Chapter 4

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman
(1972)

As stated in the introduction of this study, the 1970s and 1980s were the most creative and flourishing period of Angela Carter's literary career. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* was published in Great Britain by Rupert Hart – Davis in 1972 and in the United States of America by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., under the title *The War of Dreams* in 1973. This novel is founded on a strong and eclectic philosophical basis - Freudian psychoanalysis, De Sade's concept of sex, Alfred Jarry's science of imagery solutions - the pataphysics, Eric Satie's new perception of music, Magical Realism, Surrealism, Gothicism, Romanticism, Feminism, critical theory, postmodern miscellany and reappropriation and other branches of Continental philosophy.

The novel is a magical and satirical adventure, profoundly influenced by the picaresque tradition. Summarisation and classification of the novel becomes difficult and quagmireish on account of its diverse and rich texture. This book has been described as theoretical fiction, as it distinctly explores some of the theoretical and social issues of its time, particularly the counterculture, feminism, mass media, societal obsession with images and the schism between the rational from the irrational
which arises out of our desires). Ali Smith considers this novel as one of those landmarks in storytelling which represents its time, defines its generation and thus shapes modern Britain.

The title *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, immediately recalls E.T.A Hoffman, the German Romantic writer of fantasy and horror. The theme as well as the plot structure of the novel corresponds to that of Hoffman’s short story *The Sandman* (1816). In this short story, Professor Spalanzani, the scientist-father accidently creates desire through the creation of an automaton - daughter Olimpia, who incites Nathanael’s (the protagonist) madness. Carter’s Hoffman uses his daughter Albertina to produce desire which is challenged by Desiderio. The novel also brings to mind the name of Albert Hofmann, the Swiss scientist known for the synthesis of Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD-25); a chemical famous for inducing psychological effects and altered thinking process. The imagery employed by Carter seems very similar to those experienced by Albert Hofmann when he had accidently absorbed a small quantity of the LSD through his fingertips. To quote his words:

... affected by a remarkable restlessness, combined with a slight dizziness. At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicated-like condition, characterized by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed (I found the daylight to be unpleasantly glaring), I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colours. After some two hours this condition faded away. (Hofmann 15)
The story evolves in the form of Desiderio’s journey “through space and time, up a river, across a mountain, over the sea, through a forest” (Infernal 13) to reach the magician’s (Hoffman’s) castle. Carter’s description of Desiderio’s journey, follows the fantastical mode of writing of Homer, Swift and Carroll who used journey as a device to create a world of unbridled imagination. The introduction of the book summarises the entire novel as well as reveals the climax and the ending. The setting of the book is of an anonymous Latin American country. The protagonist is Desiderio - “the desired one” (54) which in Italian means wish, longing and desire, a name apt in context of the title and theme of the book. The novel is in the first person narrative, narrated from Desiderio’s perspective. Desiderio - now an old man, sets to write down his memories of “the Great war” (11) which had come to an end fifty years ago. The outcome of his labour is a picaresque tale of heroic adventure dedicated to his ladylove.

He was “the confidential secretary to the Minister of Determination” (12) in the main city, which was “under siege” (15) by Doctor Hoffman’s reality distorting machines. With the help of these machines Doctor Hoffman – “the diabolical” (11) adversary, enlarged the dimensions of time and space, allowing ever-changing mirages and illusion to dwell in the same dimension as the living which steered the city towards insanity. He was “waging a massive campaign against human reason itself” (11). Unlike Desiderio, many people had gone mad in reaction to the apparitions, and the city, severed from communication
with the outside world, became a place of widespread lunacy and crime, thus calling a state of emergency to be declared. Desiderio, leading an uninteresting life devoid of any passion, remains unaffected by these images. Though apathetic to these haunting phantoms, he is regularly visited every night by a woman “with flesh of glass” (Infernal 26), the manifestation of Albertina, Hoffman’s daughter and his prospective lover. One night, he dreams of a black swan, ugly yet marvellous, and with a look depicted as evil. Her swan song is described as “savage” - a “thrilling, erotic contralto” (31) and around her neck is a collar bearing the name, Albertina, who is to become the focal point of all Desiderio’s desire.

