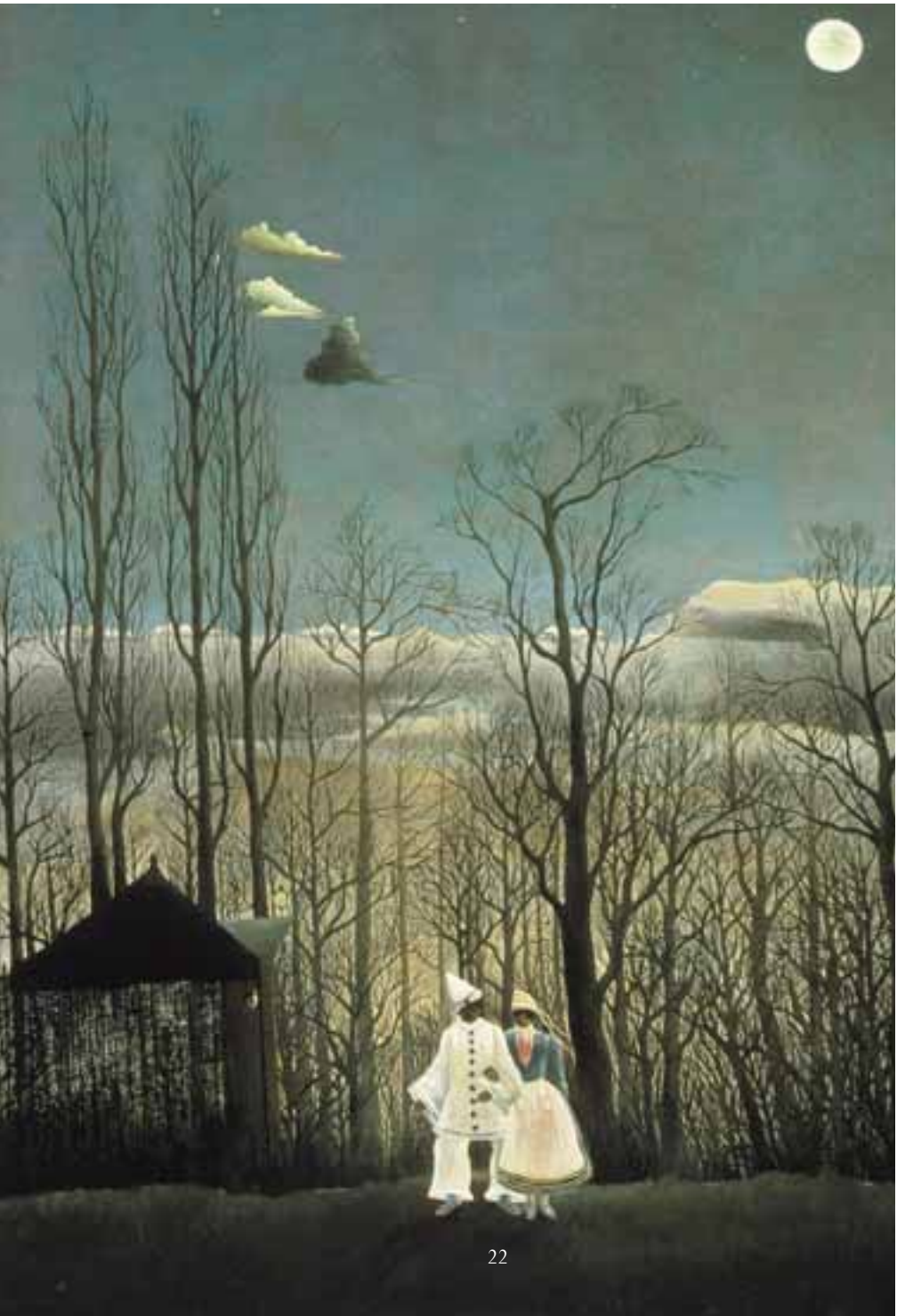

Henri Rousseau, 'Une soirée au carnaval' ('Carnival Evening') (1886).

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: Carnivalisation from Bakhtin to feminist postmodernism

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With the advent of the postmodern age, new literary concepts, new textual forms and experimentations with genre have been brought into practice. Nonetheless, postmodern writers such as Angela Carter have drawn on their literary heritage to explore its various hidden facets and adjust some aspects to serve their feminist aims. The carnivalesque, for instance, is exploited within postmodern literature to convey feminist endeavours and goals and to criticise various patriarchal ideas that are taken for granted or internalised, mainly masculine supremacy over females. Angela Carter's feminist postmodern carnivalesque rewriting in her novel *Nights at the Circus* problematises gender through criticism of specific carnivalesque elements that have anchored male superiority and female subjugation. The theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's original use of 'carnivalesque' differed in its goals and ways from the feminist carnivalesque, and Carter's innovative carnival style likewise differs from the Bakhtinian logic. In *Nights at the Circus*, she emphasises the circus as a location of male violence exercised over marginalised females; grotesque[1] characters like the heroine Fevvers; the lower bodily stratum diction,[2] which aims to deconstruct hierarchical binary opposites; transvestism that functions to alter culturally fixed gender roles; and feminist laughter, which positively resolves the narrative by dispelling gender conflict and injustice.

