

Post Feminist Aesthetics in the Select Works of Angela Carter

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Abstract

This paper presents the Post Feminist Aesthetics in the Select Works of Angela Carter. Society depicts women to be passive recipient of the atrocities done toward them by society, tradition and patriarchy. Classic literature had also portrayed women in this stereotypical role. Angela Carter's women characters defy this stigmatization. Her women characters are not passive recipient of male authority but rather can be seen challenging social norms by their independent mindset that challenges the thresholds of societal, patriarchal, traditional and religious norms.

Keywords: Post Feminist, Aesthetics, Society, Independent, Patriarchal

Post feminism today can be seen as an aesthetic discourse which has evolved through the decades of battering and reshaping of feminism as a movement or discourse. Though post feminism embodies within it various contradictory and pluralistic dialogues and dialectics yet its uniqueness qualifies for itself a separate aesthetic position. The works of Angela Carter, (1940-1992) the British novelist, short story writer, poet and journalist best exemplifies post feminist 'sensitivity' (Gill 2007). Her niche in carving out a canvas with bold unapologetically feminist strokes in the narration of her novels and writings provoke the reader's to rethink those angles often missed out as conventional or ant conventional, feminist or antifeminist.

Anjela Carter's writings are embedded with post feminist portrayals of the tension between the subjectification and objectification of women, the transition of the passive docile women to individualistic neoliberal goal oriented women and the struggle of that transition. Through the amalgamation of various generic mediums such as carnivalesque, grotesque, picaresque, magic realism, rewriting of fairy tales, Carter addresses the women question in the transitional postfeminist world in the portrayals of the female characters in her works. This paper intends to focus on Anjela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and 'The Company of Wolves' from 'The Bloody Chambers and Other Stories' (1979).

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chambers and Other Stories* retells the stories of *Bluebeard*, *Snow White*, *Red Riding Hood* and *Puss and the Boots*, and unearths different meanings in the process. It is interesting to note that Carter had translated Charles Perrault's tales a few years prior to her writing *The Bloody Chambers*. That perhaps provided her with clues regarding the embedded ambivalences and contradictions in these conventional tales (Mukhopadhyay 122). Myths and fairy tales often embody within them stereotypical roles especially for women characters who are portrayed in a subjugated demeanour embedded with cautionary measures. The female characters are often portrayed as ones needing protection or ones that need to

be rescued. In the classic fairy tales, the female characters are hardly portrayed as independent, confident or intelligent rather they are portrayed as naive and victims of circumstances. Most of the characters portrayed are young adolescents about to enter into the world of maturity. These fairy tales which are mostly read by small children who are in their formative years tend to internalise it therefore disrupting their perception about identity and world view.

When we look at the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* it gives us a picture of a naive little girl who is unaware of the impending dangers of the world which has been represented in the story as the dark forest. The wolf in the story symbolises the strangers that can be encountered in this strange world. In this story the little girl goes to meet her grandmother, wearing her red hooded coat, who lives in the other side of the forest. The wolf ends up killing both the grandmother and the little girl by the end of the story. This story is a patriarchal perspective of young girls and a warning to them who dare to venture out without caution in this strange world. This story tends to inculcate a lot of anxiety and leaves the little readers with their questions unanswered. It portrays a male stereotyping of feminine vulnerability.

Anjela Carter's *The Company of Wolves* is a rewriting of the Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf in this new perspective of the story is a cunning carnivore animal and since it has had a taste of flesh, there is nothing that satisfies the wolf. The depiction of time in the story is symbolic as it shows the transition between winter to summer, the girl's age is also symbolic as she is somewhere between adolescence and maturity. Contrary to the girl in Perrault's tale, the girl depicted in the new perspective of the tale is afraid of nothing and has her knife with her. 'The wolf appears before her as a young man, with whom she strikes an immediate rapport, accepting the challenge of racing him to her grandmother's house. The prize promise is a kiss. The red hood that the girl wears gradually assumes a wider significance. It is a mark of difference; but scarlet is no longer the colour of shame, but of defiance and challenge against the internalised and indoctrinated structures of morality that is based on denial and repression. Red becomes the symbol of the instinctual and natural life' (Mukhopadhyay123).

Postfeminism's anarchical traits and its longing of diversity and plurality can be seen in the scenes that depict the encounter between the wolf and the grandmother. The wolf upon reaching the abode of the grandmother, devours her up. Before the grandmother was eaten she had been seen with a Bible in her hand. The Bible in the hand of the grandmother signifies the traditional orthodox rigidity that religion tends to put on mankind. The grandmother being devoured with the Bible in her hand symbolises the breaking down of this rigidity that religion tend to put on mankind. Therefore we can see anarchical traits in the new perspective of the story. The girl here can be seen as someone who refuses to be the victim of circumstances unlike the girl in the Perrault's version of the tale. She negotiates her way into the wolf's arms into a kind of savage marriage ceremony. She crosses the boundaries put upon her by society and patriarchy. She can be seen as having her own mind which is defiant.

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, the 1984 novel is widely considered as a post feminist novel for its magic realism, hybrid narrative technique, and larger than life characters. The main protagonist of the novel Sophie Fervvers who is an aerialist in a circus in London is an embodiment of that female figure that transcends the

boundary of rigidity put by patriarchal norms. Her very being is a matter of scrutiny that keeps the readers, audiences and Jack Walser curious as she is a hybrid between a human and a bird. It is said about her birth that she was hatched out of an egg. As the plot moves forward the readers are to discern whether she is a fact or fiction and this technique necessitates the implication of the willing suspension of disbelief. Jack Walser, the journalist, who decides to venture out with Fevvers to find about the truth of her origin and identity, finds himself in this willing suspension of disbelief as he witnesses the accident of Fevvers in the tapestry, she does not fall to the ground but hovers about in the air. This illusive being that Carter has decided to give Fevvers is symbolic of the postfeminist plurality, Fevvers is neither fully human or fully bird. The wings on her back signify her plurality. Her identity is anti essentialist, she cannot be trapped in any kind of universalism.

The character of Fevvers is also symbolic of the defiance and struggle a woman faces against patriarchy. The wings on her back are symbolical of her desire for freedom. However there is the paradoxical element in depiction of her character. Though she has wings, she is still caged with the circus troupe. Though she has wings to fly she is still caged by systems of patriarchy. Her body is an object of curiosity which puts her time and again in public and private gaze. She is an embodiment of women trapped in her own body. She has wings but this wing does not give her freedom rather she is trapped because of her wings. Her eccentric being attracts people, men pay to see this enigmatic being and to feel her as a result she becomes wealthy but she becomes more dependent on wealth. The result of which is that the wings become a source of her own bondage rather than freedom.

Society depicts women to be passive recipient of the atrocities done toward them by society, tradition and patriarchy. Classic literature had also portrayed women in this stereotypical role. Angela Carter's women characters defy this stigmatization. Her women characters are not passive recipient of male authority but rather can be seen challenging social norms by their independent mindset that challenges the thresholds of societal, patriarchal, traditional and religious norms.

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