Carnival of the Dispossessed:
Nights at the Circus and Wise Children

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Chapter 5
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*Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*

The last two novels by Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* are both carnivalized texts that explode sexist ideologies and expose the relative nature of prevailing truths. The narratives of both the novels are controlled by their female protagonists. As performing artistes they are typical carnival-grotesque characters. Fevvers, the heroine of *Nights at the Circus* is an aerialiste while Nora and Dora in *Wise Children* are music hall artistes. All three of them belong to the ignoble section of society marked by shame and infamy. Fevvers is an orphan brought up in a brothel whereas Dora and Nora are illegitimate twins disowned by their father. Nevertheless, the ability of the heroines to shatter all cultural and sexist differences makes the final victory theirs. True to the function of the carnival, all social, sexist and cultural barriers are overthrown thereby allowing for the free mingling of people.

By taking control of their own story, the female narrators assume a position of authority from where they freely express their thoughts and feelings without the intervention of the male voice. Linden Peach observes:

> Autobiography is one of the strategies by which women can take responsibility for their own sense of self in a restricted and
restrictive environment or milieu, challenging the traditional appropriation of women’s lives and histories by men. Self-making is an essential element in women’s autobiography and the notion of the self as “subject in process” is important to both *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* (133).

By assigning the absolute control over their story to the female narrators, Carter gives them power to challenge an oppressive patriarchy and represent the emotions, frustrations and desires of women in a truly female light. Through these carnivalized texts, Carter disrupts the strategies employed by the official culture to consolidate and maintain the hierarchical structure of society. The august air of official culture is as a consequence, undermined.

The heroine of *Nights at the Circus* is Fevvers who is described in the novel as the most famous aerialiste of the times. Her slogan “Is she fact or is she fiction” illustrates her ambiguous nature. As a freak possessing a real pair of wings she is a typically grotesque character. She claims to have been hatched into the world and not born in the manner of ordinary human beings. Fevvers contains within herself a clash of opposites. This heterogeneity enhances the grotesque quality of the character. She is crude and bawdy but erudite at the same time. She belongs to the lowest class of the society yet moves among the circle of famous writers and artists of the times. In spite of her disgusting habits, she is charming. Mary Russo observes that she is “an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes
painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque” (Revamping Spectacle 137).

Jack Walser, the American journalist, comes to interview her with the intention of unraveling the mystery of the “Cockney Venus” and to expose her as a fraud. Fewers defies his attempts to prove her a fake by taking command of her own story right from the beginning. Magali Cornier Michael remarks that, “Fewers asserts authority over her own story-history and evades attempts by Walser to fix an identity upon her” (496). The fact that Walser is almost blown over by the flapping of her wings as he watches Fewvers’s performance is suggestive of his loss of control over the narrative. Walser is caught up in the magical spell of the narrative unfolded by Fewvers and Lizzie, her foster mother:

He continued to take notes in a mechanical fashion but, as the women unfolded the convolutions of their joint story together, he felt more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool [. . .] or a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night (NC 40).

Even time seems to stand still during Fewvers’ narration of her story. Walser gets an uncanny feeling when he hears the Big Ben striking midnight thrice that same night. The sceptic Walser soon becomes a slave to her charms and follows her enthralled.
Except for the pair of wings, there is nothing angelic about Fewvers. With her gargantuan appetite and earthy, coarse manners, Fewvers is a typical carnival-grotesque figure. Indulgence in eating and drinking is the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. In the act of eating, the individual body interacts with the world and gains a cosmic quality. In the act of eating man triumphs over the world and the boundaries between him and world are erased. Food and drink have the power to liberate human speech (Bakhtin Rabelais 281).

Walser is staggered at the quantity of food placed before Fewvers: "[. . .] hot meat pies with a glutinous ladleful of eel gravy on each; a Fujiyama of mashed potatoes; a swamp of dried peas cooked up again and served swimming in greenish liquor" (NC 22). However, Fewvers with a little support from Lizzie finishes it all in no time:

[. . .] she tucked 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 and table manners of the Elizabethan variety [. . .] at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched (NC 22).

In the course of the interview, she keeps drinking and finishes an entire case of champagne. When there is no more champagne left, she pours "pots of tea
down her gullet”. She throws away measures and just tips “sugar into her steaming mug directly from the bag in a stream” (NC 43). Fewers is a “marvellous giantess” whom only superlatives may adequately describe. Emma Parker comments: “A self-indulgent Epicurean, Fewers makes a joyous spectacle of her appetite and self-consciously challenges conventional notions of female delicacy and propriety” (159).

