Chapter 6

Wise Children (1991)

The novel *Wise Children* (1991) is the “final legacy” of Angela Carter. It is believed that she wrote it after being diagnosed of cancer and died “the year after its publication, so it takes crowning place in her now recognisably revolutionary literary project” (*Wise* vii). It is a grand and befitting finale to Carter’s glorious writing career. The poignant refrain - “What a joy it is to dance and sing!” running through the pages of the book, echo repeatedly the spirit of carpe diem, an expression and celebration of life and a boundless craving for life. Speaking to Scott Bradfield, Carter confessed the book to be her favourite as she “felt it was time to write about my [her] country, and Wise Children is all about England--London especially.” The city (London) where she grew up was rapidly changing and disappearing. The novel is an attempt by the novelist to preserve the London she knew and remembers, so that her son Alexander and the future generations would get a glimpse and whiff of what it was like.

*Wise Children* gives expression to Carter’s unrelenting endeavour to depict “the obscurity allocated to women in a male-dominated society” (Gambles 164), “the complex ideas about paternity” and “Shakespeare as a cultural ideology” (Bradbury 188). Furthermore, the book also deals with the social system; the snobbery, hypocrisy and pretentions of the British
culture. Carter portrays the great cultural divide of the British social system:

It's very broadly about class, about our two distinct cultures in Britain," Carter explained. "The absolute fissure between bourgeois culture and nonbourgeois culture. The absolute division between people who go to the National Theatre, say, and the sort who frequented the old time music halls. You've got this one class in Britain which pretends to be so proper and respectable, but all the time they're completely repressed. This other culture they're trying so hard to distance themselves from--the live sex shows, the louts, the hooligans--is their culture, too. They just don't know it yet." (Bradfield)

All these significant themes are explored through the trivial "comedies and tragedies" of relationships and affairs of the Hazard family. The novel draws its title from a dialogue of Launcelot addressed to his father, Old Gobbo in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (Act II scene-2):

Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me: it is a wise father that knows his own child. Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son. Give me your blessing; truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long; a man's son may, but in the end truth will out. (196)

Carter revises the dialogue so as to make it contextually suitable for her novel: "‘It’s a wise child that knows its own father,’ . . . ‘But wiser yet the father who knows his own child’" (Wise 73).
Wise Children is a giddy saga of an extremely eccentric British theatrical family. The story is narrated by Dora Chance (the readers oscillate between past and present) as she recounts the experiences of the childhood, youth and old age which she shared with her twin sister Nora. The novel opens on the scene of the seventy-fifth birthday of the twin sisters (also Shakespeare's birth anniversary), when an invitation arrives at their South London house from the Hazard estate for Melchior's centenarian celebration. As the twins ponder over what to wear for the occasion, Dora, who has taken on the unofficial duty of preserving her family's tale for posterity, reflects upon the past events of their riotous life. Speaking of "origins and past history" (Wise 11) she mentions that the theatrical world of her grandparents - Ranulph and Estella Hazard, was a complex Shakespearean maze of conspiracy and relationships, where Lear's fell in love with their Cordelias and Othello's murdered their Desdemonas. Ranulph murdered Estella and Cassius Booth (with whom she had an affair) before killing himself. Their fraternal twin sons, Melchior and Peregrine moved on with their respective lives. While Melchior finally settled down in England, Peregrine remained a wanderer.

The "lucky Chances" - the identical twin sisters, Dora and Nora Chance are the illegitimate and unacknowledged daughters of Sir Melchior Hazard, the greatest Shakespearean actor of his times. They "went on to the halls" (11) to become vaudeville performers. Dora comments "Chance by name, Chance by nature. We were not planned" (24). The twin sisters were the product of a covert affair between Kitty - an
orphan chambermaid (their mother) and Melchior (the prospective thespian) who lodged at the boarding house owned by Grandma Chance. Their mother died in child birth and the landlady (Grandma Chance), brought them up out of sheer love. When Melchior denied his paternity, it was his younger brother, Peregrine, who out of a sense of duty, took up their guardianship. Theatre was in their blood and in course of time with their hard work and vigour they become the most celebrated dancing girls in London.

