Chapter 5

Nights at the Circus (1984)

*Nights at the Circus* - Angela Carter’s penultimate novel was first published in 1984. The same year it won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction. The “polyphonic nature” and theoretical orientation of the novel makes it complex to read and analyse. The novel is a bizarre and cerebral fusion of storytelling and philosophy. It integrates manifold categories of fiction like postmodernism, Magical Realism and post feminism. In this carnivalesque and vibrant narrative, Carter juggles with many ideas (the modern world, freedom, gender, love), literary aspects and analyses the traditional structure of the fairy tale. The book is a story composed of many sub-stories, several episodes and a variety of characters, all having something to say; thus making it as much a celebration of storytelling as it is of language. Carter seems to possess a passion for stories and they, in her hands, become an end in themselves and not just a means to explore a theme.

*Nights at the Circus*, takes the readers along with Colonel Kearney’s circus on its Grand Imperial Tour over Europe and Asia. The novel is written in the style of a classic three act play, including a short Envoi which functions as an epilogue and is extremely theatrical in style, content and structure. The story is divided into three parts, titled - *London, Petersburg* and *Siberia*. The magical journey begins in the year
1899 “the fag-end, smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century” (Nights 11) from London and moves on to Petersburg and then Siberia, where the characters are marooned for the rest of the novel. While in London, the setting is chiefly Fevvers' dressing room above the Alhambra Music Hall but the action that takes place in Fevvers' memoir, covers much of London and its vicinity. In Petersburg, the action takes place in three major locations: Clown Alley, Fevvers' hotel room, and the circus itself. The final section begins with the whole circus on a train crossing the Siberian wilds separating Europe and Asia, but the main action and conclusion of the story takes place in the freezing wintry forests of Transbaikalia.

The novel begins with Jack Walser - a young American reporter questioning Fevvers “for a series of interview tentatively entitled: “Great Humbugs of the world” (11). The interview takes place in her London dressing room “a masterpiece of exquisitely feminine squalor” (9) after her performance in the circus. The winged woman and her constant companion and caretaker Lizzie, take on the task of detailing her story of life – a tale of many struggles and few moments of joy. “Lor’ love you, sir!” (7) Fevvers exclaims, and goes on to narrate the circumstances of her birth and upbringing. She recounts that she was found in a basket at the doorstep of a brothel; that she was not born but (like Helen of Troy) hatched:

And she who found me on the steps at Wapping, me in the laundry basket in which
persons unknown left me, a little babe most lovingly packed up in new straw sweetly sleeping among a litter of broken eggshells, she who stumbled over this poor, abandoned creature clasped me that moment in her arms out of the abundant goodness of her heart and took me in. (Nights 12)

As a child, Fewvers explains, she was like all other children except for the raised lump on each shoulder and posed as a living statue of Cupid in the drawing room of the brothel with a “wreath of pink cotton roses” (23) and “toy bow and arrow.” But when she approached puberty, the “feathered appendages” (24) began to swell and at the age of fourteen she sprouted wings; thereafter Fewvers started posing as the “Winged Victory” (25). Under Lizzie’s (the housekeeper of the brothel) supervision, she began taking lessons in flying. However, this phase of Fewvers’ life comes to a sudden end when Ma Nelson – the head of the brothel slips on Whitechapel high street and falls in the path of a carriage and dies. As Ma Nelson had not left a will, “all her estate went by due process of law” (44) to her surviving elder brother who intended to make the house a hostel for fallen girls. The inmates of the house comply with the orders of the court but to be ousted from the place which had been their home, fills them with anger. Out of resentment they set fire to the house before parting ways. Fewvers expresses the feelings of the inmates thus:

'We girls stood on the lawn and the morning wind off the river whipped our skirts about us. We shivered, from the cold, from anxiety, from sorrow at the end of one part of our lives and the exhilaration of our new beginnings. When
the fire had fairly taken hold, off we went, . . .
(Nights 50)

Thus, Fevvers and Lizzie now without shelter and work move in with Lizzie’s sister and help her to run the family ice-cream parlour. However, when the family falls upon bad times and face financial adversity, Fevvers moves out. She accepts an invitation from the formidable Madame Schreck, who puts her as an exhibit in her unique freak show (and brothel) along with numerous other women with distinctive appearances. Sometime later, Madame Schreck sells her to an influential client - Christian Rosencreutz, who desired to sacrifice a winged virgo intacta in order to attain immortality. Using her “gilded sword” for self-defence and ability to fly, Fevvers makes a narrow escape and returns to Lizzie’s sister’s home. Soon, she gets an opportunity to join Colonel Kearney’s circus as an aerialiste and thus begins her life of success and wide fame.