According to Bakhtin, apart from eating and drinking, activities like belching, yawning and breaking wind are manifestations of the grotesque body. The grotesque body defies the regulations of the classic body with its closed, smooth surface that limits it as a separate phenomenon. The grotesque body is cosmic and universal (Rabelais 318). Fewers with her unabashed, vulgar and indecorous ways completely neglects the cultural stereotype of woman and becomes a true carnival-grotesque figure. She overcomes the confines of the classic body and the confines between the body and the world through her bodily activities. While being interviewed by Walser, Fewers: “Shifted from one buttock to the other and – ‘better out than in, sir’ – let a ripping fart ring round the room” (NC12). Even when she yawns, Walser feels, it is not that of a tired girl yawning:

Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed
she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk

(\textit{NC 52}).

Such activities as these indicate the grotesque quality of Fevvers's character and expose its universality. She challenges the notion of the feminine through her grotesque body and her unseemly behaviour.

According to Bakhtin, the carnival-grotesque forms exercise the function of sanctifying inventive freedom. The formalization of carnival-grotesque images permits them to be used in many different ways and for various purposes by allowing the combination of a variety of different elements in a state of cordiality. Thus it offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world (\textit{Rabelais 34}). These features of the carnival-grotesque forms are reflected in Fevvers. Instead of being discouraged by the coarse manners of Fevvers, Walser is rather impressed and enjoys the interview thoroughly. By making Fevvers, a carnival-grotesque figure Carter disrupts the conventional ideas of a heroine and even of the female. Carter's heroine challenges the official culture which ascribes certain codes of behaviour to certain distinct classes in society.

The polished manners of Jack Walser the refined journalist and representative of high culture suffer a rude shock when he interviews Fevvers. Walser who feels quite ill at ease in the presence of the aerialiste wants to escape for a while: “'Ouch – excuse me, ma'am, the call of nature.'"
Fewers offers him an easy way out: "'Piss in the pot behind the screen love, go on. We don't stand on ceremony.'" With this invitation to "piss", Walser's pretensions to decorum disappear: "The act of engaging in this most human of activities brought him down to earth again, for there is no element of the metaphysical about pissing [...]" (NC 52). According to Keith Booker: "Carter overturns society's strictures against the lower bodily stratum with carnivalesque exuberance, using the tremendous levelling power of excremental functions to undercut pretentiousness" (229).

Ma Nelson's brothel where Fewers is brought up has a carnival status. It overthrows the popular concept of a whorehouse being a place for immoral trafficking. Fewers calls it a "decent house" where the "ladies" introduce themselves to the "gentlemen" (NC 23). The stigma that society attaches to prostitutes is completely absent and they are presented in a positive light. Fewers's depiction of the house as having an "air of rectitude and propriety" and as being "a place of privilege" (NC 26) is outrageous if judged by the standards of the high culture. Michael observes:

The novel's presentation of prostitutes in a positive light and prostitution in non moral terms as well as its use of an extraordinary heroine with wings are carnivalesque disruption of established norms. The physical description of the whorehouse itself further establishes its carnival status [...]. The whorehouse of the novel's London section is a carnival
sphere, in the sense that it defies established conventions and codes; it becomes other than what it is generally thought to be and thus challenges the ruling order (504-08).

By adapting the language and style usually reserved to describe the culturally sanctioned institutions in order to depict the whorehouse, Carter subverts the hierarchical difference imposed by high culture and debases it.

There are several other instances in the novel where high and low cultures are brought together so as to shatter the pretensions and artificial boundaries between them. Fewers is believed to have had acquaintance with all famous painters and writers of the nations that she has visited. These representatives of the high culture vie with one another to entertain her. There are several instances in the novel where works of famous authors are parodied. Certain great things which are generally treated with reverence, are juxtaposed with images of low culture and reduced to bathos. In one scene Walser's recital of Shakespeare coincides with the beastly copulation of the strong man with Mignon: "'What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!' The strong man accomplished his orgasm in a torrent of brutish shrieks, such a hullabaloo that Walser stumbled over his recitation [. . .]" (NC 111). While Fevvers is narrating to Walser the story of her life at Ma Nelson's, she makes a reference to Baudelaire and this astonishes him: "'I put it down to the influence of Baudelaire, sir'. 'What's this?' cried Walser, amazed enough to drop his professional imperturbability"
Such interjections at most unexpected places by the most unseemly persons wipe out the difference between high and low culture.