The first chapter begins with Tristram’s (son of Melchior by his third marriage) arrival. He informs the Chance sisters of the disappearance of his girlfriend Tiffany (Dora and Nora's godchild), who has gone missing after appearing on his trashy television show "Lashings of Lolly" in a state of delusion. The fact that she was pregnant with his child, and his refusal to forge a commitment, “I’m not ready . . . I can’t take the responsibility” (Wise 44) unhinges her. Later, the police recovered a body from the river, believed to be of Tiffany.

Chapter two of the book reads like a fairy tale, using the flashback technique, it gives a retrospective view of the past life of the Chance Sisters. Dora takes the readers down memory lane, to their childhood days and the day of their seventh birthday, when Grandma Chance, dressed them like princesses and took them to their first matinee, as a treat. This was the beginning of their passionate lifelong romance with the stage. That very day, the sisters got the first glimpse of their biological father when Grandma spots Melchior and points him out to them. The curiosity
to know their father “took root” (Wise 57) in them and with passage of time “the curiosity turned into a yearning, a longing.” A toy theatre as a birthday present from Peregrine awaited the girls on their return from the theatre.

Next Dora narrates about a family outing to Brighton planned by Peregrine. Outside the Theatre Royal, the girls see the poster of their father and “longed and longed to push through the glass doors” and feast their eyes on the sight of their “gloriously handsome”, “gifted” and “sensationally applauded genius” (70) father. Peregrine takes them to Melchior’s dressing room. But to their “bitterest disappointment” (72), their “father’s eyes skidded right over” them and they are forced to leave the place “unkissed”, “unwelcomed” and “unacknowledged” (73).

The sisters grow up and come of age. Peregrine goes bankrupt by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the sisters are forced to earn their livelihood by becoming song and dance girls at the halls. Their growing up is marked by their rising interest in sexuality. Of the two, Nora, was more curious and “had a passion to know about Life, all its dirty corners” (81) and hence loses her virginity, gets pregnant and eventually haemorrhages and miscarries. On their seventeenth birthday, Dora swaps her identity and perfume with Nora in order to share her boyfriend. The same night at a party, Dora meets Melchior who gives the sisters “a very special birthday present” (87) - to star with him in the Shakespearean play What You Will. Thus, the night of her seventeenth birthday turns out to be very special for Dora:
...I never felt more grown-up in all my life ever after than I did that early morning, watching my shadow teeter-totter home in front of me in those sexy shoes. Because during the night that now was over, I had made love to a boy for the first time; and my father had kissed me, for the first time; I had heard my name would be up in lights on Shaftesbury Avenue, for the first time, and I was choked up inside with the pleasure and the terror of the world. (Wise 87)

The Lynde Court party (for the Shakespearian play) introduces the carnivalesque elements into the narrative: transgressive behaviour, mocking humour and grotesque. Nora's boyfriend mistakes Dora for Nora yet again. Genghis Khan, a film producer leaves his lighted cigar on the table (to dance with Nora) which sets the tablecloth alight and eventually the entire mansion – thus, disrupting the party and forcing everybody to move outside. However, the chapter ends on a happy note with Peregrine saving both Nora as well as the Melchior's paper crown and Genghis Khan announcing that he would take “all fabulously talented people” (108) present there (Lynde Court) to Hollywood.

The next chapter, describing the shooting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the United States, has many similarities to Shakespeare's plays. The first reading of it gives an overwhelming impression of chaos and confusion. Three marriages are depicted to take place - Melchior to Daisy Duck, Nora to Tony and Dora to Genghis Khan - all a result of conspiracies, misunderstandings, revenge and mistaken identities. A further twist is introduced and is subsequently resolved when Genghis
Khan’s ex-wife “who loved her man so much she was prepared to turn herself into a rough copy of his beloved for his sake” (Wise 155) appears on the scene. She had taken the help of cosmetic surgery to become a replica of Dora. She pleads with Dora to give back her husband who out of sympathy willingly hides behind a mask so that the ex-Mrs. Khan could marry him again. The wedding announcement leaves Tony’s mother outraged; she “gibbering with fury” (159) empties “a vat of marina sauce” on Nora and as a consequence Nora’s marriage with Tony is called off. After wrapping up the shooting of the film, both Dora and Nora as “sadder and wiser girls” (161) return home with Grandma Chance.

