CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Angela Carter's cap feathered with sure successes in the field of novel-writing stands aloft among those of the feminists in the latter half of the twentieth century. She is a visionary, prophetic and imaginative angel who veritably carts us from an unreal world of dreams and fables to the grim realities of life. With her bewildering flow of unconventional ideas and experimentations in the art of novel-writing, she is in the vanguard of the feminist movement. Her gift of writing has elevated her to be one of the most vivacious and compelling voices of the English literary scene. A proper understanding of her novels will certainly assign her a permanent place among the greatest of luminaries in the firmament of feminist novelists.

Though Angela Carter was not lucky enough to win the best seller fortunes of some of her contemporaries, she won international esteem. She had a wide range of influence. She was Arts Council Fellow in Creative Writing, University of Sheffield from 1976 to '78; Visiting Professor of Creative
Writing, Brown University Providence, Rhode Island from 1980 to '81 and writer-in-residence, University of Adelaide, Australia in 1984. She was also the recipient of Rhys Memorial Prize in 1968, Maugham Award in 1969, Cheltenham Festival Prize in 1979, Maschler Award for Children’s book in 1982 and James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1985. But the world lost her when she was at the height of her powers. A few days after her death, Salman Rushdie, in his article “Angela Carter, 1940-92; A very Good Wizard, a very Dear Friend” observed that Angela Carter was not accorded due recognition though she was the most brilliant writer in England:

Angela Carter was a great writer. I repeat this because inspite of her worldwide reputation, here in Britain she somehow never quite had her due. Of course, many writers knew that she was that rare thing, a real one-off, nothing like her on the planet; and so did many bewitched, inspired readers. But for some reason she was not placed where she belonged - at the centre of the literature of her time, at the heart. Now that she's dead, I have no doubt that the size of her achievement will rapidly become plain. How sad that writers must die before we grant them their place in the pantheon. Of course, Angela Carter knew who she was. But we could have told her, more loudly and more often than we did, that we knew too (par.3).
Born in England on 7th May, 1940, this daughter of Hugh Stalker, the journalist, lived in Yorkshire with her grandmother, a working class, matriarchal, domineering feminist granny of the north of England. She liked to go to the cinema and was impressed by movie stars like Jean Simmons. Her mother who was from South Yorkshire worked as a cashier in Selfridge’s. Angela went to Streatham Grammar School but did not wish to go to Oxford. Though she was apprenticed as a reporter on the Croydon Advertiser, she gave it up. She was then married to Paul Carter, a chemistry teacher at Bristol Technical College. She then studied Medieval literature at Bristol University, thus making herself acquainted with allegories and tales. Chaucer and Boccaccio were her favourite writers. She also developed an interest in folklore and tried to discover the folk and the jazz music scenes of the sixties.

Angela Carter began writing novels in her twenties. *Shadow Dance* (1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968) and *Heroes and Villains* (1969) were her early novels. It was also at that time that she wrote her novel *Love* (1971). [It] showed her baroque powers of invention, and her fearless confrontation of erotic violence, of female as well as male sexuality: she marked out her territory early, and men and women clash on it, often bloodily, and the humour is mostly of the gallows variety. From the beginning, her prose was magnificently rich, intoxicated with words - a vivid and sensual lexicon of bodily
attributes, of minerals, of flora and fauna - and she dealt in strangeness (Warner, par.11).

These novels fetched her praise and prizes. One of the awards gave her an opportunity to travel to Japan. She stayed in Japan for two years. She came into deep contact with the Surrealist movement. Her stay in Japan gave rise to two Novels: *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Angela Carter had a special, enchanter's lightness of mind and wit that made her explore the possibilities of presenting women in the strangest fiction. Thus her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991) have an aerialist heroine and twin sisters playing fairies and feathered creatures on the stage. She was able to 'conjure strangeness out of the familiar' as Marina Warner puts it (Obituaries, par.11).

She divorced her first husband Paul Carter in 1972. Her trip to Japan was almost a running away from her husband. She found happiness with her second husband Mark Pearce who was training to become a primary school teacher. Their son Alexander was born in 1983. Angela Carter loved cinema, vaudeville, songs and circus. Though she could grasp reality, she always believed in change.