Although the carnivalesque offers a liminal space for females to experience freedom, it also represents a threat to order and to the achievement of the postmodern feminist agenda. Bakhtin's carnival approach does not concentrate on the feminist cause. As previous literary studies have failed to cover this field, this innovative and challenging examination of Carter's novel enriches the concept of the carnivalesque and adjusts it to fit the feminist quest for liberation and gender equality. Simultaneously exploring and delineating the limits of the carnivalesque represents a contemporary tendency taken by Carter. What Carter adds to the Bakhtinian carnival is its postmodernisation to fit her feminist investigation and gender justice aims. The writer displays two contradictory feminist readings of the carnival and in so doing creates an unrivalled carnivalistic style. In her writings, mainly her novel *Nights at the Circus*, Carter uses carnival aspects to challenge the patriarchal order and

undermine male power by probing how carnival undermines the female position. The very same technique that helps to deconstruct patriarchal dominance over women works to advance gender justice and to bring to the fore a new male/female relationship based on love, equity and tolerance.

The carnivalesque initially related to Renaissance[3] festivities during which the populace enjoyed a momentous freedom to challenge their government and were free to vent their oppressed human impulses. This temporary emancipation has been considered as a source of inspiration for stricter societies; as such, Bakhtin viewed it as a suitable remedy for the dominated and subdued Soviet population. The carnivalesque used to provide a sense of freedom and joy for socially and politically restricted societies. During that short span, citizens liberated themselves by challenging political, religious and sexual taboos. This freedom was brief and in fact helped authoritarian governments tighten their control over people. The Bahktinian carnivalesque challenges the status quo and overthrows traditional hierarchal power relations. This fact led to the Stalinist rejection of Bakhtin's work and his subsequent exile. For Bakhtin:

> Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.[4]

The merry nature of carnival is felt collectively by the participants, who threaten the dominant powers and appropriate their inborn freedom. Bakhtin used his carnival theory to criticise his government's tyrannical rule, which usurped citizens' rights and forbade them from revolting. He considered carnival as a remedy for his suffering statesmen. Travesties, sexual license, the festive banquet, the spread of the grotesque and infinite laughter, as carnival tenets, are potent enough to deconstruct suffocating governmental control. The presence of the clown is very significant during carnival demonstrations, since he dares to challenge the sovereign powers, albeit momentarily, without being punished. Clowns personify rulers and briefly suspend their powers and privileges by debunking their ranks and class systems. Clowns deconstruct the traditional power relations between the dominant and the dominated members and blur all types of distinctions to draw attention to the constructed nature of hierarchy and the innate acquisition of freedom and equality. This elimination of binary opposites is one goal, among others, of the feminist postmodern deployment of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Feminists have suffered greatly due to society's binarism which has relegated them to an inferior position compared to males. By dissecting

binary divisions, women regain equality with men. Feminist postmodern writers such as Carter resort to carnivalesque to fight for gender equality and to advance their natural rights while simultaneously appraising carnival's vulgar and refractory participants.[5]

The deconstruction of binarism lurks at the heart of carnival transvestism. This reveals the possible exchange of powers which, by its turn, unveils the artificial division between the dominant and the dominated. What is remarkable is the chaotic and disordered atmosphere which overwhelms the carnival. This disorganisation comes as a result of governmental over-control and despotic rule. The short time of carnival conviviality provides citizens with an opportunity to put aside their worries and enjoy all types of forbidden behaviour. Before developing into a literary style, the carnivalesque originated as a practice shared by the whole of society. This popular event targeted political, religious, social, sexual and economic powers while providing the populace with entertainment. Its positive effects curb the misuse of power and provide the actors with a moment of sublimation while raising their awareness of the urge to recuperate their freedom.