Dora’s affair with Irish - a writer, a playwright and also her most significant lover, gives expression to the sensual and sexual indulgences of an essential promiscuous society. He was attracted to Dora’s beauty and her “conspicuous unrefinement” (123) while Dora was lured by his “potent charm”, “vulnerability”, “soft, light baritone” and his “wasted talents” (120). His presence filled the vacuum created by the lack of education in her life. Yet, at the same time she is seen sleeping with her German tutor, thus, proving to be a “lecherous”, “treacherous” and “deceitful” opportunist.

After Grandma Chance’s death (chapter 4), the Chance sister’s life is marked by loss, sadness, tears and melancholy:

Nora and I sat down right here, in the breakfast room, in these very armchairs, and listened to the silence in the long, narrow house where we would live alone, in future,
and had a good cry, just the two of us, for this was Childhood's end with a vengeance and we were truly on our own, now good and proper.

We hadn't just lost Grandma, either. She was the only witness of the day our mother died when we were born, and she took with her the last living memory of that ghost without a face. All our childhood went with her into oblivion, so we were bereft both of her in person and of a good deal of ourselves, too. (Wise 164)

The house where the sisters were born and brought up was now ruled by silence and “was nothing but a barn” (165). Peregrine, who was missing at Grandma’s death and funeral, reappears at Saskia’s and Imogen’s (Melchior’s daughters) birthday party. The sisters receive a surprise gift from their father, Melchior - a stepmother; when he announces his intention of marrying Cordelia (Saskia’s best friend). The announcement leaves the sisters in a state of shock and hysterical outburst.

Dora and Nora, who had been invited by Lady Atlanta (Melchior’s first wife), are mute spectators to the ongoing drama. After the party, while Peregrine embarks upon yet another journey to the jungle, the Chance sisters return home. Later that night, they are informed about Lady Atlanta’s accident (tumbled down the shiny uncarpeted stairs) that had dislocated her spine, never to walk again. While she lay “in a heap at the stairfoot” (179), she is left abandoned by her daughters - Saskia and Imogen who leave home with their possessions. It is alleged that she (Lady Atlanta) might have been pushed down by them but the idea remains unconfirmed as Lady Atlanta remains tight-lipped about it. It is
the Chance sisters who then bring her home to 49 Bard Road and take care of her as a family. At this point, the readers are brought out of the flashback into the present, where the Chance sisters are checking “out their wardrobes for their smartest gowns” (Wise 186) and are engaged in preparations to celebrate their father’s centenary party.

The final chapter of the novel sees the sisters going to their father’s hundredth birthday party along with Lady Atlanta in a wheelchair. Outside the Hazard residence, Dora and Nora are met by Gorgeous George (of chapter 2), who had enacted Bottom, the weaver in The Dream, and was now an old and a homeless destitute, begging for money. Dora gives him 20 pounds (with the face of Shakespeare printed on it) on the condition that he “would spend it all on drink” (197). There are unanticipated, profligate and surprise entries to the party. A motley crowd of characters that had been missing from the scene/action or were presumed to be dead all reappear. The first to enter was Daisy Duck who was accompanied by “a fanfare of baroque trumpets” (201). Next comes the cake, a model of the Globe Theatre “big enough to ring a hundred candles all around the roof” (205) baked by Saskia - her masterpiece. But before Melchior’s knife “descends” on the cake there is a “tremendous knocking at the front door” and amidst the thrill and “genial tempest” of “laughter like sweet thunder” (206), Peregrine makes a magical entry. He also brings with him a trunk, out of which the pretty Tiffany (assumed dead in chapter 1), steps out. Tristram goes down on his knees to seek her forgiveness but instead she retorts: “I wouldn’t marry you if you were the
last man in the world. Marry your auntie, instead” (Wise 211). By auntie she means Saskia whose clandestine relations with Tristram had been the main cause of the discord in their (Tristam’s and Tiffany’s) relationship. Another discovery is made thereafter - Saskia has tried to kill her father by poisoning the cake. Truths and secrets tumble out: Saskia and Imogen turn out to be Peregrine’s biological daughters who had been robbing their mother of her money and home, the public announcement of Dora and Nora being Melchior’s daughters, all come to light in Lady Atlanta Hazard’s rhetorical speech as she speaks of her loneliness.