The first chapter, The City Under Siege describes in detail, the city before and after the siege and how and when things began to change. Readers are also given an insight into the family background and life of Dr Hoffman, who was some twenty years ago, a distinguished professor of physics at the university of P., but had suddenly vanished one day without leaving any trace. However, a few years later he started his experiments on the city in small ways. Also, noteworthy is the episode of the Minister’s rendezvous with the ambassador - Dr Hoffman’s special emissary. Desiderio, also accompanies the Minister to record the conversation which took place between the two. Later, under the decree of the Minister of Determination, Desiderio embarks on an expedition to find Hoffman. Thus begins the fantastical journey of Desiderio, in which he experiences a variety of pleasures and dangers. He finds himself involved in a number of
wild adventures featuring explicit scenes of eroticism that comprise sexual anathemas/taboos.

The second chapter of the novel, *The Mansion of Midnight* brings us to the first stop on Desiderio's journey. He encounters Doctor Hoffman's former physics professor who now worked as a blind peep-show proprietor. His visit to the sexualized exhibits of the peep-show present strange and grotesque images (of sexuality and death). He later discovered that the images of the peep-show, bore mysterious semblance to the events that had occurred within his own life. The exhibits of the peep-show were Doctor Hoffman's samples - his plan of action, which were an imperative part of his schemes. Desiderio's first destination is the Mayor's Office in town S., whose Mayor had disappeared. At the Mayor's home he fornicates with the Mayor's "beautiful somnambulist" (*Infernal* 48) daughter, Mary Anne (symbolic of the mad and drowning Ophelia) while she was in her sleep. When Mary Anne mysteriously turns up dead, Desiderio is charged for her murder; however, he succeeds to escape albeit with a bullet wound.

The chapter, *The River People*, shows Desiderio being saved by an Amerindian family that lives on barges and "sailed from ports to cities to ports as heedlessly as if the waterways were magic carpets of indifference" (70) and speak "a liquid and melodious language" (66). With these river people, he shares a common Indian background and almost marries Nao-Kurai's daughter. While he indulges in "elaborate love play" (85) with his would-be-child bride he also gets physically involved with the girl's
grandmother. The night before the wedding is scheduled, he begins to suspect them of intending to eat him (as they believed in old myths about the transfer of knowledge through anthropophagy) and thus runs away.

The fourth chapter, *The Acrobats of Desire* shows his return to the seaside town, where he joins the travelling show with the old professor, serving as his apprentice. He makes friends with a number of other performers and learns from the professor about Hoffman's past and the metaphysics behind the doctor's samples. But these blissful times too end with the arrival of nine Moroccan acrobats. They initially enthrall Desiderio with their astonishing performance but later rape him. Subsequently, a landslide accompanied with rain and wind destroys everything - the whole town, the blind philosopher, the circus carnival and the peep-show samples of Doctor Hoffman – “the greatest single weapon in his armoury” (*Infernal* 120), leaving Desiderio as the only survivor. The force of nature is shown to be so strong and so primal that all of Hoffmanian potential fall short of conquering it.

Shortly afterwards, he meets the megalomaniacal Lithuanian Count, who takes him into his company. The count is one of the most interesting characters in the novel and is clearly influenced by the Marquis de Sade. The Count believed himself to be an act of negation, “a blasphemous libertine” and “a blood-thirsty debauchee” (126). He is on the run from a black pimp who was chasing him on account of the murder of a prostitute in New Orleans. But in reality, the pimp is his dark half, a being willed in reality as a form of self-abuse. In their travels together the
Count wanting to indulge his baser instincts, goes to a brothel called the “House of Anonymity”. There in a room of inhuman whores that seem as much animal as they are human, Desiderio meets Albertina disguised as one of the whores. From this point onward, Albertina uses her father’s machines to travel with Desiderio, first as the Count’s servant Lafleur and later as herself. Attempting to flee the pimp by sailing to Europe, the three end up being captured by pirates. In the chapter, *The Coast of Africa* they encounter the Count’s nemesis, this time as the chief of an African tribe. Desiderio, narrowly escapes becoming the victim of cannibalism while the Count meets his end being boiled in a pot by the cannibal chieftain. Desiderio continues his journey with Albertina (who has now revealed herself) into the nebulous time.

