MAGIC REALISM AND GOTHIC TRADITION IN THE NOVELS OF ANGELA CARTER

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at discovering and analysing Magic Realism and Gothic Tradition in the novels of Angela Carter.

Carter believed human beings to be the pure product of history, culture and circumstances. True to her own view, the author's life — her childhood days; the influence of her family (grandmother and parents); the war years (World War II); her life in Bristol; the era in which she lived - the counterculture of the 60s; and her career as a journalist — played a significant role in making her the indomitable and richly talented writer she was. These aspects of her life also provide an autobiographical quality to some of her novels. Her degree in Medieval literature (which lends an allegorical dimension to her novels); her vast reading of eccentric and eclectic literature, and her travels enriched her intellectual acumen and stimulated her artistic ingenuity.

Carter's iconoclasm - her vision of unshackling reality; creating a new liberated world; and a utopian vision of the freedom of woman is reflected in her writings. A break with conventions and traditions runs through her narratives. The novelist has appropriated magic realist techniques in conjunction with the Gothic nomenclature to subvert the boundaries of conventional narrative strategies; displace traditionally established discourses; and counter the established truths and values of Western culture. The magic realist and Gothic writings of Carter, become a medium of social, cultural and political critique.

The novelist has used Gothicism right from her first novel — which is more or less sustained through all her novels. She works within the framework of the classic Gothic literature and employs Gothic conventions, reworked/remoulded within the contemporary reality. The
Gothicism of her early novels paves way for the development of her later art - Magic Realism - her supreme achievement. Carter's early works are suffused with an ingenious display of generic traits of Gothicism along with Surrealism. Magic Realism and Surrealism can be realized as an outcome of the Gothic Tradition. The dissemination of Gothic features across texts and literary periods, distinguish the Gothic as a hybrid form - incorporating and transforming other literary modes as well as developing and altering its own conventions in relation to novel forms of writing.

The thesis consists of an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter has an introduction followed by the synoptic view of the plot of the text under study, a detailed, exhaustive analysis of the techniques involved and the conclusion reached. The Introduction to the thesis gives an insight into the life, career and extensive writings of Carter.

Chapter 1 presents an appraisal of the techniques under study - Magic Realism, Gothic Tradition and Surrealism. These strategies are the cornerstones of this research work. Therefore, a close assessment of these terms, the understanding of their historical background and their defining characteristics becomes imperative.

Chapter 2 analyses three novels of Carter - Shadow Dance (1966), Several Perception (1968) and Love (1971) - clubbed together because of the similarities and correspondences in style, thematic concerns, plot and their setting of the 1960s England. These early novels do not possess highly fantastical characters, events or supernatural elements. Nevertheless, their analysis becomes essential to understand the novelist's later skilful and imaginative engagement with Magic Realism. Carter's oeuvre needs to be read in continuum to realize her development from a realist to a magic realist writer. Carter's depiction of realism, aims at
discovering the mysterious and inexplicable relationship between man and his circumstances, and is aided by her use of Gothicism as well as her fantastical/surreal descriptions. The novels abound in surrealist imagery (chiefly depicted with the aid of dreams and hallucinations), carnival, myths and fairy tales which are often classified under the nomenclature of Magic Realism. Thus, these early novels depict Magic Realism in its nascent phase.

These novels possess distinctive Gothic spaces, themes and machinery. The decaying old houses where Honeybuzzard and Morris go to collect antiques, and the derelict Victorian house where Ghislaine is murdered (Shadow Dance); the disintegrating mansion, the site of a "Dionysiac" revel (Several Perceptions); and the desolate, decaying and alienated eighteenth century park (Love) are examples of the Gothic setting.