The story comes full circle in this chapter with all the secrets being unravelled. The Chance sisters are acknowledged by Melchior as his daughters and showered with the love and attention that was denied to them in the past. At this juncture, Dora and Peregrine are shown making love. In the course of their conversation certain doubts are sorted out: Dora “seized with panic, and a crippling doubt” (222) asks Peregrine, if he was her father by any chance. Perry declines this assertion yet at the same time expresses his doubt that Grandma might have been their mother (though without any concrete evidence). However, Dora assures Perry that if they were her daughters: “she would have been proud as a peacock, she’d never have made up some cock and bull story about a chambermaid” (223). Together, they search for the cardboard crown and present it to Melchior to cheer him up. Peregrine surprises the Chance sisters by presenting them with a baby each - “Brown as a quail, round as an egg, sleepy as a pear” (226). The three months old twins - a boy and a girl, were
Gareth's offspring who had been in America. All this leads to an atmosphere of "laughter, forgiveness, generosity, reconciliation" (Wise 227). The sisters walk back home all ecstatic, for "the barren heath was bloomed, the fire that was almost out sprung back to life...." They break into song and dance in the middle of the street to serenade the babies. And the novel ends with the lines - "What a joy it is to dance and sing!" (232).

Magical Realism forms an integral aspect of the narrative design/structure of Wise Children. The comingling of realistic details of everyday happenings and characters with elements of fantasy and wonder gives rise to Magic Realism. Carter blends the absurd with realism and thus magical elements appear in an otherwise realist setting. The most compelling manifestation of Magic Realism in the novel is the character of Peregrine. He is monumental - "the size of a warehouse, bigger, the size of a tower block" (206) and is an embodiment of the magical and the carnivalesque - a travelling carnival always on the move, propelled by the restlessness and agitation of his nature.

He is one exceptional character in the novel, who carries an air of magic and unpredictability about him. He is a magician who could produce white doves from knotted handkerchief (31), make a full set of china and cutlery disappear after an afternoon picnic (62), extract a couple of cream buns from Grandma Chance's cleavage (73), as well as remove a scarlet macaw from Melchior's tights (133). No one ever knows where he might be or when he would appear. If there is an occasion to be
celebrated, the prospect of Perry turning up can never be completely overlooked. He appears from nowhere at every party - be it Saskia and Imogen’s birthday party, the scene of the multiple weddings at the end of The Dream, and at Melchior’s centenarian celebration, when he makes a magical and mystical entry and with him “blew dozens and dozens of butterflies” (Wise 207) of multiple hues. The butterflies bring to mind, the character of Mauricio Babilonia from One Hundred Years of Solitude (a quintessential magic realist text) who is constantly swarmed by yellow butterflies.

Wherever Peregrine appears, he is accompanied by fun, humour, laughter, revelry, magic and pandemonium. He has a laugh which like Dora’s is full and infectious - raising the spirit of those around him into a celebratory state. It is he, who first accepts Dora and Nora as family, when they were small; introduces them to the magic of the phonograph and the joy of song and dance. Again when they are thirteen, he sweeps them off for a picnic in Brighton, where, once more, they enjoy and have fun with good food, good company and soaring spirits. Apart from his conjuring talents and spirit of revelry, events often seem to become a little bizarre in his presence. On one occasion, Perry suggests that the sisters dance: "As I remember it, a band struck up out of nowhere. . . . Or perhaps it was Perry on his harmonica, all the time, who provided the music, so that we could dance for him"(68). Later, even stranger things follow:

Peregrine spread his arms as wide as wings and gathered up the orphan girls, pressed us so
close we crushed against his waistcoat, bruising our cheeks on his braces' buttons. Or perhaps he slipped one of us in each pocket of his jacket. Or he crushed us far inside his shirt, against his soft, warm belly, to be sustained by the thumping comfort of his heart. And then, hup! he did a back-flip out of the window with us, saving us. (Wise 72)