In course of the interview with Fevvers and her stepmother-come-mentor, the terse, magically gifted Liz, Walser is told the story of Fevvers life - a fantastic, mythic tale that stretches his imagination beyond the bounds of credibility and leaves him wonder-struck and hypnotized. Fevvers and Walser’s first encounter is subtly combative and confrontational. Both are intrigued by the other. Walser is sceptical as well as confused and finds it difficult to believe the winged aerialiste and her fantastical tales. He is intent on revealing Fevvers as a hoax – a fraud, yet he is fascinated by her. The London section closes with Walser telling
his chief in the London office that he is going to follow Fewvers – the "Cockney Venus" (*Nights 7*), by signing up on Captain Kearney's Grand Imperial Tour of circus:

I don't think you realise how much I'd like a break from hard news chief... keep me away from the battlefield for a while! I need to be refreshed. I need to have my sense of wonder polished up again. What would you say to a series of inside stories of the exotic, of the marvellous, of laughter and tears and thrills and all? What if, of incognito, your correspondent follows the great confidence artiste in the history of the world to the world's most fabulous cities? Through the trackless wastes of Siberia and then... even unto the Land of the Rising Sun? (90)

The next section of the book is titled *Petersburg*, since this "city built of hubris, imagination and desire" (97) is its setting and locale. The section depicts Walser, living in Clown Alley, typing his first impressions of the city. We are informed of Fewvers and Walser being engaged by Colonel Kearney's Circus for their Grand Imperial Tour of Russia and Japan (to be followed by their Great Democratic Tour of the United States). Colonel Kearney after due consultation with his extraordinary pig Sybil has employed Walser as a clown in the circus. At this juncture the readers are introduced to the other members of the circus – a rather incredible, colourful and amusing lot.

The chaotic world of the circus is encapsulated in this section of the novel by a series of extraordinary, bizarre, incredible and absurd
happenings. Walser saves Mignon - "Ape-Man's woman" (109) from being attacked by a tiger. Later he sneaks out of the circus to find Mignon, forsaken by both her husband and lover (Samson the Strong Man). He takes her to Fevvers' hotel room for help, who presumes Walser to be in a relationship with Mignon. Though overcome with jealousy she does take care of Mignon. On discovering the beauty of her singing voice, she introduces her to the Princess of Abyssinia - a silent tiger tamer. The princess includes Mignon into her act with the dancing cats and Walser is enlisted as an associate. The Colonel unwillingly fires the Charivari family of "high wire dancers" (Nights 158) from the circus as they out of animosity had plotted to kill Fevvers' during the band rehearsal. The Educated Apes break their contract and depart. Buffo the Great drinks to oblivion, loses his mind during that night's act and tries to slaughter Walser. The Princess is forced to shoot one of her tigresses who attacks Mignon for dancing with her tiger mate during the tiger waltz.

"After the dizzy triumph of the Grand Gala opening" (173) Fevvers receives numerous invitations for solo performances and suppers, of which she accepts only that of the Grand Duke. After her final performance at Petersburg, she goes to the palace for her date with the Grand Duke where she nearly succumbs to his ardent advances but manages to escape from his clutches to reach the circus train as it was about to pull out of the station. The drunken clown mayhem; the strange self detesting monologues by the monstrous Buffo; and the ape act lead to the last scene which is by design both bewildering and mystifying. It
makes everything suspect to the bewildered reader and paves way for the implausible happenings of the closing segment.

The novel takes a really bizarre and almost mystical turn in the *Siberia* section. The train is attacked by a band of runaway prisoners, who believe (after reading in the newspaper) that Fewers is “intimate of the English royal family” (*Nights* 231) and the future daughter-in-law of the Queen of England. They think she could help them get in touch with the Tsar (husband of the Queen of England’s grand-daughter), and thus get his permission to return home to their native villages. The entire circus (except for Walser) is taken hostage by the convicts as the train has been damaged in the attack. Meanwhile, Walser is saved by a group of escaped murderesses and their lovers (their former guards). Since Walser has lost his memory (due to a blow on his head) in the train accident, the band of women leaves him to an approaching rescue party. However, Walser escapes into the woods before the rescue party reaches him and is taken under the protection of a village shaman. The shaman teaches him the ways of his people, believing him to be a kind of spiritual guide. In course of time, he regains a fragment of his memory and language, which the shaman infers as signs from the gods. Gradually, Walser gets integrated into the village ways and life.