There are several such juxtapositions of images of high culture with images of low culture in the “London” section of the novel. Ma Nelson’s drawing room is said to be decorated with the original paintings of great masters like Titian. But the effect is immediately destroyed by Lizzie’s anecdote about how Ma Nelson has come to possess it:

Curioser and Curioser, thought Walser; a one-eyed, metaphysical madame, in Whitechapel, in possession of a Titian? Shall I believe it? Shall I pretend to believe in it?

‘Some bloke whose name I misremember give’er the pictures,’ said Lizzie. ‘He liked her on account of how she shaved her pubes’.

Fevvers gave Lizzie a disapproving glance but spoiled the effect by giggling (NC 28).

The possession of an original work of a great master, considered to be a matter of pride and a symbol of superior taste and status by the high-society is made to look ridiculous because of the kind of connection made here. This carnivalesque strategy pricks the bubble of pretentiousness of the high culture, allowing those who belong to low culture to gain an edge of advantage. The same kind of effect is achieved where the reference to Ma Nelson’s library is made. Walser gets another jolt to hear that Ma Nelson’s
whorehouse had a library and that everyone of them including Fevvers used to spend most of their leisure time in pursuit of knowledge:

‘Library?’ He queried indefatigably, if a touch wearily.

‘E left it to er,’ said Lizzie.

‘Who left what to whom?’

‘This old geyser. Left Nelson ‘is library. On account of she was the only woman in London who could get it up for him—’

(FC 40).

Yet again, something, which is a mark of the elite and the scholarly, is made to look trivial through the grotesque association made here.

Unlike the carnivalized world of Ma Nelson’s brothel, Madame Schreck’s museum for women monsters is a gloomy and terrifying world. It takes the readers temporarily to the murky world of the terrible grotesque. The sinister gloom that pervades the whole atmosphere is threatened and overcome through the efforts of Fevvers and her companions. From the Madame of the house to her servant, all the inhabitants are grotesques. They are physically deformed and inhuman. Madame Schreck herself is a living skeleton. Her manservant Toussaint has no mouth and hence cannot protest against the goings on in the house. The girls in the house are all freaks of nature. Fanny is a girl with four eyes, two on her face and two in place of her nipples. The girl who is called the “sleeping beauty” wakes up only once a day, that too only for a few minutes. “The Wiltshire wonder” is not even
three foot high and “Albert/Albertina” is bipartite. All of them are kept as exhibits in the dark cavernous cellar of Madame Schreck’s house. Being freaks of nature, they prefer to remain in the dark interior of Madame’s house and be the object of the gaze of the perverted men who visit the house rather than be gazed at by the whole world. As Fevvers puts it: “Madame Schreck, she catered for those who were troubled in their [. . .] souls” (NC 57). Every girl in the house has a tragic past and her present is no different. Fevvers describes the place as being as terrifying as hell: “[. . .] for there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them” (NC 62). With the timely intervention of Fevvers and Toussaint, Madame Schreck is subdued and the girls are released.

The violence inherent in the patriarchal world is not much foregrounded in this novel. In the two instances where Fevvers confronts the evil patriarchal figure, she subdues it with her will to survive. The first instance is her encounter with the mad scientist figure, Mr. Rosencreutz. He takes Fevvers to his gothic castle with the intention of sacrificing her. A follower of the phallic cult, he believes that by sacrificing her he will attain immortality and perpetual youth. Though a sense of impending danger pervades the whole scene, the grandiloquent style of Mr. Rosencreutz clashes with the flippant tone of the narration making it look ridiculous. He informs Fevvers that by uniting with her he hopes to get more power and asks her to lie on the altar. It is only then that she realizes his real intention:
[... ] I glimpsed, peering over my shoulder, a shining something lying along his hairy old, gnarled old thigh as his robe swung loose. This something was a sight more aggressive than his other weapon, poor thing, that bobbed about uncharged, unprimed, and unsharpened [... ] in the cold, gray light of May morning, I saw this something was – a blade (NC 83).

The sight of the blade rouses Fewvers into activity. She subdues him with another phallic symbol – Ma Nelson’s sword that she always carries for self-defence. The phallic symbol which Mr. Rosencreutz worships is ridiculed and its purpose is defeated by Fewvers. In a similar encounter she later escapes the Russian Grand Duke, whose evil intention is to shrink her and keep her shut in a miniature bird cage.