His licentious behaviour is evident in his affair with Lady Atlanta and the fact that Saskia and Imogen were his biological daughters. His profligacy reaches its height, when we learn of his incestuous relationship with Dora. Readers are also given an account of their coupling at Melchior's birthday party. He truly lives up to his own statement “Life is a carnival”. Everything about Peregrine - his appearance, his size, how he always seems to disappear and then turn up miraculously, the extravagance of his character together with his magical presence lend a magic realist character to the narrative.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the narrative is the never ending string of fraternal and identical twins in the cast of characters. The sheer range of characters, together with the complexity of their relationships heightens the Magic Realism of the text. There are five pairs of twins in the novel – Melchior and Peregrine Hazard, Dora and Nora Chance, Saskia and Imogen Hazard, Tristram and Gareth Hazard, unnamed three month old babies – a boy and a girl. The varied and alluring range of dualities presented by the plethora of twins in the novel cannot be overlooked. The presence of these numerous twins, adds to the
absurdity as well as the magical character of the novel. It depicts a world of chaos and anarchy. The uniformity is a result of pairing of so many characters by virtue of their birth as twins, and the chaos ensues from the erroneous identities. The dualities and inversions are analogous to those in carnivalesque tradition and some renowned Shakespearean works, which are recognized for a similar array of twins giving rise to utter comic confusions. The superfluous presence of twins in the family challenges the credibility of the readers and gives a call to the willing suspension of disbelief.

The novel follows a nonlinear pattern of time and events, the fluctuations and oscillations from present to past, from one generation to the other and vice versa which are all skilfully manipulated. The events described are surreal, bizarre and chaotic but brilliantly vivid. Dora in narrating the history of her family, willingly rejects the choice of a chronological and sequential account in favour of an effervescent and escalating style. She holds back an account in the middle in order to leap several generations back into the past and delights her readers with an evocation of her grandparents even though they do not have any direct relation to the scene being recounted. She gives an account of her childhood days, switches on to describe Grandma Chance’s death when they were about to turn thirty and again describes an event which occurred when they were fifteen. This non-linear depiction of time is also a mode employed by magic realist writers. The fluctuation of time and
events, the wide array of characters and the unbelievable sets of twins add to the commotion and chaos of the novel.

The Chance sisters meeting with Grandma Chance's ghost before they go to Melchior's 100th birthday is an eerie, fantastical happening within a realist setting; the instance has strong undertones of Magic Realism. In Grandma Chance's bedroom where they stored their "cast-offs" (Wise 190) - clothes, the sisters while looking at their old dresses, find "Grandma's bits and pieces" - her hat, gloves, stockings, corsets etc "cascade out of the wardrobe." They feel that Grandma was trying to tell them something and could even hear her voice:

'She's telling us Memory Lane is a dead end,' I said. I could hear her voice clear as a bell: Come off it, girls! Pluck the day! You ain't dead, yet! You have got a party to go to! Expect the worst, hope for the best!' (190)

Magical feel of the novel is accentuated by the inversion of hierarchies and delineation of an inverted and chaotic world of excesses. Dora and Nora - the daughters of Melchior (the greatest Shakespearean actor of his times) lead a life of vaudeville song and dance girls though by birth they deserved a better life. But both their social hierarchy and their destinies get inverted. They finally receive the much deserved recognition of being Melchior's daughters only at the end of the novel. Another inversion of hierarchy is evident in Lady Atlanta - the once young, glamorous and beautiful wife of Melchior who is forced to lead a life of
obscurity in her old age - left to the kindness and generosity of the Chance sisters and confined to her wheelchair in the basement of 42 Bard Street.

The novel is underpinned by opposites and contradictions - like the North London and South London; the legitimate and the illegitimate; the right side of the track and the wrong side of the track; the high and low culture; and music hall and pantomime in opposition to the tragedies and comedies of Shakespeare. Depiction of such conflicting polarities is an important characteristic of Magic Realism. Similar opposition is also portrayed in the characters of Melchior and Peregrine; Nora and Dora; and Saskia and Imogen. Carter represents the tragic and comic visage of the theatre through the characters of the fraternal twin brothers - Melchior and Peregrine. The dark, serious and mournful Melchior is the quintessential tragic hero and the bright, spontaneous and fun loving Peregrine is the typical comic character. The novelist is never explicit about this association but nevertheless the idea is reinforced. At the surface, Dora and Nora – the identical twins are different from each other only by the different perfumes – Shalimar and Mitsouko they wear, still they are asymmetrical and inversions of each other. As Dora explains:

All the same, identical we may be, but symmetrical - never. For the body itself isn’t symmetrical. One of your feet is bound to be bigger than the other, one ear will leak more wax. (Wise 5)

Saskia and Imogen - “the darling buds of May”, who were born to a life of better opportunity and decency are inversion of the Chance sisters. They
are insensitive and malevolent beings who do not take responsibility of their own invalid mother. Dora and Nora in spite of their crude south London background, their promiscuous and licentious leanings are generous and affectionate. It is they who take in Lady Atlanta Hazard after she is abandoned by her own daughters and husband. Nora’s passion for life is contrasted with Imogen’s penchant of falling to sleep in any circumstance, while Dora has an innate feeling of abhorrence for Saskia ever since her infancy days.