In Shadow Dance, Ghislaine with her hideous deformity – a "revolting scar" is the damsel in distress as well as the "monstrous feminine." Honeybuzzard - the writer's "fledgling figure", who will graduate into the sexual predators and puppet masters of her later novels, is the vicious and brutal villain of the Gothic novels. The Gothic motif of conflict between good and evil is depicted through the character of Morris. Carter employs clichés of Gothic motifs like hooting of an owl, deserted cemetery, old churchyard along with the sinister suggestiveness of the night in various scenes of the book. The theme of search for identity which is central to many Gothic writings is depicted through the character of Joseph in Several Perceptions.

In Love, Annabel's madness (inability to relate to the real world) - her hamartia, develops the Gothic premise of decay and imprisonment. Her suicide becomes her flight of escape - from the agonies of internal
(imaginative) and external (real) world, and from the shackles of patriarchy. Buzz with his diabolic appearance and homosexual leaning is the modern re-embodiment of the Gothic desperado. The novel also draws attention to the boundaries between sanity and madness; between upper middle-class and bourgeoisie.

Chapter 3 examines *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) wherein Carter blends biblical allusions, myths and fairy tales, to create a dream-like world. She successfully demythologizes the myth (Leda and the Swan) and fairy tales (Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast, Bluebeard) by dissecting them and making them less mysterious and mythical thus enabling the readers to connect and relate to them. Albeit *The Magic Toyshop* is structured like a fairy tale, it is not a traditional fantastic tale that aims to surprise. Her fantasy is deeply rooted in realism and aims at subverting traditional patterns of patriarchy, femininity and sexuality.

Uncle Philip's dilapidated house; the once stately middle-class neighbourhood and park (where Finn takes Melanie for a walk), are the quintessential Gothic setting. Melanie is the re-embodiment of the Gothic heroine - a lonesome and vulnerable female. Uncle Philip is the impulsive and tyrannical Gothic male of the novel, who attempts to control Melanie's sexuality through his puppet show. His character develops the Gothic theme of sexual and patriarchal oppression and the theme of imprisonment. The novel also deals with boundaries and transgression of boundaries - between a young girl and a woman; between upper middle class and the poor working class; and between the English and the Irish. The Gothic theme of incestuous relationships also finds place in the novel. The house (nurturing incestuous relationship) meets a destiny similar to that in conventional Gothic, when it is burnt down by Uncle Phillip.
Melanie's desire of flight (a Gothic motif) is fulfilled when she and Finn break out of the burning house at Aunt Margaret's insistence.

Chapter 4 deals with *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). The novelist like a true magic realist merges both a careful observation of the real and the power of imagination to create an artificial construct. The narrative begins with a realist description of the mundane city, followed by a detailed account of the fantastical invasion of the city by Doctor Hoffman's desire machines. The city is transformed into a realm of weird and bizarre happenings and an abode of evil - ghosts, apparitions, mirages, madness, death and decay. The meeting of the Minister with Dr Hoffman's emissary (a magical and mysterious presence) is suffused with Magic Realism - fusing of lights and flickering of flames. Carter has employed the "Kafkaesque" image of metamorphosis, in presentation of Albertina, who transforms herself into various fantastic forms. The travelling fair, peopled by bizarre and grotesque characters like the bearded Madame de la Barbe; the phallic female Mamie Buckskin; and the nine Moroccan acrobats is the re-creation of the carnivalesque by Carter. The novelist has also introduced the concept of hybridity (with the aid of the bizarre race of centaurs) - an important machinery employed by magic realist writers. The juxtaposition of the inharmonious groups of people - African tribe; the race of centaurs; the bestial whores in the "House of Anonymity"; and the eccentric assortment of characters of the travelling fair within the narrative lends a magical quality to it.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is replete with Gothic elements. The "Mansion of Midnight", the "House of Anonymity" and Dr Hoffman's "Wagnerian castle" provide the Gothic landscape. 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, incest - intrinsic to the Gothic Tradition are close at hand.