In *Lost in Nebulous Time*, they meet a strange and religiously rigid race of centaurs. The chapter brings to mind Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and appears to be Carter’s most palpable homage to Swift. On the first night of their arrival Albertina is raped by the males of the town and Desiderio by the females. When the centaurs discover that Albertina is Desiderio’s mate, they punish themselves (as self-flagellation was an essential aspect of their religion). Desiderio and Albertina spend some time as part of this society until they learn that their life is endangered yet again; for the centaurs intended to put them through a religious ceremony that would eventually kill them. Albertina sets fire to the area around them by her will power and summons one of her father’s helicopters to carry them to his castle.
At Hoffman's castle, the Doctor explains his plans to reduce the world into its most basic constituents. Desiderio learns that Hoffman used the "Eroto-energy" (Infernal 206) produced by 50 copulating couples for his war against reality. He wanted to exploit Desiderio and Albertina for the same energy to propel the omnipotent desire machine. Though Desiderio loved Albertina, he ultimately chooses reality over the fulfilment of his desire when he kills both Doctor Hoffman and his daughter. As a result, Desiderio becomes the proclaimed hero of “the Great War” (11). Nevertheless, he continues to long for his dead lover. He could not renounce his own reality because he was jaded by the complexity of the “tumultuous and kinetic times” (11), and like the Minister, had an appreciation for “statis” and therefore desired for the anarchy to stop. He was also guided by his belief that “some things were necessarily impossible” (12).

Carter begins her novel with three perceptive and weighty epigraphs, one in French by Robert Desnos, one by Ludwig Wittgenstein and one by Alfred Jarry whose play Ubu Roi (1896) is often cited as a precursor to the surrealist theatre of the 1920s and 1930s. These quotes recapitulate the novelist’s involvement with the imaginative and the fantastical, highlight her ideological and aesthetic purpose and underline the themes dealt within the book.

This novel can rightly be labelled as an embodiment of Magic Realism. The magical effect is created with the aid of Carter’s exalted imagination and the power of her vision which is remarkable. The novelist
like a true magic realist merges both a careful observation of the real and the power of imagination to construct that reality. She begins the narrative with a realist description of the “solid”, “drab” (*Infernal* 15) and mundane city. The city built on a tidal river was populated with blacks, browns and Orientals. Though it was a rich and prosperous city which thrived on business yet parts of it were ugly due to the “picturesque squalor” (16) widespread in those parts. It had some notable buildings dating back to the colonial period like the Cathedral, the Opera House and several stone memorials. The realist description of the city is followed by the detailed account of its “phantasmagoric redefinition” (18) which was the outcome of Doctor Hoffman’s desire machines.

Life in the city is marked by weird and bizarre happenings and a “tempest of fantasy” (31). Sugar began to taste a little salty; a door which was always blue turned green; on one occasion the audience in the Opera house enjoying the performance of *The Magic Flute* turned to peacocks – “everyone in the gallery was wearing a green skull cap and behind each spectator stirred an incandescent, feathered fan” (17); every mind was filled with hallucinations; ministers at a meeting vomited throughout the proceedings; the Chancellor of the Exchequer was washed overboard; “cloud palaces erected themselves then silently toppled”(18); chanting pillars exploded in middle of a hymn which metamorphosed into street lamps and later into flowers at night. These are some very initial instances of the “disruptive coup” (17) of Dr Hoffman which seized the city and its inhabitants in a “feverish delirium” (18) and “orgiastic panic” (17). The
city "became the arbitrary realm of dream" (*Infernal* 18). The siege reaches its point of culmination when typhoid and cholera take a heavy toll and statistics of burglary, arson, robbery, violence, rape and suicide rise to "astronomical heights" (21). The city in unrest knows no segregation between the state of waking and sleeping and becomes a phantasmagoria – of bizarre images becoming real:

Dead children came calling in nightgowns, rubbing the sleep and grave dust from their eyes . . . pigeons lolloped from illusory pediment to window ledges like volatile, feathered madmen, chattering vile rhymes and laughing in hoarse, throaty voices, or perched upon chimney stacks shouting quotations from Hegel . . . I often glanced at my watch only to find its hands had been replaced by a healthy growth of ivy or honeysuckle which while I looked, writhed impudently all over its face, concealing it. (19-21)

Carter in such passages provides outstandingly engaging fantastic and dreamlike images. People either awake or asleep, see phantoms of "dead children" and "abandoned lovers" (19). The images of Dr Hoffman's desire machines were so rampant that "there was no longer any way of guessing what one would see when one would open one's eyes in the morning for other people's dreams insidiously invaded the bedroom while one slept" (19). The widespread images obliterate the margins of the real and the fantastical.