Bakhtin promotes carnival celebrations as restorative solutions for all oppressed groups. What is enticing about carnival theory is its universality and progressive development through the years from performative merry demonstrations to the more sophisticated and philosophical literary fields. A focus on the feminist postmodern literary deployment of the carnivalesque in *Nights at the Circus* reveals how remarkable the writer's critical scope of gender issues and her embedded feminist remedies are. Postmodern carnivalesque writing tends to criticise traditional carnival festivities due to their hidden ideological and political purposes, notably dominating people and usurping their human rights. Feminists embark on tackling carnival theory according to a self-contradictory method: using it while condemning its violent and patriarchal dimensions. In *Nights at the Circus*, the use of the carnivalesque is a double-edged weapon since the writer uses it to deconstruct dogmatic patriarchal prescriptions and to criticise the carnival aspects themselves for taking part in anchoring the said prescribed roles.

Though Bakhtin believes in the global nature of the carnivalesque, he does not highlight its potential to boost the feminist liberation movement. Carter applies the theory for the betterment of women's status, although she denounces the carnival's disorder and chaotic nature. Seeing its repercussions on female progress and its tendency to impede the feminist agenda, Carter deploys various carnival characteristics from a feminist angle to explore their potential to benefit the feminist cause and to achieve the cherished principle of gender justice. Various postmodern critics have praised her enigmatic use of carnivalesque, which lends her feminist novel a positive and innovative touch. Paulina Palmer, for instance, 'argues that Carter is exceptional as a writer in that she frames her use of the carnivalesque within a feminist critique of it.'[6] Palmer refers to Carter's use and abuse of the carnival elements such as the grotesque female bodies that serve to reveal the masculine gaze and voyeuristic exploitation of the female body while simultaneously overthrowing this masculine invasion. Carter's incorporation of the

carnivalesque into *Nights at the Circus* is perspicacious in that she selects the most pertinent components to strengthen her feminist cause, while subtly condemning other aspects that thwart feminist development. Linden Peach goes beyond Palmer to claim that:

> The circus and the theatre are important contexts for Carter's later work because both are potentially 'sites of illegitimate power' and, as such, are tied into her use of the carnivalesque as well as being responsible for the brighter, more expansive and less claustrophobic feel of her later work.[7]

Carter's carnivalesque restructuring resides in its elevation of previously marginalised and debased groups of people, notably the female characters, the physically deformed and non-white males. She views them as social, economic and ideological outcasts who are in need of decent social positions and worldly recognition. Her choice of the circus, the female panopticon and remote Siberia are meant to pay tribute to the neglected groups and to readjust their life paths. As such, the reliance on the carnivalesque lies 'in its potential to give centre stage and political/moral integrity to characters who might previously have been dismissed as merely marginal or troublesome outsiders'.[8] Fevvers, the black Toussaint, old Fanny Four-eyes, the Wiltshire Wonder, Albert/Albertina, Cobwebs and the sleeping beauty are all grotesque figures who are entrapped within Madame Schreck's museum of monsters and exposed to cater 'for those who were troubled in their … souls'.[9] Though this article focuses on the character of Fevvers, it is important to mention Carter's special care with the above-mentioned abnormal and grotesque human creatures. Liberating them from the prison-like museum, Fevvers scientifically helps the grotesque prisoners to recuperate their normal human physical appearances by undergoing medical treatments and operations. At this level, we grasp Carter's corrective feminist carnival impulse, which differs from the Bakhtinian mere exposition and depiction of the grotesque bodies, regardless of any possibilities of redemption or healing. The polyphonic[10] textual nature of *Nights at the Circus* reflects its carnival style, though narrated from a feminist point of view. Carter uses the brothel, the circus, Madame Schreck's museum of monsters, the female prison, and the Siberian landscape to liberate oppressed characters and to articulate their struggles by giving them a voice within her polyphonic carnivalesque narrative. Palmer 'cites Carter's reservations about Bakhtin's carnival thesis [and insists] that the novel challenges the carnivalesque by filtering it through a point of view defined as female'.[11] Carter's feminist message while dealing with the carnivalesque is conspicuous and delineates the differences between her carnival writing and Bakhtin's. The various features are formulated and introduced within a feminist framework which strikes the difference between the Bakhtinian philosophy and Carter's.

Bakhtin rejoices in the carnival's disorganisation and suspension of rules for the sake of ensuring the inherent human freedom. In contradistinction, Carter criticises the absence of law and regulations that impedes the feminist project of progress. Her female heroine, Fevvers, both embodies the carnivalesque and criticises its anarchy. She is a grotesque female who embodies the independent 20th-century New Woman.[12] Fevvers' fantastic wings symbolise the New Woman's ability to soar over the patriarchy's rigid dominance. Her 'notorious and much-debated wings, the source of her fame', add an illusionary touch to her female being.[13] Fevvers, whose name reflects her grotesque female body, embodies and criticises the carnival ways. Her work as a circus aerialist, together with the group of clowns, and her enigmatic birth reinforce her carnival attitude. Similar to the carnival actors, Fevvers gains her living from circus performance which grants her physical emancipation and provides satisfaction to her spectators. Carter's revolutionary employment of the carnivalesque is oxymoronic in its nature. Her technique of embracing some characteristics while arraigning others is meant to boost the female position by showing the carnival role as hindering female development. Adopting a carnival demeanour and having a grotesque body do not detain Fevvers from abhorring other carnival elements which hamper her advancement.