Carter, with extreme dexterity, has reincarnated and reawakened the spirit of carnival with its social/political/aesthetic possibilities which is a much privileged feature of Magic Realist narratives. The Lynde Court party for the Shakespearean play is an epitome of Magic Realism characterised by absurdity, chaos and carnivalesque as it “celebrates the body, the senses and the unofficial, uncannonized relations that nonetheless exist, . . . alongside the official recognized forms of human intercourse” (Danow 3). Over-indulgence in eating, drinking and sexual activity is the natural order of things at this gathering. Dora and the waiter (Nora’s boyfriend) stealthily sneak “up the black oak staircase” (Wise 99) to have sex while Nora flirts with Genghis Khan - the American film producer. Genghis Khan leaves his lighted cigar on the table to dance with Nora, causing the tablecloth to catch fire. Deeply engrossed in the celebration of the body, no one notices the fire, till it spreads all over the place and creates a pandemonium. While Lynde court blazed, Nora and the waiter “naked as nature intended” (101), escape through the window
and unable to resist their "urgent promptings" (106) of passion continue with their sexual engagement in a shrubbery; Melchior enjoys a glass of champagne by the "fireside" (Wise 104) and mourns the loss of his "old crown of gilded cardboard" (106) which his father had worn while playing Lear. The odd, bizarre and abnormal behaviour portrayed by these characters while the house burned, seems implausible. This episode is evocative of "carnival time" – which gives licence to liberate from all reserve, decency and etiquette. At the same time it is a stinging critique of the behaviour and life style of the upper class and thus performs a significant function of Magic Realism which is an "implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite" (Williams 194).

Melchior Hazard's centenary celebration is also marked by magic realist elements. The most singular being Peregrine's unexpected and magical reappearance at the bash which "upstaged . . . plausibility" (Wise 207). He was followed by a swarm of "flapping" and "swirling" butterflies of different colours. The cake "hovered" and "veered off to one side" and the "chandelier shook" (207) at the approach of the "material ghost." Imogen's "bronze shift sequined in scales" and her headwear – "fishbowl on her head with a fish in it" (204) which was her way of promoting her programme for kids - Goldie the Goldfish is ridiculous to the point of absurdity. The scene in which the seventy five year old Dora and the centenarian Peregrine are shown making love, is totally bizarre: "... the agitation of the steel bed began to make the chandelier downstairs directly beneath it, shiver," (220) to such an extent that Nora who was downstairs
began to think that “the grand bouncing” would “fuck the house down” (220) along with the chandelier. The lights, camera and action, along with “drumrolls” (Wise 206), “baroque trumpets” (201) and the “uproar and commotion” (208) create a total bedlam at the party.

Carter’s love for the “make-believe” world and films was a life-long interest. It began during her childhood, when she accompanied her father to the cinemas. This particular interest finds expression in her novels. Carter, has travelled a long way from the private puppet show of The Magic Toyshop, to the vaudeville, the theatre and Hollywood as depicted in Wise Children. Her obsession with performance can be traced right from her first novel Shadow Dance, where Honeybuzzard with a penchant for making Jumping Jacks, also loved to “slip in and out” of himself. In Love, Lee has a different smile for different occasions whereas Annabel and Buzz thrive on melodrama. Uncle Philip in The Magic Toyshop considers the others around him as puppets and forces them to play different roles in his puppet shows.

Carter in Wise Children, deploys the tricks of pantomime and music hall – the bawdy and popular arts that gave rise to the cinema (in turn, harking back to magic lanterns, fairy tales and oral storytelling). Performance and theatre occupy a pivotal place in the novel. The inclusion of these aspects of the “make-believe” world within a realist text with rational aims and objectives makes this novel a Magic Realist work. The novel is divided into five chapters corresponding to the five acts of theatrical drama. Dora’s love and obsession with the stage prompts her to
make various theatrical references and at times even the simple details are presented in a way that make them similar to an act taking place on the stage. “I made my bow five minutes ahead of Nora” (2); “The curtain call of my career as a lover.” The Chance sisters’ first encounter with the stage that left them “mute with ecstasy” is described by Carter thus:

... and the wonderful curtain that hung between us and pleasure, the curtain that in delicious agony of anticipation, we knew would soon rise and then and then... what wonderful secrets would be revealed to us

‘You just wait and see,’ said Grandma.