Colonel Kearney’s Circus which Fewvers joins becomes the elaborate site of Carnival misalliances and eccentricities. Circuses and sideshows are themselves reduced versions of the carnival. The circus courtyard where a major part of the action takes place becomes a carnival square with its familiar contacts, disguises, scandals and decrownings. By using these techniques of carnivalization, Carter succeeds in presenting an Utopian vision where without the barrier of gender distinctions, cultural disparity and social status, people exist side by side to create a better world.
Colonel Kearney's Grand Imperial Circus shifts the scene of action from London to Petersburg, a city "on the threshold". Bakhtin in his study of the carnivalized works of Dostoevsky says that Petersburg becomes the right setting of action for a carnivalized work:

It is characteristic that the very setting for the action of the novel – Petersburg – is on the borderline between existence and nonexistence, reality and phantasmagoria, always on the verge of dissipating like the fog and vanishing. Petersburg too is devoid, as it were, of any internal grounds for justifiable stabilization; it too is on the threshold (Bakhtin, *Problems* 167).

This same carnivalized sense of Petersburg is conveyed through *The Nights* also. Petersburg is described as the "loveliest of all hallucinations, the shimmering mirage in the Northern wilderness" and as "a city built of hubris, imagination and desire" (*NC* 96-7).

The most highly carnivalesque scene in the novel is included in the Petersburg section where Walser is accepted into the midst of the clowns. The initiation ceremony in his honour turns out to be the occasion for the clowns to perform all manner of eccentricities, carnivalistic obscenities and profanations. Buffo the head clown, in the parody of last supper sits in Christ's place and serves from a cauldron:
Rising ceremoniously to his feet, the Master clown fished within the cauldron and found there all manner of rude things knickers, lavatory brushes, and yard upon yard of lavatory paper. (Anality, the one quality that indeed they shared with children) Chamber-pots appeared from nowhere and soon several wore them on their heads, while Buffo served up more and yet more disgusting tid bits from the magic depths of his pot and dealt them with imperial prodigality about his retinue (NC 124-5).

Thus they celebrate “the primal slime” in a carnivalistic parodying of last supper. More obscenities linked with bodily lower stratum are found in the dance of the buffoons. The dance which begins on a funny tone turns into a “dreadful libel upon the whole notion of dancing”. It turns out to be bitter and cruel:

As they danced, they began rhythmically to pelt one another with left over crusts of black bread and emptied their vodka bottles over one another's heads, mugged pain, resentment, despair, agony, death, rose up and pelted, emptied, turn and turn about. [ . . . ] What beastly, obscene violence they mimed! A joey thrust the vodka bottle up the arsehole of an august; the august, in response, promptly dropped his tramp's trousers to reveal a virile member of priapic size, bright purple in colour
and spotted with yellow stars, dangling two cerise balloons from the fly. At that a second august, with an evil leer, took a great pair of shears out of his back pocket and sliced the hurried thing off but as soon as he was brandishing it in triumph above his head another buried phallus appeared in the place of the first, this one bright blue with scarlet polkadots and cerise testicles, and so on, until the clown with the shears was juggling with a dozen of the things (NC 124).

This phallic grotesquerie is not just meant to be part of the general transgressive mood of the novel, it also suggests the cyclic death and rebirth motif of the carnival. Though highly obscene and comical, the scene is suggestive of the underlying violence in the lives of the clowns. They are in fact challenging the “great ring master in the sky” (NC 120), who has doomed the clowns to a life of pain and humiliation. They react rudely and vehemently against a system that refuses to see them as human beings with feelings and emotions like others. The suppressed disquietude beneath the merry façade of the clowns’ lives is revealed through the increasing number of suicides among them. The paradoxical nature of the clowns’ lives is reflected in Buffo’s words “Despair is the constant companion of the clown” (NC 119). Buffo is forced to take part in the show and make others laugh even immediately after receiving the news of his daughter’s death. Personal
tragedy must not affect the show it must go on. When he cries his heart out in
the ring, people laugh taking it for another comic piece by the clown.

Buffo's enactment of the resurrection in the presentation called the
clown's funeral too is highly carnivalesque. At the climax of the clowns'
Christmas dinner, Buffo starts to disintegrate himself by spinning round and
round. The fallen Buffo is put in a coffin and the funeral march begins. But
Buffo bursts through the coffin lid asserting life. In the carnival, death is
always presented in a positive light as it heralds birth. The clown's rebirth
also suggests the return of the repressed; it reminds that the upper stratum has
no existence without the lower stratum. This carnivalesque episode while
showing the merry life of the clowns also exposes the pathos and violence in
their life. Thus the carnivalesque mode becomes a vehicle that depicts the true
nature of things.