Besides her novels she has contributed collections of short stories like *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1980) and *Black Venus* (1986). Her collection entitled *Fireworks*
(1987) also contains touching stories. All these showed her interest in revising handed-down tales to project the experiences of women. In the beginning of her writing career itself she had produced stories for children - Miss Z, The Dark Young Lady (1970) and The Donkey Prince (1970).

In her polemical essay, The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History (1979), she lays bare women's collusion with their own subjection. She was frank to the core. She also published a wonderfully pungent series of articles for New Society in her collection Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings (1982). The only work in verse among these was Unicorn (1966). She also edited a work called Wayward Girls and Wicked Women (1986) which contains a marvellous collection of stories about bad girls, wicked women and unsatisfactory wives. It was designed to promote the female virtues of discontent, sexual disruptiveness and bad manners and to give a positive role to women who will not put up with the status quo. One of the last published of her works was Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings (1992) which proves that she was an acute and startlingly original observer of the writings of others. Burning Your Boots (1995) is the most recently published collection of her short stories.

Death snarled at her before she could glean all that was there in her brain. Afflicted with cancer, she fought death with all her strength and all her courage. She fought
like the very devil, but in the end she lost. She died in London on 16 February, 1992. Just like her spirited heroines in her tales she was brave and uncomplaining in the illness that brought about her death. “After showing us how to write, after helping us to see how to live, she showed us how to die”, says Rushdie in his article, “Angela Carter, 1940-92; A Very Good Wizard, a Very Dear Friend” (par.2). With her death the literary world has been deprived of the magic that would heal.

Using her extensive narrative vocabulary and considerable gifts of language, Angela Carter takes her readers for a trip through a most interesting universe which is dangerous, edgy, sometimes baroque and often hilarious. Carter shows a Shaman’s ability to transport women to a land of freedom. It was rightly observed in Independent of 18th February, 1992:

[The] American critic Susan Suleiman has celebrated her fiction as truly breaking new ground for women, by occupying the male, modernist voice of narrative authority and at the same time impersonating it to the point of parody, so that the rules are changed and the dreams become unruly, transformed, open to a different future (Warner, par. 14).

In her novels there is a radical interrogation of the novel form and the assumptions which underlie it. Carter sees “immense cracks in the structure of the real world” (Several
Perceptions 3). Reality is too grim for a woman to live it. Therefore, she tries to evade it through magic, dreams and fantasies. Besides performing a ‘psycho-surgery’ on men, she is filled with an angry pity for suffering women. This anger is kept alive in her novels. At the same time she tries to show us “how glorious it is to be a woman” (Passion 152).

A close look at Carter's novels reveals her notable energy and unusual diversity of imagination. Her style emphasizes visual detail and imagery, often giving it a poetic effect. Though found wallowing in fantasies, dreams and mythologies, Carter carts us back from fancies to realities. Violence, mutilation, murder, rape, castration, cannibalism, incest and flagellation are found raw in her novels. A woman's speciality is suffering. Suffering is her vocation. Carter's imagination caters to the needs of suffering women. Angela Carter's women suffer exquisitely until suffering becomes demoded and then they “put themselves away tidily in a store-house of worn-out dreams” (Passion 8).

When her novels like Love, Several Perceptions, The Magic Toyshop, Wise Children and Shadow Dance keep themselves in a world of reality to a certain extent, novels like Heroes and Villains, The Passion of New Eve, The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman and Nights at the Circus are so far removed from reality that we almost feel that her characters dream their life instead of living it. In fact women do not live,
but only dream their life. In almost all her novels men are either told how women suffer or are made to experience their suffering. Her novels are all histories of tragic women. Many of them with all their strange and fabulous nature have one thing unique about them all - they have not experienced much happiness in their lives.

Carter's novels have drawn the attention of some critics recently. But still there exists only smatterings of Carter scattered in some articles published in certain feminist anthologies. Among the critics who have paid some attention to Carter's works are Patricia Duncker, Susanne Kappler and Robert Clark. Patricia Duncker concentrates on Carter's collection of stories and fairy tales. Robert Clark is unsure whether she is offering us a knowledge of patriarchy or simply repeating the 'self-alienation' which is the outcome of the patriarchal system. Still another critic Elaine Jordan pictures Angela Carter as a writer of contradictions, liable to be easily misunderstood by her readers. In her article, "The dangers of Angela Carter", Elaine Jordan argues that from the difficult position of being heterosexual and feminist she is trying to be radical (128).