The lights went down, the bottom of the curtain glowed. I loved it and have always loved it best of all, the moment when the lights go down, the curtain glows, you know that something wonderful is going to happen. It doesn’t matter if what happens next spoils everything; the anticipation itself is always pure. (Wise 54)

At the wedding party, Puck of The Dream makes a call for the “willing suspension of disbelief”: ‘It was only a paper moon, sailing over a cardboard sea. But it wouldn’t be make-believe, if you would believe in me...’ (157). Carter too, in guise of Dora - the narrator, seems to be conveying a similar appeal to the readers.

The verisimilitude in the novel is highly credible and compelling. Fiction is a marvel due to its “vivid evocation of reality, rather than because it is actually real.” The many mention of Melchior's "cardboard
crown, with the gold paint peeling off" (105) which Dora refers to as "a flimsy bit of make-believe", Peregrine's thrilling magical tricks, all the "behind-the-scene" technicalities of the set and the visual effects that are involved in making a believable and plausible drama, effectively create a semblance of reality.

There is a scene in the enchanted wood, where art (imaginary) and life (reality), suddenly gaze at each other, as Dora confronts her fiancé's ex-wife:

I saw my double. I saw myself, me, in my Peaseblossom costume, large as life, like looking in a mirror.

First off, I thought it was Nora, up to something, but it put its finger to its lips, to shush me, and I got a whiff of Mitsouko and then I saw it was a replica. A hand-made, custom-built replica, a wonder of the plastic surgeon's art . . .

"And after all, she looked very lifelike, I must say, if not, when I looked more closely, not all that much like me, more like a blurred photocopy or an artist's impression . . ." (Wise 155)

Later, Dora learns that Genghis Khan's ex-wife had gone under the knife and taken help of plastic-surgery to win back her ex-husband whom she loved madly. She had got her face and body parts altered in order to resemble her husband's new love Dora, and she becomes a close replica of her. Dora and Genghiz Khan are believed to be a loving couple by the
outside world but in reality Dora is well aware that their relationship was far from genuine, that Genghiz khan's proposal was not guided by love but by some ulterior motive. It is the love of ex- Mrs. Khan which is true and indisputable.

Carter speaks through the voice of Dora Chance — the high-spirited, deliciously witty chronicler, with strong feminist leanings and an exclusively inexorable appetite for drama. To the readers, Dora — the narrator comes across as being intelligent, articulate, gentle, loving and lewd; vulgar, disrespectful and forthright. Her narration is distinct by absolute candour as she readily accepts the fallibility of her memory and unpredictability of her narration. She comes clean about the omissions she chooses to make of the various faux pas of her life and of the periods of her life. Time and time again she expresses: "I have a memory, though I know it cannot be a true one . . ." (Wise 72), "I could have sworn that . . ." (217), "these days, half a century and more later, I might think I did not live but dreamed that night . . ." (158) and "I misremember. It was sixty-odd years ago you know" (68). Such confessions by the narrator are cues of "fictionality." At the same time she quotes songs from her distant past, memories are brought back to life through smells of perfumes and the narration of riveting episodes. This adds to the credibility of the novel and lures the readers into believing them; blending seamlessly the ordinary (real) and extraordinary (magical).

The book engages those who have knowledge and fondness for Shakespeare, whom Carter considered as "a champion of popular culture
and of illiterate and semi-literate communities” (Sanders 38). The novel is bursting with the Shakespearean paraphernalia of - twins, bastards, misshapen creatures, mistaken identities - ensuing confusion; “bed swaps” and “bed tricks”; strange lands (Hollywood); and effervescent characters from every walk of life. For the author, the Shakespearean plays become a medium for exploration of the different themes because they “dealt with comparable issues of sexuality and performance, social and geographical boundaries, and other kinds of luminal experience to do with time and the potential in our lives for the magical, the supernatural or otherworldly” (Sanders 39). Readers take delight in the very many reverberations of - King Lear, Winter’s Tale and Tempest, among others. The many “coincidental” links to Shakespeare and the intertextuality involved call for “the willing suspension of belief.”