Carnival presents the picture of a topsy-turvy world where the order of
things is reversed. It is a world turned upside down and inside out. Carnival
life is free and unrestricted, full of debasings and obscenities. It brings about
familiar contact with everyone and everything (Bakhtin Problems 130). In a
scene of carnivalistic debasement, Walser who joins the circus incognito is
made into an object and forced to stand naked before Mr. Lamarck's educated
chimps: "Now Walser wore nothing but the dunce's cap [. . .]. Walser stood
before them nude and exemplary[. . .]. Walser wilted under the scrutiny of the
eyes of his little cousins twice removed (NC 110). A disruption of the hierarchical order takes place here when a human being is subjected to a study by animals. Carnival becomes a site of hierarchical disruption where all distinctions between the high and the low are erased.

Walser's plan to remain in disguise fails when he is injured in his attempt to save Mignon, the wife of Mr. Lamarck, the Ape-Man, from the attack of the tiger. The anatomy lesson of the chimps is interrupted with the intervention of the escaped tiger that comes in hot pursuit of Sybil, Colonel Kearney's pig. But, when it finds "something better than pork" is "on the menu" (NC 112), the tiger turns towards Mignon. Though the scene is one of suspense and terror, its comic presentation replaces horror with mirth. The Strong Man abandons his lover in the lurch: "The Strong Man tore off the woman's clinging arms, clutched his loincloth round his privates and made for the auditorium door" (NC 111). Seeing the tiger, the Ape-Man's wife lets out "a blood-curdling scream" which attracts the tiger's attention to her. Walser the clown hurls himself towards the tiger: "Involuntary as his heroics, Walser let rip a tremendous, wordless war-cry: here comes the clown to kill the Tiger!" (NC 112). The incident exposes Walser before Fevvers and he is lowered in esteem in her eyes as she suspects him of having an affair with Mignon:

'So you've run away to join the circus, have you, love?' she asked not quite pleasantly.
Evidently she no longer felt the need to call him ‘Sir’ [. . .] he felt himself much diminished in their eyes and was glad to get out of the dressing-room. In some pain and painfully aware that, by the very ‘heroicness’ of his extravagant gesture, he had made a fool of himself just as the Colonel had predicted he would [. . .] (NC114).

Walser is only being initiated into the life of a clown. He has to suffer more humiliations in order to perfect the art of clowning. Walser is made to pose as a human chicken in a trick improvised by the clowns for him:

‘Crow like a cock.’

‘Cock-a-doodle-do,’ said Walser obediently[. . .].

‘Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,’ intoned Buffo, ‘I give him and you can take him! - the Human Chicken!’

Grik found an egg, not too fresh, inside his fiddle and tossed it between Walser's eyes. Buffo creaked approval. Grok found a couple of eggs in the belly of his tambourine. Amid ululations of glee, all the clowns followed suit, whipping eggs out of various parts of their clothing and anatomies, and pelted Walser until egg liquor streamed down his face, blinding him (NC 152).

The clowns further torment Walser by tripping him. His balked gestures of fury and his comic wound look extremely funny to them giving rise to
hilarious amusement. Degradation, the essential principle of grotesque realism is demonstrated here. The thrashings, abuses and smirching with dirt are not personal punishments but symbolic actions directed at something on a higher level. The abuses and bringing down to earth have a positive aspect in carnival: “The abuse and thrashings are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other true face of the abused; it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the kings uncrowning” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 197).

Walser thus learns to stand the humiliation, becomes part of the circus, and does not remain an outsider. The process of degradation that he goes through destroys Walser’s bourgeois ego and helps him see life in an entirely different light. He lets go of his inhibitions, hypocrisy and his skepticism. As Carter herself says in an interview with Haffenden, Walser becomes a serious person:

[…] his rather two-dimensional idea of himself – as the foreign correspondent, the person in control, the permanent bystander, with the privileged marginality of the journalist – has to be broken down before he can become […] not a fit mate for Fevvers at all, but a serious person (89).

When Walser represents one kind of American rationalism, Colonel Kearney, who “presides over the carnival like proceedings” (NC 146), of the circus, represents another type of rationalism rooted in entrepreneurship.
With his overconfidence, mercenary patriotism and air of pomposity, Colonel Kearney becomes a grotesque parody of the American entrepreneur. He runs his ludic game with the help of his pig, Sybil which he believes to possess oracular powers. This again is an instance of carnival inversion where the human being is made to act according to the advice of an animal and that too the one considered the basest. Keith Booker observes that: “Pigs have historically had a special association with both the carnivalesque and the abject” (238). Theorists like Stallybrass and White too categorize pigs and rats as “symbolically base and abject animals” (5). Colonel Kearney debases himself by turning to an abject creature for advice.