In her work, (Un)Like Subjects: Women, theory, fiction, Gerardine Meaney analyses some of the novels of Angela Carter along with those of Doris Lessing and Muriel Spark. She is generally thought of as a spiritual writer who leads her readers into confusion. Her novels are serial and episodic,
not hierarchical and organic. It means that the whole significance of her novels cannot be found out from any sample, as it is possible in certain Romantic works.

Edmund White recognizes her as an exuberant writer who is too omnivorous to be able to stick to plain-fare narration. In an article entitled “Grand, buffoonish and tender” published in Times Literary Supplement on 7th June, 1991, Edmund White accords a grand reception to Carter’s new novel Wise Children saying that “some writer’s visions are mean, stinting, but Angela Carter’s is grand, buffoonish and tender” (22). Most of her novels sound buffoonish but on being analysed closely, they are grand, meaningful and real. Carter’s revelations through her novels are very often so stunning that the reader loses count and is left with the general giddiness. David Punter is another critic who read Carter and Russel Hoben together and classified both of them as important writers coming under the label of magic-realists-(Essential Imaginings 142-57). Paulina Palmer too in her beautiful article, “From ‘Coded Mannequin’ to bird women : Angela Carter’s Magic Flight” examines some of the pressing problems of the women’s world discussed by Carter in her novels and short stories (Women Reading Women’s Writing 179-201).

A few critical essays have also appeared on the internet. However these cannot claim to be exhaustive studies on the novels discussed. Maria Aline Salguerio Seabra Ferreira, Departamento de Línguas e Culturas, University of Aveiro,
Portugal has come out with a comparative reading of Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*. Arabella Clauson makes a study of the novel *Love* in her article, “Contradictions in Love and Angela Carter” published on 9th January, 1998. Brian Finney has published still another article “Tall Tales and Brief Lives: Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus” in 1998. Apart from these very little has been done to extract the essence of the novels of Angela Carter as a whole.

The present study attempts to analyse the novels of Angela Carter highlighting the feminist ideology embedded in them. It seeks to specify to what extent her feminist inclinations has lead her, and how far she is different from the other feminists of the time. She is not for creating mythical nonsenses to glorify women and then allow them to be subjugated by men, but to put an iron-heart and an iron-will into every woman. Her novels are meant to create a new body and soul for woman. She touches the very quintessence of feminism when she dwells elaborately on women’s construction and liberation. Carter’s novels project her comprehensive vision as to what a liberated woman of the future should be. It is worth exploring how Carter constructs even the minutest aspects of this New woman after sounding the death-knell of partmarchy which has reigned supreme to the detriment of women’s freedom. This is also an attempt to find out how far her unconventional ways of making her feminist
designs clear, puts her in the postmodern line. This study seeks to assess how far those aspects of postmodernism which are traced in Carter's novels are conducive to her feminist designs. In her attempt to articulate the aspirations of women she uses techniques and strategies that evince postmodern tendencies.

Apparently, “Feminism and postmodernism would seem to be strange bedfellows indeed” (Moi, *Feminism and Postmodernism* 368). Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality of women. It is a necessary resistance to patriarchal power. It typically invokes the condemnation of male attitudes towards men, charging that men have historically imposed their will on women, in order to convince the female population of some inherent inferiority. Postmodernism is concerned with de-naturalizing some of the dominant features of our way of life. It points out that entities like patriarchy that we unthinkingly experience are not ‘natural’ but only ‘cultural’. Postmodernism interrogates, evaluates, overturns and disrupts. Postmodernism is a reaction against modernity. Since women are a marginalised lot, feminism’s interest in women does not clash with postmodern interests. The exploration of ethnic minority and feminist perspectives is a significant element of postmodernism.

A constructive dialogue has been opened up between feminism and postmodernism. Postmodernism is engaged
in preparing the way for a successful feminism. Postmodernism and feminism are complementary. They sustain each other. The postmodern speciality of displacing the dominant discourse and the decanonicalization of existing conventions and authorities make it conducive to feminism. Even though it is not purely political in nature, it stands for the subversion of received hegemonies.