The Gothic premise of decay is evident in the ageing of the various characters in the novel. Dora and Nora - the once “slim and trim and tender” dancing girls and “teenage sexpots” (Wise 94) are transformed into septuagenarian old ladies with “crow’s-feet, the grey hair and turkey wobblers” (208). Lady Atlanta Hazard – “the most beautiful woman of her time” (194) is confined to a wheelchair following an accidental fall. The “gloriously handsome” Melchior Hazard was now “a touch unsteady on his pins, inclined to wobble” (218). There were others like “My Lady Margarine” who tried defying age by “nip and tuck” (199) and Daisy Duck who took the help of “hormone replacement therapy” (202). The fall of the British Empire, too, is commented upon in a chance meeting with
Gorgeous George outside the Hazard residence at Melchior’s birthday party, when Nora ironically reflected “Lo, how the mighty have fallen” (196), after taking a look at the outlines of Europe and Africa tattooed on his torso. The decay of the once “Clown Number One to the British Empire” (Wise 150-51) becomes a metaphor for the decay of the once powerful British Empire.

The Gothic theme of incest recurs in almost all the novels of Carter. Many Incestuous relationships have been depicted in Wise Children along with the various illicit relationships. Dora’s incestuous relationship with Peregrine (her fraternal Uncle) begins when she was thirteen. “I thought I must have had it off with Peregrine!!! Dread and delight coursed through my veins; I thought what have I done...” (63). In the last chapter, Carter establishes the fact of their being a couple by recounting their copulation which had the power to “fuck the house down” (220). Lady Atlanta Hazard’s covert incestuous relationship with Peregrine (her brother-in-law) is acknowledged at Melchior’s birthday party by the Lady herself. The relationship grew while Melchior was engaged in his “titanic conquest” and Lady Atlanta “was left lonely, with [her] empty womb” (216). Saskia and Imogen turn out to be Peregrine’s biological daughters. Another case of incest is the relationship between Saskia and Tristram her half-brother and her best friend’s son.

Wise Children depicts Carter as “a mellowing writer . . . settling into an avancular middle-age” (Gamble 164). The appalling violence and brutality of the earlier novels is replaced by “geniality.” Though less
ornamented, the narrative still reverberates with energy, exuberance and “high-kicking gusto.” The novel is written in an unmistakably Cartarian style but it seems far more light-hearted than her early books like *Love* or *The Magic Toyshop*. The narrative is also infused with autobiographical elements from Carter’s own family history. The accounts of the war years have a direct link to Carter’s life as a child at Wath-upon-Dearne during the wartime. The delineation of the character of Grandma Chance: “She was our air-raid shelter; she was our entertainment; she was our breast” (*Wise* 29) links her directly to Carter’s maternal grandmother who was a woman of “physical and spiritual heaviness.” Carter’s Aunt Cynthia (Aunt Kitty – her moniker) was the inspiration behind the portrayal of the Chance sisters. The novelist manages to evoke a vivid picture of the numerous characters with such vital interest, that the readers get trapped in the story of their life.

The novel takes the readers on an adventure through London, Brixton, Brighton and across Atlantic to New York and Hollywood. *Wise Children* is bawdy, sentimental, dazzling and warm, evoking laughter and tears all at once. “A diabolically clever mix of pathos and humour maintains the balance between realism and a sense of the ridiculous which is unmistakeably Carter. Her legendary tongue twisting, mind bending, linguistic pyrotechnics is in full flower and display throughout” (*Wise*, back cover).

*Wise Children* deals with events that encroach into the fantastical as well as realistic domains without permanently inhabiting either of
them. Dora - the narrator makes frequent shifts from the fantastical occurrence to the realistic happenings and vice versa. Carter heightens the intensity of the novel by weaving layers of meaning into the text. The events narrated, often function at a literal, referential and metaphoric level. Magic Realism – with its varying constituents/elements, performs diverse functions in the novel. At times it lends the narrative an emotional quality or gives it a metaphoric significance. On very many occasions, it evokes cultural subtleties and nuances, offering an assessment of human nature and an implicit critique of society. The narrative celebrates the cycle of life, death and transformation and at the same time draws our attention towards - the transience of human life. The conclusion of the novel is marked by hope and optimism/birth and regeneration which fit with its unrealistic and magical aspect and the dramatic nature of all the major characters and the relationships they share.
Works Cited