The convicts holding Fewers and the others as captives are shocked into drunken mourning when told (by Fewers) that she cannot help them as what they have heard about her is false. Lizzie persuades the clowns to organise a show for the convicts to shake them out of their
mourning. During the show, all are caught in a blizzard which carries them away into the night. Those who remain of the circus, begin to walk in search of civilization. They stumble upon a dilapidated music school and take refuge with its owner, the Maestro. Fewvers and Lizzie leave the haven of the Maestro's school to look and search for Walser, whom they had seen in the woods one day. Meanwhile, Colonel Kearney goes in search for civilization, desirous yet again of setting up a more successful circus. However, Mignon, the Princess and Samson stay on with the Maestro at his music school. Fewvers succeeds in finding Walser and the story ends with them together at the dawn of the new century and her triumphant cry "to think I really fooled you" (Nights 294).

John Haffenden in Novelists in Interview speaks of Carter's Magic Realism thus:

The term 'magical realist' might well have been invented to describe Angela Carter, novelist, journalist, feminist. Her gift of outrageous fantastication, resourcefully drawing on folklore and fairy tale, enables her to conjure fabulous countries which have close designs upon the ways and means of real men and women, and upon the institutions that condition their responses and contests. Richly imagined and stylistically uninhibited - with dehumanizing villains, exotic landscapes and lush sensuality - her fictions are in many ways parables of power, desire and subjection. (76)

Nights at the Circus is the epitome of Carters experimentation with Magic Realism - the brilliant unification of myth and reality, of implausible
events and stark realism. Carter creates an entire world till the readers lose their ability to discriminate between the real and unreal, that there exists "no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism" (Nights 260). At the heart of this unconventional narrative is the myth of Leda and the Swan. Fevvers like Helen of Troy was hatched from an egg. She is the magical, glorious, larger than life woman with wings, walking the thin line between a human and a bird. Her character is difficult to come to grips with due to the "physical otherness" bequeathed to her by the presence of wings on her shoulders. Carter places this fantastical and unnatural image of Fevvers in a harsh and bleak background - among those who are considered the "worst class and defiled" (21). She grows up at a brothel among whores, serves at the museum of the "damned" and at the circus. The juxtaposition of the fantastical against the dark and dismal reality, lends this narrative a magic realist character. The novelist through the two central characters of Fevvers and Walser, draws a distinction between the implausible and the plausible. Fevvers' position as half swan and half woman remains disputed, debatable and surreal while Walser's role as the practical, hard-headed journalist, looking for facts with "the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing" (10) gives the story a realistic foundation.

Metamorphosis is an integral aspect of Magic Realism. The transformation of Fevvers from a normal/regular child to a bird-woman - "a winged victory" and an "aerialiste" (7) is marvellously evoked by
Carter. Fewvers wings – her “peculiar inheritance” came into being “unwilled”, “uncalled” and “involuntarily”:

... one morning in my fourteenth year, rising from my truckle bed in the attic... I had taken off my little white nightgown in order to perform my matutinal ablutions at my little dresser when there was a great ripping in the hind-quarters of my chemise and, ... suddenly there broke forth... these wings of mine! Still adolescent, as yet, not half their adult size, and moist, sticky, like freshly unfurled foliage... 

(Nights 24)

After a failed attempt of flight and fully aware of the pain and risk involved, Fewvers begins her endeavour to learn the “method of the act of flight” (32) under Lizzie’s guidance and tutelage. She started studying birds and their “airy medium” and observing the pigeons who had built a nest upon the window pediment of her attic with “customary diligence” (33).

One “Midsummer’s Night” (33) they (Fewvers and Lizzie) decide to put their theory into practice. Fewvers is “seized with a great fear” (34) that her wings might turn out to be like those of a hen or an ostrich or a “physical deceit, intended for show.” She is overcome by a strange terror, not only by the thoughts of bodily harm but also the harm of the soul if her attempt failed. “I [She] suffered the greatest conceivable terror of irreparable difference with which success in the attempt would mark me [her].” She fears the proof of her own “singularity.” In spite of the thoughts in her mind, Fewvers pushes herself into the “transparent arms
of the wind” and succeeds. Her ability to fly becomes symbolic of her freedom and independence. Her training at an early age of playing to an admiring audience, exhibiting and selling her distinct talent comes handy when she joins the circus. She is whisked around by royalty and rich suitors and is paid huge sums of money for solo appearances and performances in which she wears her dazzling costumes and provides “spectacle” (Nights 185) and makes a show of herself. Metamorphosis of Fewers into a bird-woman also develops the premise of hybridity which is often associated with Magic Realism. Carter by depicting Fewers as a hybrid – part woman, part bird - challenges the boundary of sex and gender.