Desiderio is also troubled by the constant hallucinations which occur as he is on the threshold of sleep:
... I would be visited by a young woman in a négligé made of fabric the colour and texture of the petals of poppies which clung about her but did not conceal her quite transparent flesh, so the exquisite filigree of her skeleton was revealed quite clearly... She did not speak; she did not smile. Except for those faint quiverings of her imaginable substance, she did not move...

... occasionally she left an imperative written in lipstick on my dusty windowpane...

BE AMOROUS!... BE MYSTERIOUS!... DON'T THINK LOOK;... WHEN YOU BEGIN TO THINK, YOU LOSE THE POINT. (Infernal 25-26)

The meeting of the Minister with Dr Hoffman’s emissary is suffused with Magic Realism. The moment the emissary entered the restaurant where the meeting was scheduled, the lights fused - “A dozen tiny fireflies clicked into life at the nozzle of a dozen cigarette lighters” (32). The flames of the candlesticks (brought in by the waiters) moved by the breeze that “seemed to play about him” (32). There was something magical and mysterious about his beauty, his “reptilian liquidity”, his movement like “soft coils” and his “ambiguous sophistication” (32) that leave the Minister and Desiderio nervous and uneasy. The negotiations fail as the minister refused to be bought by the agent’s offer. This meeting echoes Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus where the protagonist sells his soul to the devil for knowledge and power. The envoy is symbolic of
Mephistopheles (the representative of the Devil) who had come to bargain for Doctor Faustus' soul. After the agent leaves, the Minister says:

‘If I were a religious man, Desiderio,’ . . . ‘I would say we just survived an encounter with Mephistopheles.’ (*Infernal* 38)

Carter has employed the "Kafkaesque" image of metamorphosis in the novel, which is an important machinery employed by various magic realist writers. The most remarkable example of metamorphosis in the novel is the character of Albertina who appears to Desiderio in “a series of marvellous shapes formed at random in the kaleidoscope of desire” (13). The change and metamorphosis the city was going through provides a suitable backdrop for the physical transformation of Albertina. She appears to Desiderio in various forms: as a “curious, persistent hallucination” (25) of a young woman; as the male emissary of Dr Hoffman; as the dead Mayor’s adolescent daughter - Mary Anne; as one of the metamorphosing girls in the “House of Anonymity”; as the count’s valet Lafleur and finally as a hermaphrodite at Hoffman's castle. The various fantastic images of Albertina add to the magical texture of the narrative by transgressing the boundaries between the real and the magical. These transformations also lay emphasis on the idea of the constant and all-encompassing change. The shifting portrayal and metamorphosis of Albertina from a woman to man and vice-versa also becomes a vehicle for transgressing the boundaries of gender roles. Carter
has employed the mode to deconstruct and to demythologise patriarchal
and cultural codes.

A very prominent characteristic of Magic Realism is the
carnivalesque. The travelling fair, peopled by bizarre and grotesque
characters described in the chapter *The Acrobats of Desire* is the re-
creation of the carnivalesque by Carter. Desiderio meets these characters
while he worked as an assistant to the peep-show proprietor. Madame de
la Barbe, the bearded woman or the “Bearded Bride” (*Infernal* 106) is the
“immensely handsome, widely travelled and the loneliest woman in the
world” (105). She is “penetrated” (106) by the onlooker’s eyes on account
of her personality which is a juxtaposition of a beard and a bosom along
with exceptionally maternal instincts. Another weird figure is of Mamie
Buckskin – the “sharp-shooter” who “was a paradox: a fully phallic female
with the bosom of a nursing mother and a gun, death dealing erectile
tissue, perpetually at her thigh” (108). Then there is the Alligator Man
who “suffered from no human feelings” (111). In the travelling fair he
performs as a man standing in a glass water tank up to his neck. He
cannot bear the sunlight and has “shivering fits if he is out of the water for
more than two or three hours” (111). Carter also presents a team of nine
Moroccan acrobats who join the travelling carnival. The acrobats “shared
a similar, almost female sinuosity of spine and marked development of the
pectora.ls” (112). They appeared as artificial “plastic anagrams” that
“negated physicality” (113). Their mindboggling performance leaves
Desiderio awestruck:
To enter their circular arena was to step directly into the realm of the marvellous. To the weird music of a flute played by a veiled child, they created all the images that the human body could possibly make – an abstract, geometrical dissection of flesh that left me breathless. (113)