In the topsy-turvy world of the circus, the distinction between the human and the animal is disrupted. In addition to the chimps anatomy class using Walser, there are many more instances in the novel where the so-called superior beings are debased and controlled by animals. The chimps make Colonel Kearney obey them and re-write the contract made by Monsieur Lamarck, the Ape-Man, according to their requirements. The Professor Ape gives a note to the Colonel:

Nature did not give me vocal cords but left the brain out of Monsieur Lamarck. He is a hopeless drunk with no business sense. I therefore propose to take over all the business management of the “Educated Apes” and demand the salary and
expenses formerly payable to Monsieur Lamarck now be paid to me (NC169).

When the Colonel consults the oracle, Sybil takes sides with the apes making the Colonel doubt “that there might be some solidarity amongst the dumb beasts, that they could form a poet of some kind against him” (NC 170). The Colonel’s complete degradation by the chimps is accomplished when the angry Professor chimp walks out on the Colonel and his circus:

The Professor lost his temper completely, crumpled his paper into a ball and thrust it down the Colonel’s throat. The stable-lads greeted this action with a burst of ironic cheering and scattered applause. The Professor, newly aware of his audience, granted it a jerky little bow. He stroked Sybil’s ears, apparently in farewell; then he and his entire troupe precipitated themselves outdoors, leaving the Colonel choking (NC 182-83).

This results in an inversion that brings about the degradation of the high and the triumph of the abused. Stallybrass and White perceive Bakhtin’s carnival as “a world of the topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled” (8). This is perfectly true of the carnivalized world of Carter’s circus.

The Colonel’s excessive patriotism is made fun of in the scene where he gives a seduction dinner to Fevvers. She makes a hearty meal and the
Colonel spares no expense. When he nervously invites her for a night-cap in his suite, Fevvers readily accepts realising that the overexcited and drunken Colonel will pose no threat to her. Things go on as she imagined:

She enjoyed well-chilled champagne while the impresario lapsed into slumber on the couch beside her. Removing the bourbon bottle from his fist, she poked curiously into the aperture of his fly, which he’d just fumbled open before he passed out, and withdrew a string of little silk American flags \( (NC\ 171) \).

Lizzie’s inquiry regarding the evening elicits this answer from her:

“‘Couldn’t get ’is star-spangled banner up,’ replied Fevvers. Britannia’s revenge for the war of 1812 ’” \( (NC\ 171) \). The Colonel and his absurd notion about patriotism are ridiculed throughout the scene.

Of all carnivalized literature, Menippean Satire has influenced post modernist fiction most. Brian McHale observes: “Postmodernist fiction is the heir of Menippean satire and its most recent historical avatar” \( (172) \). Menippean Satire, which originally developed in direct contact with popular carnival, exercised a very great genre shaping influence in literature. The menippea is fully liberated from history, legend or the demands for an external verisimilitude to life. It uses the fantastic and adventure as a mode of searching the truth. “Threshold dialogues” acquire a great importance in menippea. A very important characteristic is the free mixing of philosophical
and religious elements with crude slum naturalism. It includes elements of social utopia in the form of dreams or journeys to unknown lands. In addition to all these elements there is the predominance of carnivalistic-comic element (Bakhtin, Problems 114-19). *Nights at the Circus* incorporates almost all the features of menippea like the use of the fantastic, adventure, slum naturalism, utopian element, threshold dialogue etc. Carter’s creative utilization of this genre enables her to present a completely new outlook on the world.

The elements of the fantastic can be seen in the episode revealing the Russian Grand Duke’s vile intentions and the episode with the outlaws. In a highly grotesque and fantastic episode, Fewvers discovers the Duke’s plans in time and saves herself using her guile. Her avarice gets Fewvers into the trap of the Duke. Fewvers accepts the Duke’s invitation against Lizzie’s warnings, eager to get the diamonds he offers her. As the Grand Duke takes her on a tour of his house Fewvers finds among the exquisite miniature toys a cage which she instantly recognizes as meant for her. The highly charged, terrible, atmosphere is alleviated by the funny tone adopted for the narration. When Fewvers realizes the danger involved, her apprenticeship at Ma Nelson comes in handy: “[...] a deep instinct of self preservation made her let his rooster out of the hen-coop for him and ruffle up its feathers, as he was ruffling hers”(*NC* 191). Fewvers is rendered defenceless when the Duke discovers Ma Nelson’s sword, and breaks it into two. She continues to manipulate him and when she realizes that “the Grand Duke’s time was nigh” she makes a move
which effects her highly fantastic escape. Fevvers takes the miniature train which bore the name of the one she was about to leave from Russia – The Trans-Siberian Express – and drops it on its runner. The train lands perfectly on its wheels and the next moment Fevvers is seen running down the platform and clambering into the real train. This is an instance of the fantastic in the text where Carter plays a confidence trick on the reader.