Within this context, it is important to note her disgust and extreme hatred for the clowns. For example, Fevvers describes Buffo, the clown, as 'the lord of misrule'.[14] All along the narrative, the presence of the clown brings chaos and fear. Buffo's ominous attendance is a hindrance to Fevvers' progress. Fevvers loathes the clown, whose perplexing and paradoxical character raises an unanswered existential question. As critic Daniel Punday asserts: 'Part of the reason that Fevvers dislikes clowns so intensely seems to be that they represent quite the opposite of the unifying symbol that Fevvers sees herself to be.'[15] Fevvers initiates her circus journey as a male-dominated female, having spent her childhood in a brothel. However, she commits herself to attaining her emancipation and complete severance from traditional patriarchy. She is determined to achieve her New Woman's position, and to ensure her female subjectivity and gender equality. The fantastic and carnival character of Fevvers is Carter's female idol, contrary to various previous submissive female characters, who gets rid of all patriarchal and ideological chains and attains gender justice and female subjectivity as the culmination of her journey. Her circus tour symbolises the different steps she goes through before arriving at her destined utopian location, where she achieves self-unification. The clowns' presence by her side threatens her progress and shatters her female dream of emancipation and success at certain times during her evolution. The writer exposes the hidden side of circus life where women, such as Mignon, are beaten and exploited by the violent males. The clowns' unbridled freedom and brutal demeanour drive them to disaster by tempting homicide. In this context, Carter views 'the circus as a haven for male violence against women'.[16] Fevvers' survival within the male-dominated circus is dependent on her entrapment as a woman within the dichotomy of male dominance/resistance.

Carter fashions the grotesque female character of Fevvers to convey her antithetical feminist postmodern carnival agenda. Fevvers displays the feminist endeavour for liberation and severance from patriarchal dogmatic thinking and works to ensure her previously usurped gender balance. Equally pertinent to the feminist agenda, Fevvers looks for unified gender relations based on romance and tolerance, which is a distinguished feminist proclivity of the writer. Carter's moderate feminist activism searches for reconciliation between the democratic New Man and the emancipated New Woman. Fevvers asserts her female subjectivity within an archaic patriarchal place, the brothel. The circus and the brothel as carnival locations are explored in a different way by Carter. The brothel, for instance, serves in the deconstruction of binarism by revealing the opposite image of the previously disreputable location.

Fevvers feels insecure and fragile in the clowns' presence. The latter are associated with confusion and turmoil, which obstruct Fevvers' subjective development. In this context, Anne Fernihough avers that Carter's circus 'functions as a debased version of carnival, using all the carnivalesque tropes but showing how, in practice, they can often serve very different ends from the radical utopian ones emphasised by Bahktin'.[17] It is important to stress Carter's innovative deployment of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The writer reveals the meaningless and catastrophic repercussions of the seemingly joyful and full-of-life clowns. The writer puts the carnival components into practice, revealing their dark sides and hinting at their limitations that have been ignored by the idealist Bakhtinian analysis. Carter is aware of the female victimisation during carnival in bygone times; therefore she endeavours to postmodernise the Bakhtinian carnival tenets in order to serve the feminist cause. Even though she makes recourse to the carnivalesque for her feminist goals, she conveys Fevvers' dislike for the clowns due to their disruptive behaviour. They epitomise the opposite of her chosen female self. Their disorganised demeanour hinders her planned female future, and so Fevvers attempts to evade their company. The clowns' violent deportment leads to anarchy and death, depicted during Buffo's last supper which culminates with his attempt to kill Walser, whose act is the Human Chicken:

> 'Homocidal … homicidal …' … Buffo screamed most horribly and brought the carving knife smashing down … No sooner was the human chicken on its feet again than it took to its heels and sprinted the length of the board. … All present agreed it was a fitting climax to the great clown's career, that chase after the Human Chicken, round and round the great ring, round as the apple of an eye, of the imperial circus in the imperial city of St Petersburg.[18]