They took their heads off their neck with unparalleled skill and grace and juggled with them “so that a fountain of heads rose and fell in the arena” (Infernal 113). This was followed by the dismemberment and juggling of other parts of their body one after the other to be finally joined by “eighteen fringed, unblinking eyes” (114).

Carter reveals a set of characters who challenge the standard patriarchal character formation. Madame de la Barbe and Madame Buckskin – figures containing both feminine and masculine features are used by her to subvert the ideals of femininity constructed by patriarchy. The Alligator man, who was sold by his father to a travelling showman at the age of twelve, grows outside the patriarchal family structure and thus builds an identity of his own. The reflection of the disintegrating bodies of the acrobats in the mirror not only multiplies them but also heightens and increases the sense of the magical. The magical images of disintegration suggest a yearning for the desires which are denied existence by the cultural system. Carter by resorting to the carnivalesque:

... supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extra ordinary or “magical” as viable a possibility as the ordinary or “real” so that no
true distinction is perceived or acknowledged
between the two. (Danow 3)

Carter has also introduced the concept of hybridity in the novel which is an important characteristic employed by a number of magic realist writers. In the chapter, *Lost in Nebulous Time*, Desiderio and Albertina meet a bizarre race of centaurs. In Classical Mythology, Centaurs were a race of monsters having the head, trunk, and arms of a man, and the body and legs of a horse. Apart from the detailed description of the main city, Carter also introduces the readers to other cultures and societies like the African tribe, the race of centaurs, the bestial whores in the “House of Anonymity” and the eccentric assortment of characters who make up the travelling fair. The juxtaposition of these inharmonious groups of people within the narrative lends a magical quality to it.

As stated earlier, criticism of the society is often an inherent aspect of Magic Realism. The fantastic and magical in Carter's novel becomes a critique of social and cultural practices. The magical in Carter is always linked to the real. Critics and readers should attend to the real through allegorical and metaphorical readings. From this perspective *Desire Machine* can also be regarded as a didactic work written in the magical form. The following lines from “Notes from the Front Line” make it clear that the novelist should not be ghettoized as solely fantastical:

I became mildly irritated (I'm sorry) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the 'mythic quality' of work I've written lately. Because I believe that all myths are products of
the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business.

_The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman_ (1972) also represents the pinnacle of Carter's research and experimentation with Surrealism. Carter's essay "The Alchemy of the Word" is a testimony of her initial enchantment with Surrealism and also states the rationale behind her decision to give it up later. She writes:

Surrealist beauty is convulsive. That is, you feel it, you don't see it - it exists as an excitation of the nerves. The experience of the beautiful is, like the experience of desire, an abandonment to vertigo, yet the beautiful does not exist as such. What do exist are images or objects that are enigmatic, marvellously erotic - or juxtapositions of objects, or people, or ideas, that arbitrarily extend our notion of the connections it is possible to make. In a way, the beautiful is put at the service of liberty.

(73)

The novel brilliantly captures the thoughts and principles of Surrealism. Viewed from the surrealist perspective, Dr Hoffman is a pertinent reincarnation of Breton (the fountainhead of the surrealist movement) and his attacks on the city appears to be philosophically associated with the ideal of Breton that "Man must be in permanent revolt against limits of all kinds . . . [to] transform the world" (Caws 73). The book gives us a vague insight into Desiderio's background of which much is left unsaid. We are told that he is "the fatherless son of a known prostitute of Indian extraction" (_Infernal_ 62) and the nuns took care of
him after his mother's death. The vagueness of Desiderio's past actually suits the novel's purpose – in keeping with the surrealist argument that only the present state of mind, awareness and response, is essential. Hoffman's ideals are synonymous to those of the surrealist revolution. His agent had come to strike a deal with the Minister and find out the price at which Hoffman could buy him. The minister's allegation and interrogation about the changing city and the chaos which comes with it, elicits the response “for the sake of liberty” from the ambassador. An answer that resonates with Carter's belief and statement of “beauty in the service of liberty.”