“The Trans-Siberian Express” which bears the Colonel’s circus to Europe is blown up in the Siberian wilderness by outlaws. Their intention is to take Fevvers as a hostage and bargain for their pardon as they learn from newspapers that she is engaged to the Prince of Wales. They want Fevvers to ask her “would-be-mother-in-law”, Queen Victoria to intercede with the Tsar to absolve them. The false story, which the Colonel himself fabricates for publicity, proves his undoing. All his dreams are shattered in the Transbaikalian snow desert. In another highly fantastic incident Fevvers and Lizzie and the others escape captivity. Lizzie persuades the clowns who are themselves sad at the death of the master clown, Buffo, to humour the disappointed and gloomy outlaws so that they can negotiate with them. The clowns’ dance wakes up the outlaws from their lethargy: “This dance was the dance of death [. . .] . They danced it for the wretched of the earth, that they might witness their own wretchedness. [. . .] The outlaws entered into the spirit of the thing with a will” (NC 242-43). As if their dance evoked the spirits of nature, a storm begins to blow. The clowns and the outlaws continue
with their dance oblivious of the brewing storm. When finally it subsides, except for the hut in which Fevers, Lizzie and the rest remain, everything else has been blown away. There is no sign of either of the clowns or the outlaws. The intervention of the fantastic once again creates an unsettling emotion. In analysing Dostoevsky’s works Bakhtin examines the importance of fantastic in a work:

[... ] the verisimilitude of a character is the verisimilitude of the character’s own internal discourse about himself in all its purity – but in order to incorporate it into the field of vision of another person, the law of that other field must be violated [...]. Some fantastical viewpoint must be sought for the author outside the ordinary fields of vision (Problems 54).

At the bottom of the carnivalistic acts and categories lies a deep carnivalistic sense of the world, which gives meaning to the seemingly absurd and unexpected things in them. This carnival logic can be presented in a somewhat simplified form through the fantastic elements in a work (Bakhtin Problems 146).

The utopian theme of using music as a powerful means to bring about a peaceful co-existence between human beings and even between animals and human beings is developed in the novel through the relationship between Mignon, Princess of Abyssinia and the tigers. Through the stories of Mignon and the Princess, and the women prisoners in the Taiga Carter challenges the
idea of the heterosexual relationship as being the ideal one. The liberating
power of lesbian relationship is shown here. Almost every male she meets,
except for Walser, abuses Mignon. She cuts a pathetic figure with her
emaciated, bruised body and naïve innocent looks. Her husband, the Ape-
Man, has made it a habit of beating her “as though she were a carpet” so that
her body bears “marks of fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruises”
(NC 129). Samson the Strong Man, her lover, abandons her to the mercies of
the escaped tigress. When the Ape-Man treats her as an object over which to
assert his authority by inflicting violence on her, Samson treats her as an
object of sexual gratification.

Mignon acquires the status of a human being only when she joins the
Princess of Abyssinia, when “the cruel sex threw her away like a soiled
glove” (NC 155). The women discover her singing voice and give her a new
life. Mignon’s voice enchants even the tigers: “The cats all lifted their huge
heads and their eyes dropped amber tears as if for their own dumb fates.
Slowly, slowly, all the beasts dragged themselves towards the source of
music, softly beating their tails against the straw” (NC 155).

The same utopian theme of bringing about a peaceful co-existence
between man and animal with the help of music is seen in the episode of the
Siberian wilderness. Tigers, birds and other animals gather around the house
attracted by Mignon’s song and the princess’s piano: “We saw the house was
roofed with tigers [. . .]. Under that unseasonable sun, or under the influence of the voice and the piano, all the wilderness was stirring as if with new life" (*NC* 249-50). Music and the Princess utterly transform Mignon. She is no longer a passive victim but becomes an active subject.