There are other characters in the novel that also undergo metamorphosis. Walser – the rational and practical “war correspondent” (90) obsessed with facts, also undergoes a transformation. He loses his memory in the train accident. His amnesia leads his mind to become a tabula rasa. He forgets his own identity – his name, his mother tongue as well as all the cultural and materialistic constructs he had been exposed to. After he comes in contact with the Shaman and his shadowy world of dreams and fantasy, he is reborn and “hatched out of the shell of unknowing” (294) as a new man. Fewvers too, has her share in his rebirth and metamorphosis. “In fooling Walser, Fewvers transformed his life. Dreams, fantasies and imaginings have now become a legitimate part of his consciousness” (Finney). The transformation in Walser’s ‘self’ is expressed thus:
He was as much himself again as he ever would be, and yet that 'self' would never be the same again for now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is fear of death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love. It was the beginning of an anxiety that would never end...

(Nights 292-93)

Even the innocent, vulnerable, dependent and submissive Mignon, is able to break out of an abusive life of subjugation and tyranny with her husband and embark on an empowered life. She may have been abused and beaten throughout her life, but her resilience and “febrile gaiety” (139) allow her to cling to life long enough for her fate to change. Samson, the “Strong Man” too, is transformed in the course of the novel. He acknowledges the fact that all his life he had abused women because he was “a coward, concealing the frailty of my [his] spirit behind the strength of my [his] body” (276) when in reality he “was too weak to bear the burden of any woman’s love.”

The description of the fantastical transition and transformation of Fewers is merged with mundane details of “the friendly sound of Bow Bells” coming through the window, the winter sun shining, the great dome of St. Paul, Ma Nelson’s garden and the cherry tree. As the magical description of Fewers first successful flight comes to an end, there is a silence in the room for a few minutes to be disturbed only by the “metallic tinkle” (37) of the hot-water pipes, the creaking of Lizzie’s handbag and the “Big Ben” eerily striking the same hour again and again. All these
minute but vivid details add to the authenticity of the experience of the
glamorous flight and the story recounted by Fewers and Lizzie. The sense of
verisimilitude achieved through the description of such details help the
readers suspend his/her belief. Even Walser feels:

As if the room that had in some way, without
his knowledge, been plucked out of its
everyday, temporal continuum, had been held
for a while above the spinning world and was
now – dropped back into place. (Nights 87)

Fewers escape from the Grand Duke’s palace is a significant
instance of Magic Realism. The Duke - “a great collector of all kinds of
objects d’art and marvels” (187) had carefully plotted the scheme of her
“objectification” into “only a bird in a gilded cage” (190). As Fewers,
conscious of herself being in “imminent and deadly danger” (190), brings
the Grand Duke to his sexual climax, the Petersburg section of the
narrative, too reaches its climax. Fewers escapes in the Grand Duke’s toy
train – a miniature Trans-Siberian Express. Time lapse, at this stage has
been managed at the level of Magic Realism, blurring the magical
moments (of the toy train) with hard reality (train to Siberia). Carter with
extreme artistry, defies all laws of time and space to blur the border
between the real and the unreal:

She dropped the toy train on the Isfahan
runner – mercifully, it landed on its wheels –
as, with a grunt and whistle of expelled breath,
the Grand Duke ejaculated.
In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fewers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment and clambered abroad.

‘Look what a mess he’s made of your dress, the pig,’ said Lizzie.

The weeping girl threw herself into the woman’s arms. (Nights 192)

The “dark abyss of the night” in the Duke’s palace where she (Fевvers) had lost her magic sword, frightens and weakens her to such an extent that later she begins to connect the explosion of the train in Siberia with the Duke’s attack on her body and modesty and his desire to objectify her.