Carter reveals the repercussions of the carnival confusion on human progress. Walser, who embodies the postmodern New Man, is killed by the clowns. This is to show how carnival disunity hampers gender equality and feminist progression. Being totally immersed

in his unreasonable performance, Buffo loses his wits and decides to commit homicide. The scene initiates as an artistic staging aiming to bring forth joy, pleasure and freedom to the actors as well as the spectators. Unexpectedly, it turns into a chaotic and fatal chase, during which the clown Buffo trespasses the boundaries of sanity and is driven to madness. Excluding Buffo from the circus symbolises the feminist victory in ridding the carnivalesque of its violent side. With its simplicity and ordinary nature, the show exposes the complexity of the human psyche and exhibits the dark side of carnival acting. The Bakhtinian perspective is revealed as false, displaying the resultant repercussions of carnival festivities since the focus has been mainly on emancipation, laughter and unconstrained happiness. At variance with this, Carter calls attention to the hidden and denied negative reverberations which, within the context of *Nights at the Circus*, are attested to be harmful to human existence and more accurately encumber female subjective growth and advancement. The exclusion of law and regulations leads to death and turmoil that impede feminist activism. Carter's carnival analysis is far more realistic than Bakhtin's idealist vision. He thinks about efficient solutions to dismantle the Stalinist autocratic governmental regime, but overlooks the resulting socio-political confusion. Carter does not adopt the Bakhtinian ideas as they have been analysed in previous literary studies; rather she postmodernises his carnival theory in order to convey her feminist postmodern thinking. She makes recourse to carnivalesque to improve women's position in the postmodern carnival context contrary to their position in traditional carnival festivities.

Throughout the Bahktinian carnivalesque turmoil, women are treated as the object of pleasure rather than an active agent. This fact influences Carter's attitude towards these disarranged festivities, even though she deploys its aspects for a more organised cause, namely that of feminist liberation, first by unveiling the carnivalesque repercussions and second through mobilising it differently. Cornier Magali Michael argues that '*Nights at the Circus* utilizes a postmodern version of carnivalization as a vehicle for its more subversive feminist aims'.[19] Carter avails herself of the carnivalesque to express the female sexual, political, historical and economic revolution. Apart from the clowns, the writer draws heavily on sexual license and the lower bodily stratum, which are typical carnival details. The difference between the feminist postmodern use of the carnival and the Bakhtinian one lies at the level of their goals and approaches. The former aims to reveal that female-emancipated sexuality should be equated to the male one, while the latter looks for total political insurrection and the breaking of imposed sexual codes. The ex-prostitutes' sexual debauchery and Mr Rosencreutz's ejaculation on Fevvers' clothes are contradictory instances of carnival sexual license, discussed by the writer to uphold the feminist goal of liberating women's sexual lives while exposing men's atrocious sexual practices.

Another substantial impetus behind Carter's reference to the lower bodily stratum diction revolves around the deconstruction of linguistic binarism.[20] She aspires to debunk binary opposites due to their inherent injustice. The first part is usually masculinised while the second inferior one is feminised. The deconstruction of binarism yields equity and

fairness in all fields. The writer's aims through the elimination of binarism are the achievement of gender justice and the female new subjectivity. As Michael points out:

> [Fevvers'] laughter disrupts the male-centred established order; it is a manifestation of release from the status quo that is directed toward an undelineated feminist version of a new and better world. Ending the novel on a note of carnivalistic laughter … provides a vital image, one that is divorced from Western rationality and logic, to carry the potential for change that the novel urges.[21]

Carter, at this level, looks for possibilities to shake the traditional binary divisions that valorise rationality, logical reasoning and patriarchal dominance. The debunking of binarism is considered a prerequisite for attaining her cherished agenda. Hence her use of the lower bodily stratum language opposes the metaphysical formal linguistic apparatus and simultaneously supports her quest for a liberated female sexuality. Further, the incorporation of the carnival transvestism[22] within *Nights at the Circus* intends to reveal the potential gender balance. The exchange of culturally internalised gender roles deconstructs the rigid divisions between masculinity and femininity. During carnival demonstrations, travesties are practised freely amid the participants, who dress as clowns and disguise their sexual identities. Parodies and travesties allow participants to swap gender, hierarchical, social and even sexual roles to deconstruct all types of taboos and binary opposites. To take an instance from the novel, Fevvers' sexual top position, throughout the laughter scene, symbolises gender transvestism. Holding the top position and laughing, Fevvers overturns the gender roles. Through this scene, Carter exposes the artificial nature of the gender partitions that stem from the patriarchal manipulation of the cultural heritage. Fevvers, the heroine of the novel, controls her sexual relations with her lover, Walser, after metamorphosing him into the New Man who fits her status as the New Woman. After Fevvers asked Walser, 'Is there some place we can be alone?', Walser 'seized her hand and ran her to the Shaman's house but lost the initiative immediately as she pinned him cheerfully to the bed'.[23] Fevvers is presented to the reader as a sexually active woman who controls her masculine mate. Carter endeavours to shatter the myth of female passive sexuality by empowering her heroine. The carnivalesque is deployed in this case to strengthen the female position. The contradictory reference to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque is typically postmodern in that it criticises and uses the same literary tool. Via transvestism, Walser submits to the female destiny to end by discovering that women's sexual passivity and men's sexual dominance are mere culturally inscribed myths that have no relation to human nature. The writer foregrounds sexual equality and the strengthening of female self-independence rather than the superiority of one part over the other. Though she aims to empower her female characters and reveal masculine manipulation, she culminates her narrative by crowning gender equality.