The surrealists were profoundly influenced by Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis. This book is open to psychoanalytic analysis primarily for the dream interpretation and secondly for the focus on sexual desire and phallic images. The Count who had devoted his “life to the humiliation and exaltation of the flesh” (Infernal 126) is the most suitable subject for this analysis. His ultimate aim is to attain his desire without any thought of the outcome: “I set my course by the fitfulness of fortune and perceive my random signposts only by the inextinguishable flame of my lust” (123). He represents the id, or the unrestrained sexual desire which according to Freud, human-beings try to repress and restrain throughout their life. Apart from this, the numerous phallic images are also open to psychoanalytic interpretation. The most arresting example of this is the bizarre costume Desiderio and the Count dress themselves in at “the House of Anonymity” which obliterates their faces and expressions
but disgustingly highlights their phallus. Carter seems to mock the sense of power that is associated with the phallus in most cultures. The exhibits of the peep-show proprietor which were marked by bizarre, horrific and erotic quality share strong resemblance to the surreal paintings of Salvador Dali.

The journey of the surrealist adventure eventually brings Desiderio to Hoffman's castle. The rejection of his desires in the form of Doctor Hoffman's sexually ambivalent daughter Albertina, helps him restore reality but first he has to kill both the doctor and his beloved. Nevertheless, his lament and regret is evident from the following statement:

... I am so old and sad now, and, without her, condemned to live in a drab, colourless world, as though I were living in a faded daguerreotype. Therefore - I, Desiderio, dedicate all my memories to Albertina Hoffman with my insatiable tears. (Infernal 14)

Rejection of the imagination is evident in Desiderio's choice of reality over unreality. This also leads us to the conclusion that Carter had ultimately, rejected chaos, unreality and Surrealism. Carter in “The Alchemy of the Word” states the reason for giving up Surrealism:

... although I thought [the surrealists] were wonderful, I had to give them up in the end. They were, with a few patronized exceptions, all men and they told me that I was the source of all mystery, beauty, and otherness, because I was a woman – and I knew that was not true. I
knew I wanted my fair share of the imagination, too. Not an excessive amount, mind; I wasn't greedy. Just an equal share in the right to vision. (73)

But as stated earlier, her imagination is linked to the real and is a vehicle used for the manifestation of the real world and deals with the significant literary issues of her times. In *The Infernal Desire Machines*, the most significant aspect dealt is the universal struggle between the rational and the irrational or in Freudian terms, the struggle between the ego and the id or the reality principle and the pleasure principle. Desiderio's mind is a battleground where the conflict between logic and desire is constantly going on. He is fascinated as well as in love with Albertina but eventually he kills her - the fountainhead of his desire, thus emphasizing the triumph of logic and rationality. The novel not only revolves around the two conflicting characters of Desiderio and Dr Hoffman but also two rival realms of existence and two different meanings of truth. Dr Hoffman commits himself to subvert all that is guided by reason and illumination in the world of Desiderio by destroying the equilibrium and violating the spatial and chronological pattern. He endeavours to construct a civilization without the manacles and structures of rationality.

Doctor Hoffman's desire machine is analogous to the mass media of the modern world. Television, internet, magazines and newspapers continually and persistently affect people's life - their thoughts, emotions and beliefs. The images depicted by media are not always true and can be
sheer illusions. Thus, the modern man is also doomed to face a plight similar to that of Desiderio; how should mundane realities of our everyday life contend with the fantasies of our desires? He is in a constant battle to refrain himself from surrendering to the totality of images, and to distinguish between the genuine and fake/true and false.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is replete with Gothic elements. The narrative combines elements of both horror and romance and features both physical as well as psychological terror. Magicians, femme fatales, supernatural, ghosts, devils, death, decay, madness - intrinsic to the Gothic Tradition are close at hand. Readers of Gothic fiction pass from the logical order of everyday life into a sinister region governed by supernatural beings that inspires dread and horror. Dr Hoffman is the very embodiment of this movement. He is against everything that is guided by reason and rationality. He is the magician, the antagonist and the diabolical adversary, who with the assistance of the Desire Machines, transforms the city bustling with life and promise into an abode of evil - ghosts, apparitions, mirages, madness, death and decay.