The magic realist element is magnificently manifest in Walser’s amnesia “that followed the blow on his head” (254) in the train explosion. The everyday and ordinary is discovered as something new as “all his previous experiences were rendered null and void” (253). Walser accepts the “system of belief” (252) of the Shaman without questioning. The Shaman who “was the pedant of pedants” lived in a world of dreams and his “main, pressing, urgent, arduous task ... was the interpretation of the visible world about him via the information he acquired through dreaming” (253). Even his bear “was both a real, furry and beloved bear and, at the same time, a transcendental kind of meta-bear, a minor deity...” (257). Walser – the once correspondent of truth and reality is juxtaposed against the bizarre and irrational world of the Shaman. Another magic realist element in the novel is of the “drumming” (257)
trees in the *Siberia* section, which are shown enjoying jokes at the Shaman’s expense. These trees drum and speak to the Shaman: “Yah! Fooled you!” and “I am the one.”

As stated earlier, Carnivalesque is an integral aspect of magic realist fiction. The travelling carnival as depicted in the earlier chapter - *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* reaches its culmination in this novel. Carter, in *Nights at the Circus* explores the positive “bright, life-affirming magical” (Danow 5) aspect as well as the negative the “dark, death embracing, horrific” aspect of the Carnival. The travelling circus of Colonel Kearney, provides a grand cum perfect backdrop to stimulate Carter’s inexorable imagination. It is the ideal medium - combining vaudeville, humour and the absurd to get closest to the murky world of decadence, of humanly produced magic and a sense of the marvellous and the magical.

The Circus lends the novel an extravagant and celebratory atmosphere. The set of vibrant, eccentric and captivating characters with their extraordinary and bizarre backgrounds, add to the carnivalesque chaos and commotion of the Circus. Colonel Kearney with his cigars, “full-tailed frock coat” (*Nights* 99) and “billycock hat” is the delirious, eccentric and prototypical patriotic American owner of the circus. He owns a pig called Sybil – his “pardner in the Ludic Game” who makes the big decisions for him. Then there are “Lamark’s Educated Apes” – a dozen chimpanzees who win their sovereignty by dedicating their spare time to learning. Buffo the Great, leads his troupe of white-face clowns and excels
in his performance as well as his philosophical “sermon” (120). His superior narration is underlined in the following lines:

‘We possess one privilege, one rare privilege, that makes of our outcast and disregarded state something wonderful, something precious. We can invent our own face! We make ourselves.’ (Nights 121)

Then there are others like the Princess of Abyssinia – “the lady with the big cat” (99), earth-shaking elephants, high-wire walkers. There is “no end to the marvels” on display in the novel. The novelist creates a cast of misfits and outcasts of the human race to occupy her pages and reserves the powerful impact of her brutal imagination for the incredibly horrid and macabre clowns who are synonymous to “disintegration, disaster [and] chaos” (242). The band of clowns in the book is the incarnation of the daemonic, the fountain of fanatical vigour that refuses to be captured or tamed. “Buffo the Great, the head clown, initiates Walser into clown philosophy in a ten page section destined to become the definitive statement on clown life and circus literature” (VanderMeer). It points to the savage absurdity that demeans man’s vain attempts at assigning himself/herself dignity and meaning; thus, the gloomy despair of the human condition is transformed into black humour. The dance of the clowns is a recurrent act used in the text, suggestive of apocalypse and doom:

It seemed that they were dancing the room apart. As the baboushka slept, her too, too solid kitchen fell into pieces under the blows of
their disorder as if it had been, all the time, an ingenious prop, and the purple Petersburg night inserted jagged wedges into the walls around the table on which these comedians cavorted with such little pleasure, in a dance which could have invoked the end of the world.

(Nights 124)

Carter’s world if exotic is also filthy, earthy and erotic. Her persistent focus on the earthier, seamy sides of life - belching, farting, dirty dishes, dirty laundry, comical sex - all unnatural and disconcerting, are made to appear natural and commonplace. Colloquial crudeness emphasises the crude, coarse and vulgar culture of the circus. On the surface, all this seems to aid and give colour to a narrative which otherwise is intending to give voice and insight to serious issues. Embedded underneath the glitter and sparkle of circus costumes and circus life, are Carter’s major preoccupations – skilfully woven into her prose.