At the beginning of the novel, the American journalist Walser starts his journey as a patriarchal figure who dreams about exposing Fevvers' fake wings. However, by the end of the novel, he is depicted as the New Man who believes in gender equality. His metamorphosis from the traditional male to the new postmodern man greatly affects his character by embracing the new masculine subjectivity which is equal but different from the female one. Fevvers, the grotesque character, with her carnivalesque table manners and physical appearance, drives him to alter his internalised dogmatic beliefs and to accept the tenets of gender equality and distinguished female subjectivity. As Bakhtin states, the carnivalesque "'proclaims the jolly relativity of everything"; it "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things"'.[24] Fevvers and Walser undergo a carnival metamorphosis which changes their living perspectives and makes them aware of the importance of equality and relativity, far from society's rigid dogmatism. The writer justifies her feminist writing with the salient Bakhtinian carnival precepts even as she denounces some of them within the context of female empowerment.

Another important carnivalesque manifestation within the novel is Fevvers' final laughter, which has postmodern feminist aspirations. In *Nights at the Circus,* Carter endorses laughter as a feminist defence mechanism that aims to subvert the patriarchal dominating culture. Making love with Walser, Fevvers indulges in laughter whose healing effects affect the entire suffering population which surrounds her. Carter narrates the scene as follows:

> Her laughter spilled out of the window and made the tin ornaments on the tree outside the god-hut shake and tinkle. She laughed so loud that the baby in the Shaman's cousin's house heard her, waved its little fists in the air and laughed delightedly too … the Shaman caught the infection and started to giggle. … it seemed this laughter of the happy young woman rose up from the wilderness in a spiral and began to twist and shudder across Siberia. … The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe.[25]

Fevvers' laughter is a feminist carnival laughter which aspires for a better future based on male and female equality. It is laughter whose healing powers are contagious and pass on to the whole globe. Analysing the scene, we can interpret Fevvers' laughter as her triumph over Walser. The latter is still doubtful about the reality of her claimed wings and intact virginity. Thus, her reactionary laughter can be interpreted as her success in convincing him about the reality of her wings or her preserved virginity. This feminist vision is underpinned by the increasing laughter in the Siberian community. As if through telepathic powers, all the oppressed characters start laughing, from the newly delivered baby in the shaman's cottage to the

oppressed ex-female ex-prisoners. Spatial distance does not hinder them from unification as a counter-mass to the patriarchy, to injustice and to social, political and gender exile.

This feminist communal laughter helps to discern each character's oppressed past and to put an end to their suffering. It is a laughter that links this marginalised society via spiritual bonds and fortifies them to stand against a whole system which has entrapped fragile human beings into its cruel and unfair monopoly. It is, therefore, a different conceptual scheme of laughter introduced by Carter for the aim of social correction and remedial aspirations. The feminist postmodern laughter chimes in with the characters' aspired future and promises improvement. The very idea of spreading via telepathy among the suffering characters holds a transcendental philosophical dimension that is in disparity with the Baktinian mere comic and funny laughter. Carter's analysis opposes itself to the festive carnival laughter, as theorised by Bakhtin: Fevvers' laughter fills the entire globe with optimism and promises a better and equal world. It is laughter with deep feminist meanings and bound to refute the purely festive one. This feminist postmodern laughter alludes to the successful feminist activism that liberates previously silenced voices. Fevvers' laughter is an extra-linguistic means used to transmit her inner revolutionary drive to marginalised characters. As excluded minorities, the characters indulge in infinite laughter that reflects their common goal to subvert oppressive powers and to correct society. Thus, the feminist laughter is not only subversive but also corrective, since it envisions a better future in a fair world. The ambiguity of feminist laughter has never been mentioned by Bakhtin and has never been deployed to achieve political, gendered or social causes.