Chapter 5 studies and analyses in detail *Nights at the Circus* (1984) - Carter's penultimate novel. The book is the epitome of her experimentation with Magic Realism - the brilliant unification of myth and reality, of implausible events and stark realism. Carter creates an entire world wherein the readers lose their ability to discriminate between the real and unreal. The juxtaposition of the fantastical presence of Fevvers against the dark and dismal reality; her metamorphosis into a hybrid bird-woman; her magical escape from the Grand Duke's palace; the travelling circus - with its array of eccentric characters; Walser's amnesia; the drumming trees; all lend the narrative a magic realist atmosphere. Keeping with the mysterious spirit of Magic Realism, the first pages of the book create a sense of disbelief that continues right till the end of the novel and Fevvers existence remains a chimera. At the same time the various references to the turn of the new century - 20th century and the major preoccupations of the time - female franchise, concept of New Woman, class struggle, etc., lend to the narrative a realistic quality/foundation.

Fevvers is the subversion of the "angelic" Gothic heroine and all that is considered feminine by social construct, nevertheless, like a Gothic heroine, she seduces Walser with her storytelling and hypnotizes him with her magical wings. She becomes the very embodiment of the Gothic heroine, when she is entrapped and imprisoned within the walls of distinctive Gothic spaces - Ma Nelson's brothel, Madame Shareck's Gothic museum, Rosencreutz's Gothic mansion, clown alley and Grand Duke's palace. The Gothic theme of decay is palpable both in concrete as
well as abstract form. The novel also depicts the boundary between the real and the fantastical; and between the elite and the outcast.

Chapter 6 discusses *Wise Children* (1991) in detail. The commingling of realistic details (the World War II, the changing city of London) and characters with elements of fantasy and the absurd give rise to Magic Realism in the text. The character of Peregrine; the superfluous presence of twins; the many coincidental links to Shakespeare; the Lynde Court party, the scene of the three weddings and Melchior Hazard's centenary celebration (all characterised by absurdity, chaos and the carnivalesque); depiction of the world of theatrical illusion and make-believe (lights, camera, action); the non-linear depiction of time; the authorial reticence; the acceptance of fallibility of memory and unpredictability of narration by the narrator; the frequent shifts from the fantastical occurrence to the realistic happenings and vice versa add to the magic realist texture of the narrative and challenge the credibility of the readers. Carter heightens the intensity of the novel by weaving layers of meaning into the text with her implicit criticism of society.

*Wise Children* analogous to Gothic novels also posits the theme of decay, the premise of incestuous relationships and the great cultural divide of the British social system - North London and South London; the legitimate and illegitimate; tragedies/comedies of Shakespeare and music hall/pantomime etc.

The conclusion, offers a brief outline of findings of this study. The in-depth reading of Carter's oeuvre, in order to discover and analyse Magic Realism and Gothic Tradition, also leads to a conclusion that though her early novels abound in surrealist descriptions, later as she matured as a writer, she distanced herself from Surrealism, as it was not serving her authorial intention/purpose - to bring about change and
create a new and liberated world. Thus Surrealism gradually gave way to Magic Realism, which was to become her finest achievement. Surrealism has been a major constituent of Magic Realism — which is a blend of fantasy and reality. The fantastical in Magic Realism, is often the product of surrealist imagery employed by the writers of this genre. But Magic Realism cannot be a part of Surrealism which deals with the overtly imaginative - the tousled and surreal world of the unconscious.

An important aspect to take cognition in these novels is that these techniques — Magic Realism and Gothic Tradition, gain in significance because of Carter's use of language and style adopted, along with the bizarre situations and background settings. Contents and themes are consistent, but Carter's artfulness lies in the variety and multitudinous description which rests on her style and expression. Her language adds to the profundity of the novel and leaves the readers marvelling at her vast reading and in-depth knowledge. On the other hand these techniques give her the licence to play with language and communicate her deepest concerns. Her writing — beautiful and intelligent, becomes an art form with infinite possibilities, empowered by her language. She is a magician who conjures up a dreamlike amalgamation of fantasy, horror and coarse realism often against a Gothic background and has the ability to transform the world into the magical with extreme artistry and the sheer power of her words.