The author portrays the life-affirming and magical aspect of the carnivalesque in the Siberia section. Siberia serves as Carter’s vision of utopia – pristine and perfect. This part of the novel, becomes the catalysing agent for the literal as well as allegorical liberation of the characters from the narrow confines/boundaries of culture and society. The section brings the narrative to a close on a note of reconciliation, mirth and laughter:

The spiralling tornado of Fewers’ laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant
comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere was laughing. (295)

The magic realist writings of Carter, read as a social, cultural and political critique. She takes up an indirect approach to communicate her message by incorporating myth, fantasy and allegory. The amalgamation of the real and the mythical enables her to construct as well as deconstruct societal codes:

... the novels of Angela Carter including *Nights at the Circus* (1984), with its winged central character Fevvers arguably constitutes British fictions fullest engagement with magic realism synthesising the ordinary and everyday with an often utopian feminist world - view that both subverts and transcends patriarchy and conventional gender politics. (Padley 105)

Carter's work if approached through a feminist lens is a benchmark of feminist identity, relations between sexes and western culture's awakening to gender equality. The novel reads as an authorial comment on the life of women. The incidents in the first and second part of the book, mirror the suppression and injustices done to women and reflect the misery and pathetic state of womankind. Their sufferings and misery were an outcome of the patriarchal order, where women were destined to be silenced and victimised; to give and be the “pleasure of the eye” (*Nights* 185). The last section of *Nights at the Circus* celebrates the hope and belief in the power of rejuvenation in the woman condition:
For many women writers, magic realist techniques provided one of a number of ways in which patriarchal tenacity could be circumvented. The celebration of female experience, historically marginalised from novelistic discourse, could be made to co-exist alongside non-realistic characterisation and subject matter drawing on myth and fairytale to implicitly challenge the assumptions and preoccupations of male-canonical literature. (Padley 105)

Fevvers, with her empyreal, celestial, Olympian, larger-than-life splendour, exhibits a majestic supremacy in contrast to the other women of the novel, who are presented as thin, weak, old, exploited or in some other way abnormal and strange. Fevvers is viewed by several critics, as a winged version of the New Women who is able to break away from the shackles of “passivity and powerlessness” of the patriarchal nineteenth century set up, and move into the twentieth century of feminist liberation and emancipation. Her wings seem to symbolize the ambitions and triumph of the idea of the New Woman. She becomes the embodiment of the debate about woman and her nature. “She is the pure child of the century that now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no woman will be bound down to ground” (Nights 25).

Through Magic Realism, Carter is able to address everyday concerns in an interesting and playful manner yet at the same time she seems to be testing the reader's perception of reality. Readers have to suspend their disbelief of magical events and concurrences both small and large in order to respond to the diverse experiences encompassed by the
text. The idea of a winged girl professing to have been hatched from an egg and who ends up as an *aerialiste* in a circus, itself requires a suspension of belief. Fevvers is an embodiment of what is real and what is not, through her own mythology and the mythic dimension of her persona posited at the beginning of the novel. The author manages to evoke such a sense of reality – part imaginary/fantastical and part real that the immediate surroundings of the real world translate as incoherent. The world depicted in the text seems so real that the readers own world becomes suspect. Readers have to open their eyes to this created world, accept its chaos, live amidst it and enjoy it, even if there exists no “categorical difference between seeing and believing” (*Nights* 260).

Keeping with the mysterious spirit of Magic Realism, the first pages of the book create a sense of disbelief, mystery and wonder as to whether Fevvers wings are real or not. This suspicion/doubt continues right till the end of the novel and nothing is established as true or false. Fevvers existence remains a chimera. Readers are at liberty to decipher for themselves, to believe or disbelieve. Knowing the secret of her wings would destroy the marvel and aura of her being which is related to them (wings). If the mystery gets exposed she would be unmasked as a fake or a freak.

The Magical Realism that imbues Carter’s tale is woven with innumerable allusions and references – biblical, mythical and literary. Leda and the Swan, Jonah and the Whale, Shakespeare, Blake, Carroll, Dickens, Poe and Melville all share the same platform. Shakespeare’s
"what a piece of work is man" from Hamlet is repeatedly used by Carter. William Blake’s famous poem, The Tyger from his collection Songs of Experience (1794) is reworked by Carter: “Authentic, fearfully symmetric tigers burning as brightly as those who had been lost” (Nights 249).

Carter’s Magic Realism is empowered by her exceptional use of language and word play. Her writing is replete with radiant images, startling word portraits, brilliant descriptions and humour (vulgar yet amusing) that give readers a glimpse of the diversity of her fictional world. Her prose is beautiful, intellectual, exuberant, theatrical, hilarious, vulgar, depressing, disturbing and sinister all at once. The incandescent prose, rich in detail and substance holds the reader under its spell from the beginning till the end. The text is full of baroque (exaggerated, extravagant, florid) prose, elegant narration, long words and rampant exclamations. Caught in the vortex of her narrative art and descriptive wonder, one goes along with the narrative flow trying to capture the essence of her tone, viewpoint and insightful commentary. Brilliance exists alongside sharp reminders of the layers of piss and dirt. There are sections which though rich in detail, are unmanageable, weighty and visceral; the ending is oblique – all of which make reading Carter, an exhausting yet beyond doubt a rich experience.