Carter borrows the universal philosophical dimensions of the carnival laughter and goes beyond them to exploit it as a way of feminist resistance and subversion of patriarchy. All this is not to deny that 'the carnivalesque Bakhtinian laughter unfolds philosophical and absurd meanings which yield healing and redeeming powers'.[26] Carter resorts to laughter as a literary strategy that strengthens females to put an end to gender inequality. She endeavours to break down hierarchies, put an end to binarism and, most of all, ensure gender equality and women's liberation. Fevvers initiates an infectious laughter and spreads it to the other oppressed characters. Her laughter represents the voice of the female body which is set free to exteriorise its inner struggles and has emerged from the margins seeking to foster the disruption of narratives, dominant discourses and taken-for-granted truths. Fevvers' succeeds in metamorphosing Walser into the new postmodern man and triumphs in making him believe in her fake female wings while exercising her feminist carnival laughter. Walser seems bewildered by the true nature of Fevvers' wings and claimed virginity. He embarked on his journey as an American journalist who sought to reveal Fevvers' bird origin as fake, and ends up being her husband who still questions his deception and doubts the reality of her wings. He asks her, 'Fevvers, only the one question … why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world"?'[27] She laughingly replies: 'I fooled you, then!'[28] Interpreting this

last utterance sheds new light on the coming analysis. Though he interrogates the reason of her discursive manipulation and her alleged birth origin, the implication of his question is far-reaching as it hints at the possibility of her fake virginity. Fevvers' answer implies Walser's deception as regards her feathered wings, as well as her intact virginity, which she claims to have preserved all her life in the brothel. Nonetheless, her laughter can be interpreted as an approval as well as a denial of Walser's conclusion. It is an absurd laughter that is collectively shared to interrogate the meaning of Fevvers' wings and virginity. As Foucault avers, it is a 'laughter [that] threatens to break up the ordered surface of things'.[29] Fevvers' laughter promises a better and equal future for females and males after shaking the patriarchal world. It deconstructs Walser's prejudices about her body and virginity and leads him to self-metamorphosis from the traditional male figure to the postmodern New Man.

Fevvers' laughter shakes the reader and the other characters alike and pulls them from a Siberian dream to face the real world. As Jo Anna Issak avers, it is a 'carnival laughter, which was not an individual reaction to some "comic" event, but the laughter of all the people, universal in scope and directed at all and everyone'.[30] To put it simply, it means to spread Fevvers' optimistic female attitude the world over, as an attempt to alter its misogynist perspective and ensure gender equality. Fevvers' laughter bears a therapeutic nature that surpasses traditional gender divisions and the patriarchal degradation of women and non-Anglo-Saxon males. It acts on various generations from the newborn baby to the old shaman and affects both sexes and various races for the sake of ensuring equality and tolerance for all human beings. Fevvers' '[l]aughter purifies from dogmatism, … from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level'.[31] Fevvers' laughter liberates the inhabitants of Siberia from their dark past and fills their hearts with permanent hope for an egalitarian and tolerant world. This feminist laughter is transgressive and ensures a free way of expression and fills the remote Siberian land with promises and hope.

The feminist postmodern implementation of the carnivalesque opts to advance feminist goals by modifying the Bakhtinian philosophy from the purely political subversive carnival strategy to a more comprehensive and corrective human project. However, we cannot overlook its conspicuous aversion to the carnival's disordered and chaotic atmosphere which, according to feminist reasoning, restricts women's progress in particular and impedes human development as a whole. Though feminists make recourse to the Bahktinian carnivalesque, they aim for different revolutionary feminist goals from its original political insurrectionary purpose. Similar to the Bakhtinian aim of achieving equality by means of the carnivalesque, the feminist postmodern writers apply the literary technique through a relative and moderate perspective, seeking to pay tribute to the previously dominated women and marginalised categories as well. The main distinctions of Carter's feminist postmodern carnival writing compared with the Bakhtinian are, firstly, its difference from Bakhtinian carnivalesque and its targeted political aims, and secondly in Carter's

progressive and creative carnival style. Her novel *Nights at the Circus* uses a feminist postmodern integration of grotesque characters, in particular Fevvers, and highlights the role of her grotesque nature in surmounting patriarchal dominance. The study of the lower bodily stratum diction means to deconstruct the oppressive linguistic binary divisions which are echoed through the political, social, gender and racial hierarchies. Transvestism features heavily in Carter's writing, in *Nights at the Circus* as well as in her other works such as *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*[32] for the purpose of gender role exchange. The feminist laughter, which differs from the Bakhtinian carnival laughter in many ways, envisions gender justice and human equity. Feminist carnivalesque writing longs for more far-reaching goals that will liberate humanity from dogmatic, culturally imposed myths rather than being tied to a particular moment of joy and mirth. In contradistinction to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque that frees people momentarily, as a way of sublimation, only to be oppressed and suffocated again, the feminist carnivalesque proves to be an everlasting weapon healing and emancipating humanity continuously.