Albertina - the name not only reminds us of Marcel Proust’s Albertine from *In Search of Lost Time* who enslaves Marcel but her character is also the incarnation of the Gothic femme fatale. She is the mysterious and seductive enchantress who entangles her lover - Desiderio, in bonds of irresistible desire, leading him into dangerous and deadly situations. She uses all her feminine beauty, charm and sexuality to become the centre of his desires. If Desiderio signifies all things real and
rational, Albertina - an advocate of her father’s ideas, plans and actions, stands for the unreal and the irrational. She also symbolizes all that is latent in Desiderio, particularly his desires and thus serves as his ‘other’.

*The Mansion of Midnight* - “run down” and “forsaken” with “weeds . . . rooted in the gaps between the mossy tiles” surrounded by a garden “sunk in the neglect of years” (*Infernal* 50-51) and “wilderness” (55) is a traditional Gothic setting. The Gothic atmosphere of the mansion is aggravated by the presence of the Mayor’s “beautiful somnambulist” (56) daughter – Mary Anne who played “Debussy” and “Erik Satie” on the piano by candlelight which echoed amidst the ruins. She is a “slender”, “forlorn”, “desperate” and “pathetic” (53) apparition like being who heightens the eeriness of the place:

She did not look as if blood flowed through her veins but instead some other, less emphatic fluid infinitely less red. Her mouth was barely touched with palest pink . . . there was no tinge of any pink at all on her cheeks . . . she was almost hidden in her dress and her tiny face . . . looked even smaller . . . because of a disordered profusion of hair streaming down as straight as if she had just been plucked from the river . . . her hair and dress were stuck all over with twigs and petals from the garden. She looked like drowning Ophelia. (53)

In the chapter, *The Erotic Traveller*, Desiderio is initiated into the world of desires and sexual extremities by the Count who takes him to a Gothic brothel. The “House of Anonymity” was “a massive, sprawling edifice in the Gothic style of the late nineteenth century . . . built in louring
red brick” (129) and possessing a series of dark, gloomy and sinister corridors. The house was inhabited by strange and bizarre girls, locked up in cages and who “towered above us [them] like the goddesses of some forgotten theogeny” (132). These girls did not belong to the realm of humanity as they were “sinister, abdominal, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute.”

Carter conjures the Gothic past with the description of the tribe which Desiderio encounters on *The Coast of Africa*. The men and women of the tribe were of large built, dressed in long robes of coloured cotton and necklace of dried beans. “Their faces and chests were whorled and cicatrized with tribal marks, knife cuts discoloured because white clay had been rubbed into them” (Infernal 155). The barbaric/savage tribe comes alive with the description of their tribal chief and his cave “an arcade of human skeletons” (159); their ancient weapons, brass trumpets, hand drums, and furniture made of human bones and decorated with shells and feathers. The naked centaurs are yet another Gothic aspect in the novel. They with intricate tattoo work on their bodies “looked like Greek masterpieces” (172). They lived in “enormous stables”, indulged in “impassioned recital of their mythic past” (174), prayed at their “Holly Hill” (175) which was a dungheap and had “a deeply masochistic streak” (180).

Dr Hoffman’s “Wagnerian castle” (196) and “sumptuous country estate” (198) with battlements is an enchanted land of captivating beauty. It stands in “picaresque decay” against the edge of a cliff and to reach it, a
chasm - deep and wide has to be crossed with the aid of a fragile and narrow bridge. The grove around the castle is an arcadian world of fruits, flowers, birds, squirrels, rabbits and deer. However, on closer inspection, this “romantic memory in stone” (196) is a place - sinister, strange, menacing, “thick with dust and most satisfactory cobwebs” (Infernal 205) and houses the mad-magician, the corpse of his dead wife and the Desire Machines.