Fevvers is the subversion of the “angelic” Gothic heroine and all that is considered feminine by social construct. Her first impression on Walser is her “physical ungainliness” (16). She is “divinely tall” at six feet two with an extremely ordinary face “broad and oval as a meat dish” (12).
Her voice is unfeminine, described as "clanging like dustbin lids" (7), "raucous and metallic . . . clanging of contralto or even baritone dustbins" (*Nights* 13). Her manners are coarse and unrefined – she "guffaws uproariously" (7), flashes her "indecorous eyes" at Walser, slaps her "marbly thighs" as she laughs, "pops the cork of a chilled magnum of champagne between her teeth" (8), and is a "spectacle of . . . gluttony" (22). The following lines describe her enormous appetite:

... she tucke into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies' fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size . . . she wiped her lips on her sleeves and belched. (22)

Fevvers narrating the story of her life is not generated or instigated by Walser's probing queries but is the outcome of her own initiative, will, motive and mood, the presence of Lizzie, and is fuelled by food and drink which "put fresh heart into the aeraliste" (53). In spite of her coarseness and crude manners, Fevvers, like the conventional Gothic heroine mesmerises Walser with her magical wings and champagne; seduces him with her storytelling. Walser who sets out to prove her hoax with the aid of his critical journalism, loses track of time and gets trapped and charmed by her narrative:

Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice . . . Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice made for singing with; it comprised discords, her scale contained twelve tones . . .
her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren’s. (43)

He begins to feel like “a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place” (Nights 40).

Madame Shareck – the “wicked puppet” (58) the “living skeleton”, the “bony woman” (59) is the Gothic uncanny apparition like being. This “Lady of Terror” whose “voice was like wind in graveyards” (58) owned a “museum of woman monsters” (55), which “catered for those who were troubled in their . . . souls” (57). The museum was inhabited by strange, grotesque and damned characters – “Dear old fanny Four-Eyes” (59), the “Sleeping Beauty”, the “Wiltshire Wonder” (not even three foot high), “Albert/Albertina” (a bipartite) and a girl called “Cobwebs” (60). Toussaint, the doorkeeper was a man “with no mouth” whose eyes were full of sorrow “of exile and of abandonment” (57).

The eerie museum is a distinctive Gothic space with its “triple-locked doors, doors that opened reluctantly, with great rattling of bolts and chains, and then swung to with a long groan as of despair” (55). The silent and chilly house was “a gloomy pile” with “a melancholy garden . . . of worn grass and leafless trees” and a facade that was blackened by soot as if “in mourning” (57). The knocker on the front door was “ominously bandaged up in crepe” that gave rise to a “soft, deathly thunder” (61) when knocked at. The ground floor of the museum which was known as “Down Below” or “The Abyss” (61) was constructed in the form of a vault or crypt “with wormy beams overhead and nasty damp flagstones underfoot.”
Stone niches were cut out in the slimy wall in which the monstrous girls were made to stand, with “profane altars” (curtains) and a small burning lamp in front of them. The upper floor was called the “Black Theatre.” The visitors had to dress themselves in one of the various bizarre costumes provided by the museum. Toussaint played “heartening tune” on the harmonium “concealed behind a pierced Gothic fold-screen” and the “old hag” (Madame Shareck) carried a lantern – “a penny candle in a skull” (Nights 62) to usher her client into the museum.

Another Gothic setting in the novel is the stately home of Mr Rosencreutz. The mansion was built in an antique Gothic style but its execution was new. It was made of raw bricks; its front door was made of fumed oak and fresh brass plates and had an “antechamber of large, square-hewn stones” (74). “The fingernail moon with a star in its arms” floating above the turrets, adds to the romantic as well as the sinister atmosphere of the house, covered with ivy and situated in the “secrecy of wooded hills.” The eeriness of the place grows with the howling of a dog somewhere in the vicinity. Fevvers on entering the house feels, as if she was “magically transported into an earlier age.”