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Wiem Krifa

Notes

1. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, from whose writings contemporary cultural theories of the grotesque derive, 'all the features of the human face, the nose and the mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body; the head, ears, and nose also acquire a grotesque character when they adopt the animal form or that of inanimate objects. … The grotesque body … is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.' Michael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hellen Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1984), 316-17. For Bakhtin the definitive image of the grotesque is that of the 'senile, pregnant hag … decaying, deformed, laughing': Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 25-6. As Mary Russo puts it, 'The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change': Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).
2. The grotesque body (also called lower bodily stratum or lower stratum) is a concept or literary trope that combines the corporeality of the human body and the notion of the grotesque. Bakhtin, in his study *Rabelais and His World* (1965), set out 'the three main acts in the life of the grotesque body: sexual intercourse, death throes … and the act of birth'. *The Art and Popular Culture Encyclopedia*, http://artandpopularculture.com/Grotesque_body (accessed 6 April 2022).
3. 'The original meaning of the Italian *rinascimento* for those who actually took part in it was the "rebirth" of Classical Greek and Latin literature. The term is commonly applied to the historical period which follows the Middle Ages, but when the Middle Ages ended and when the Renaissance began has been a source of much debate. A long accepted view was that the Renaissance began in the latter half of the 14th century and that it continued throughout the 15th and 16th centuries.' J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 739.
4. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 5.
5. Other feminist postmodern writers that use the carnivalesque include Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.
6. Quoted in Helen Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 47.
7. Linden Peach, quoted in Helen Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at The Circus* (Routledge, 2007), 48.

8. *Ibid*.
9. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006), 63.
10. Polyphony is Bakhtin's concept, which is deployed 'in his discussions of languages and discourse in literature in which he examines the different "voices" and suggests how the use of discourse in, for example, a novel may influence and, in a sense, "disrupt" the authority of a single voice … In Bakhtin's words, [characters] are liberated to speak "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices …" which are not subject to the authoritative control of the author' (Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 219).
11. Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 48.
12. The 'New Woman' refers to women of the late 19th and 20th centuries who resisted patriarchal ideologies and sought to gain a foothold in the world by asking for human rights and notably gender equality.
13. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 4.
14. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 117.
15. Daniel Punday, 'Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story', *The Modern Language Review* 97.4 (2002): 808.
16. Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 48.
17. Quoted in Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 115.
18. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 206-7.
19. Cornier Magali Michael, *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction* (Albany: New York Press, 1996), 182.
20. 'An either/or distinction common to a variety of human systems of COMMUNICATION. LANGUAGE provides good examples of organization of reality into oppositions, as in night/day; black/white; nature/culture; male/female. Binarism constitutes the basis of STRUCTURALISM. In linguistics, the Saussurian sign is made up of two halves, the signifier and the signified (cf. SIGNIFICATION); Lévi Strauss (1968) analyses CULTURE in terms of sets of paired oppositions such as the "raw" and the "cooked"'. (Terry Lovell *et al*., *A Glossary of Feminist Theory* (New York: Arnold, 2000), 21).
21. Michael, *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, 207.
22. Gender transvestism refers to the idea 'of moving across (transferring) from one preexisting gender category to the other [as well as] to the idea of living in between genders, and to the idea of transcending or living "beyond gender" altogether'. Richard Ekins and Dave King, 'Transgendering, Men, and Masculinities', *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. by Micheal S. Kimmel *et al*. (California: Sage Publications, 2005), 380.
23. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 348.
24. Bakhtin quoted in Sarah Gamble (ed.), *The Fiction of Angela Carter: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 140.
25. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 349-50.
26. Carl Lindahl, 'Bakhtin's Laughter and the Cajun County Mardi Grass', *Folkore* 107 (1996): 57.
27. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 349.
28. *Ibid*.
29. Joanne Gass, 'Angela Carter', *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, ed. by Hans Bertens and Joseph Matoli (Massachusets: Blackwell, 2002), 79.
30. Jo Anna Issak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, ed. by Jon Bird and Lisa Tickner (London, Routledge, 1996), 17.
31. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 123.
32. In *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Noirceuil wishes to experiment with gender twice during his marriage ceremony by dressing as a woman and marrying a 'female role homosexual dressed as [his] bride', while Juliette would likewise dress as a woman and marry a woman dressed as a man and then dress as a man and 'marry another woman wearing female attire' at the same ceremony. Thus, we deduce Carter's strategy to use transvestism for the sake of revealing the cultural rootedness of gender roles.