In the novel, the most potent manifestation of barbarity of both past and present is the depiction of violence in its diverse forms - domestic, political and sexual - murder, assassination, war, rape. The book is replete with horrific images which are a product of the all powerful Desire Machine - a vehicle Carter has employed to gratify her Gothic penchant as well as her surrealist cravings. There are explicit references to death and torture and “portrayal of extreme situations, mostly situations of terror” (Punter 8). Desiderio’s rape by the nine acrobats of desire is an epitome of physical as well as psychological terror:

I was trapped. I could not move. I was filled with impotent rage as the wave of eyes broke over me.

The pain was terrible. I was most intimately ravaged I do not know how many times. I wept, bled, slobbered and pleaded but nothing would appease a rapacity as remorseless and indifferent as the storm which raged outside and now reached a nightmarish hurricane. They stretched me on my face on a counterpane of pale orange artificial silk and
took it in turns to pin down my arms and legs.
(*Infernal* 117)

Desiderio and Albertina go through a similar kind of terror – “pain and indignity of rape” (179) in the land of the centaurs. The experience which is awfully excruciating and annihilating, almost kills Albertina and leaves Desiderio painfully agitated. Even in the world of images, rape culture prevails, but in spite of this, Carter does not depict Albertina as a victim. Even the dreadful act cannot deprive her of her strength, beauty and desire - which is a quintessential trait of the Cartarian female protagonist. This “undesirable desire” portrays her female character as both powerful and resilient, corresponding to her feminist views. Another macabre scene is the cannibalistic and ritualistic act of the African tribe, showing the count being ceremoniously cooked alive in a cauldron.

Desiderio's covert sexual relationship with Aoi’s (the girl he was intimidated to marry) Grandma has incestuous overtones (a Gothic theme). He is shown to have no inhibition in yielding to his sexual desires throughout the novel. The rape of the sleeping Mary Anne, the continuous sexual play with the nine year old Aoi, the regular sex with mama, all give Desiderio a sense of power and authority over the women he interacts with. The instances of paedophilia and rape come to the foreground as he uses his sexuality. This assertion of masculine-supremacy through sex is inverted on Desiderio when he himself becomes an object of desire and is repeatedly raped by the Acrobats of Desire. The incident robs him of his masculine power. The sexual theme throughout the book has not only
Gothic undertones but posits a play with gender roles and suggests that sexual desire is all pervasive and dominant.

The killing of Dr Hoffman and Albertina by Desiderio at the end of the story, establishes the triumph of good over evil which is a central Gothic motif. Desiderio symbolises virtue as he chooses “the common good” over his own desire and love for Albertina. Gothic literature often relies heavily on the disturbing power of the unseen, and dwells into the primitive and the psychological to create terror by manipulating the undercurrents of the civilized mind. The exhibits of the peep-show proprietor are symbolic of the omens, portents and visions which are an integral part of the Gothic tradition. The exhibits are a clear indication of what awaits Desiderio on his journey, but he realizes this only later.

In addition to the above mentioned Gothic elements in the novel, the language, vocabulary and description used by the writer also play a significant role in creating the Gothic atmosphere. “Gothic is not merely a literary convention or a set of motifs; it is a language, [and] often an anti-historicizing language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present” (Sage 1). The words “horror”, “horrid”, “corpse”, “infernal”, “diabolical”, “phantoms”, “ghosts”, “talisman” etc., add to the Gothic fervour of the novel. Gothic writing is very sensual as it evokes images, smells, tastes, textures and sounds in order to make the experience come alive to the reader.
The novel is the wildest of Carter's writings; the verbal feast and vivid imagery is served by the writer's inexhaustible imagination. Endless array of tools - eroticism, picaresque, Surrealism and humour - all collaborate to produce a book par excellence. Parts of the book read like a lesson in science. Carter's imagination and the use of diverse techniques lend to the novel a wide variety of themes and characters. The Magic Realist, Surrealist and Gothic mode of writing, posit the themes of the novel in a significant manner: the constant struggle between Rationality and Desire, the changing gender roles in the society and the search for true identity which are central to all the adventures that Desiderio undertakes.
Works Cited