Fevvers is a “winged victory” and her appearance defies those of the conventional Gothic heroine. Nevertheless she becomes the very embodiment of the Gothic heroine, when she is entrapped and imprisoned within the walls of Gothic spaces – Ma Nelson’s brothel, Madame Shareck’s Gothic museum, Rosencreutz’s Gothic mansion, clown alley and Grand Duke’s palace.
Gothic literature is concerned with boundaries and transgression of boundaries as discussed in the earlier chapters. The most prominent boundary in this novel is the boundary between the real and the fantastical. The beatings of Fevvers’ wings disturb Walser and make him lose his mind and his composure temporarily. Her (Fevvers’) appearance challenges Walser’s logical mind and serves to intimidate his journalistic ideals and principles as a correspondent of truth and reality. He feels that he is incapable of determining the boundaries between reality and fantasy and has to undergo many trials and tribulations. Fevvers is a narrator whose reliability is constantly under suspicion. Her wings are her unique feature which cannot fuse into the audience’s and the reader’s conception of reality. They constantly threaten their logical and rational mind. The indistinctness and ambiguity of Fevvers’ reality and existence is the very spirit and essence of her personality and individuality. This quintessential ambiguity arrests and holds the imagination of her audience:

... the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, or, as we would say, the arms, and the skeleton of a wing does indeed show elbow, wrists and fingers, all complete. So if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she by all the laws of evolution and human reason ought to possess no arms at all, for it’s her arms that ought to be her wings! (Nights 15)

Yet another boundary depicted in the novel is the one that exists between the rich and the poor or between the elite and the outcast. The rich squander their money on “bright, pretty, useless things” (185).
Christian Rosencrantz who desired to sacrifice Fewers to attain immortality and the Grand Duke who wanted to objectify her are both representatives of this class. Whereas, Fewers, the inmates of the whorehouse, the monstrous women of the museum and the members of the circus are the pariahs, who provide pleasure of the body. These outcasts are “denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged” (Nights 161). Another divide that exists in the novel is between the civilised world (as depicted in the London and Petersburg section) which is burdened by history, culture and society and the uncivilised world (as depicted in Siberia) which “possessed none of the implausibility of authentic history” (253).

The Gothic concept of decay can appropriately be applied to Nights at the Circus. Decay in the novel is palpable both in concrete as well as abstract form. Carter’s narrative lens zooms through the “exquisitely feminine squalor” (9) of Fewers’ dressing room, to the poor and scantily clad women and children collecting coal in the wee hours of the morning on the roads of London, through “stinking alleys” (103), “gloomy . . . stark tenements”, “beastly backside” (104) of Petersburg, to the locale of the circus “splashed with pigeon droppings” (105). The flashy and garish exterior of the circus along with its pulsating, mean, degraded, ugly and repulsive inside is extensively explored by the writer. The “elegant” (105), the “sumptuous” and “queasy luxury” of the circus is permeated with grime:
... the aroma of horse dung and lion piss permeated every inch of the building's fabric, so that the titillating contradiction between the soft, white shoulders of the lovely ladies whom young army officers escorted there and the hairy pelts of the beasts in the ring resolved in the night-time intermingling of French perfume and the essence of steppe and jungle in which musk and civet revealed themselves as common elements. (Nights 105)

Herr M – the undertaker who “was sincerely fascinated by the art and craft of illusion” (135) cheated people by pretending to call the spirit of their dead (female) loved ones to earth. With the aid of devices like a projector, a wind machine and a torch, he transformed his drawing room into a Gothic site where in the “darkness” (137), “soft breeze” (136), “purple clouds of incense” (137) and “reticulated fronds of fern”, the spirit/ghost of the dead came visiting the earth. Conscious of Mignon’s “great resemblance to a spectre” (133) he employed her for “personating the dead, and posing for their photographs” (134).

Nights at the Circus is a work of infinite beauty, of numerous sparkling figures, boundless possibilities and impossibilities. Carter emerges as a master teller of tales with an extraordinary gift for language and a willingness and eagerness to take risks. She is the quintessential "ex-centric" author - writing subversively from the edge, displacing conventionally established discourse. She portrays a broader canvas of experience by relentlessly discussing the undiscussed. The novel exhibits splendid craftsmanship and venerable intellect underneath, accentuated
by the rich portrayal of Magic Realism and the use of the Gothic. There is an atypical and unusual kind of fantasy, blatant barefaced absurdity and wicked word-play. It is a pleasantly captivating read that exposes the grotesque (ugly, gross, bizarre) of feminine seduction and sexuality, desire and power. Substantial subjects and themes lie beneath the surface of the story such as class struggle, patriarchy, sexuality, nature of reality vs. illusion. Through riveting twists and turns in the plot, equilibrium and harmony is achieved in the novel.