Postmodernism provides the feminists with new ways of expressing radical feminist thought. Reality is so chaotic that writers have to adopt a medium to express the realities of this world that are beyond the bounds of ordinary belief. This explains why feminists very often resort to fables and fantasies to expose the incongruities and contradictions between the social surfaces and the underlying reality.

Postmodernist fiction too entails a case against realism. It problematizes, transgresses, and disconfirms customary assurances and experiences thus establishing a break with probabilities through improbable and uncanny redefinitions radically discontinuous with reality, generating a "perturbation of our sense" (Nash 175). It is also pointed out that postmodern fiction is anti-realist not only at the level of content but also at the level of form. It dismantles our normal ways of reading. Postmodernist fiction carnivalizes the conventions or turns things topsy-turvy. Brian Mc Hale claims that postmodernist fiction is ontological (Postmodernist Fiction 9-10). By this
he means that the postmodernist imagination refuses the idea of a single world or defies the closure of a single, fixed mode of experience and expression and celebrates the play of millions of possibilities. It creates many worlds of sense and shape. When these different kinds of world are placed in confrontation or when boundaries between worlds are violated, several other possibilities and worlds are projected. Prominent postmodern narrative properties like fantasy, science fiction framework and motifs, intertextuality, parody, irony, stories within stories, improbabilities etc. aid feminist writers too in their search for new possibilities for women limited by the law of patriarchy.

Since the seventeenth century feminists have rallied against the tyranny of men, male power and male domination. When liberal feminists were merely satisfied with the aim of equal job opportunities and equal pay for women, radical feminists were engaged in more radical aspects of the women's movement such as critiques of male power, focus on sexual politics and women's community. Topics which radical feminist theorists explore include gender-role stereotyping, women's oppressed position in the family and work place; the political significance of lesbianism, critiques of male violence in terms of power evidenced in rape, male gaze and pornography.

Many of the excruciating problems in the contemporary world of women become the topics of discussion in Carter's
novels. Her very first novel *Shadow Dance* (1966) arrays a number of women who suffer in the hands of persistently unfaithful and uncaring husbands like Morris, Oscar, Henry Glass and Bruno. In *The Magic Toy Shop* (1967), the orphaned Melanie is ordained by fate to live and work like a puppet in a London shop kept by her uncle, the personification of patriarchy. Suspicion, guilt, cruelty, incestuous intrigue and imminent rape become her realities. Joseph, the protagonist of *Several Perceptions* (1968), experiences from several angles the sufferings of women and comes to the realisation that he himself is a persecutor of women and makes reparations. *Heroes and Villains* (1969), the last in her first spell of novels, exemplifies the social differences between men and women even in a post-apocalyptic world. This novel investigates the part played by ideology and force in maintaining a male-supremacist culture and explores the function of rape as a tool for subjugating women.

Carter's novel *Love* (1971) deals with the sinister feat of male impersonation and the penetrating aroma of unhappiness created among women. All the women in this novel are extremely unhappy. The only solace that they can envisage is to pretend that their bitterest of disappointment is just another dream. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) is one of her novels situated in the border area between science fiction and fantasy. It is the story of a war fought against the diabolic Dr. Hoffman who wanted to demolish the structures
of reason and liberate man from chains of reality. Angela Carter became an established feminist with her novel, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). In it she pictures how an arrogant man, stranded in the Arizona desert, encounters sophisticated Amazons who with their advanced technology change him in to a woman in order that he may experience rape and unwanted pregnancy and understand the implications of callous exploitation of women. *Nights at the Circus* (1984), incorporating analysis of feminist ideas tells the story of a larger-than-life female acrobat and trapeze artist with large bright wings. She is an image of female capacity, resourcefulness and wit and is popularly known as ‘Fevvers’ or ‘Cockney Venus’. From humble beginnings she rises to fame and glory and becomes the model of a liberated women. Her novel *Wise Children* (1991) tells the story of Dora and Nora, the illegitimate daughters of Sir Melchior Hazard, the greatest Shakespearean actor of the day, who never acknowledges these daughters until he reaches his hundredth birthday. Paternity is always questioned and maternity moves out of the realm of biological certainty.

