminism*. London: Quadrangle Books, 1973.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue and Novel". *The Kristeva Reader*. ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
-