Angela Carter’s novels prove beyond doubt that her crew “constituted a microcosm of humanity, ... an emblematic company, each signifying a different proposition in the great syllogism of life” (*Nights* 279). Women of all sorts dominate the community formed by Angela Carter. She also provides a museum of women monsters in her novels. But this vast
feminine world still remains unexplored as many of her critics and scholars concentrate more on her fairy tales and short stories than on her novels of such immense potential. When her short story collection like The Bloody Chamber drew the attention of notable writers like Jacques Barchilon, Stephen Benson, Katheleen E.B. Manley, Cheryl Renfroe, Danielle M. Roemer, Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, Elise Bruhl and Michael Gamer, her novels like Wise Children and Shadow Dance remain unattended and unexplored.

It is imperative that the feminist discourse presented by her in the novels as a whole is understood by looking at her novels collectively. Her achievement is to problematize the woman’s position in the family unit and by foregrounding the contradictions discernible in the relations between the sexes, she draws attention to the fissures and gaps in the structures and institutions of patriarchy. As Carter herself admits, amidst her magics and dreams there are “silences in which the unspoken hung like fog that got in your lungs and choked you” (Wise Children 169). Her characters too are a challenge to the colonization by patriarchy. In fact, through her novels, Angela Carter performs a ‘psycho-surgery’ on men similar to the one performed on Evelyn in The Passion of New Eve.

Since Carter’s novels are repositories of such a vast potential, this dissertation tries ot study her novel approach
to women and their scope for liberation from patriarchy. An earnest attempt has been made to trace the elements of feminism in her novels, and to examine whether her unconventional manner of speaking about women and their experience evidence any of the peculiarities of postmodernism.

Chapter two focuses on the feminist theme of construction of femininity. Carter breaks down the social constructs of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by creating her own model of a woman, bisexual in nature resuscitating herself from the condemned position of a 'sinful Eve' or 'ugly Eve' to the angelic excellence of a liberated 'New Eve'. It is a section that assesses to what degree Carter is able to make an imprint on the feminist movement.

In Chapter three, Carter's use of fantasies, dreams and fables to speak of women's experiences and aspirations are closely analysed and explained as postmodern trends. Her skilful use of magic realism to create an unreal world in which realities are better understood is seen as a postmodern technique to reveal the truths about patriarchy. Fabulous creatures, strange men and the magical world of circus and fairground are unconventionally used by Carter to present the pressing feminist problems of the day.

Chapter four makes it clear that Carter's interest in psychoanalysis in relation to her feminist objectives is a
postmodern feature. Feminism itself tends to privilege psychoanalytic perspectives, thereby revealing the female psychology. Hence the psychoanalytic elements underlying the relations between men and women and between women themselves are subjected to study in this chapter. Femininity is increasingly seen as the behavioural norm with masculinity regarded as an aberration or distortion. The various problems that form the terrain of psychoanalysis like bisexuality, lesbianism, dreams, fantasies, rape, incest, claustrophobia and psychosis are studied and the importance that Carter accords to these in her study of women is taken into account.

Chapter five elucidates the nebulousness of the frontiers created by the postmodern devices like intertextuality, parody, irony and ambivalence in attitude towards women. The 'in-betweenness' engendered by these strategies makes room for millions of possibilities for women's emancipation. The blurring of boundaries between man and woman, the oppressor and the oppressed, the observer and the observed, the civilized and the barbaric, the past and the present etc. goes a long way to prove that the challenging of male hegemony and a better understanding of a woman's position are made possible through postmodern narrative techniques.

Such a close analysis of Carter's novels gives us a comprehensive picture of the new woman designed by Carter. The concluding chapter establishes that she has rightly used the unconventional devices to the greatest advantage. Through
the use of 'other-world fantasies' and psychoanalytic insights she makes the New Woman more palatable to the prejudiced minds of men.

It remains to be said that the province of this study has been limited mainly to the novels of Angels Carter. Though her short stories provide better or more vivid examples of feminism and postmodernism, they do not form the field of present research. Still certain references to her stories and works like The Sadeian Woman-An Exercise in Cultural History cannot be avoided. But her novels by themselves provide sufficient evidence to show Carter's great interest in promoting women's emancipation.