The asylum for women convicts becomes an advanced site for the transformative power of love. The House of Correction set up by Countess P for female criminals who murdered their husbands is an abysmal grotesque world. The circular prison becomes a site of extreme mental torture. Countess P sitting in her circular room at the centre watches everyone with her penetrating eyes. The inmates who are denied all contact with one another or with the wardresses lose even the use of their voices. However, they get their voice back with the courageous act of Olga Alexandrovna. Olga’s act of touching the hand of the wardress who brings her food marks the beginning of the change:

Desire, that electricity transmitted by the charged touch of Olga Alexandrovna and Vera Andreyevna, leapt across the great divide between the guards and the guarded . [. . .] The stale air of the House of Correction lifted and stirred, was moved by currents of anticipation, of expectation, that blew the ripened seeds of love from cell to cell (*NC* 216-17).
The utopian aspect of the material bodily principle in grotesque realism is demonstrated through the manner in which the prisoners and wardresses communicate with one another:

Contact was effected, first, by illicit touch and glance, and then by illicit notes, or, if either guard or inmate turned out to be illiterate, by drawings made in and on all manner of substances, on rags of clothing if paper was not available, in blood, both menstrual and veinous, even in excrement, for none of the juices of the bodies that had been so long denied were alien to them, in their extremity – drawings, as it turned out, crude as graffiti, yet with the effect of clarion calls (NC 217).

The bodily elements are presented here in a deeply positive, assertive note. The material bodily elements, generally considered to be hideous and disgusting, become the medium of liberation for the women. Their gestures turn out to be a degradation of authority. Olga uses her menstrual blood to challenge authority and to undermine the efforts to convert the prisoners into passive objects. Besides she defies the traditional association of menstrual blood with dirtiness. By using one of the most obvious emblems of female inferiority as a means of empowerment, Olga “literally writes herself into subject hood with her menstrual blood” (Michael 516).

The eccentric countess P’s hierarchical set-up is shattered to bring together the guards and the prisoners. In grotesque realism, the gesture of
“bringing down to earth” always points to a new birth or beginning. The inmates of the House of Correction walk out on the countess. They go out into the wilderness to establish a sisterhood of their own: “The white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished” (NC 218). Though their utopia of an all women’s set-up is something preposterous, they earn their freedom having to lose nothing.

The unfeasibility of setting up a “republic of free women” is suggested in Lizzie’s sarcastic query with regard to the baby boys that may be born to them: “‘Feed ’em to the polar bears? To the female Polar bears?’” (NC 240-41). The traveller’s account of the women who beg him for “a pint or two of sperm” (NC 241), to ensure their community’s survival makes Lizzie pose such a valid question. Though Carter asserts the liberative potential of Lesbian relationships, she does not support the establishment of a lesbian or a matriarchal community as an answer to the problems faced by women.

Slum naturalism is another important characteristic of carnivalized literature, especially the menippea that Carter employs in the novel. “Slum Naturalism” or crude naturalism is an important characteristic of the menippea where “the adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, market places, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth” (Bakhtin, Problems 115). Slum
naturalism permits Carter to combine philosophical dialogues, and lofty symbol systems with crude aspects of life. Philosophic and existential matters are discussed in Ma Nelson's whorehouse, in the clowns' alley, the wilderness of Siberia, in Countess P's prison by people like clowns, outlaws and whores.

The idealistic notions of the civilized world on the subject of the primitives are undercut through the grotesque portrayal of the Shaman and his tribal people with whom the deranged Walser lives for a while. They interpret everything through the dreams the Shaman experiences during his fainting fits. Walser, a representative of the rational world, comes under the control of the Shaman who lives entirely in a world of dreams. The episode of the Shaman is Carter's critique of the supposed rational world. She exposes the irony in the idealization of the irrational fantastic world of the primitives by the civilized world. The rational society represented by Walser comes under temporary amnesia when it is exposed to the exotic, abracadabran world of the tribespeople. This world is extolled as the ideal world and its lifestyle as ideal living. Blinded by the exotic façade of primitive life, they let go off their skepticism and obsession with facts. The episode pokes fun at the extreme fascination the civilized world has for the primitive life. Walser, the skeptic, leads a life steeped in necromancy, myth and rituals in the company of the Shaman.
The Shaman's efforts to make sense out of the incoherent babblings of Walser whom he thinks is a spirit sent by his forefathers, expose the absurdity of the Shaman's beliefs. The tribal people make no distinction between fact and fiction, dream and reality: "They shared a common dream, which was their world, and it should rather be called an "idea" than a "dream", since it constituted their entire sense of lived reality, which impinged on real reality only inadvertently" (NC 253). The unexpected intervention of Fewvers and Lizzie turns the table against the Shaman and disrupts the grotesque world he constructs for his survival. They accidentally enter the primitive church where the Shaman is preparing to sacrifice the bear before an idol. The sacrifice is interrupted and there ensues a scuffle between Lizzie and the bear:

They banged against the idol in their wrestling. The idol toppled against another one, similarly clad with more of a stag-like look. Toppling in its turn the staggy deity knocked the next in Line of the row of idols from its perch and so on, in a domino effect of comprehensive desecration (NC 288).

The desecration of the temple and the toppling of the deities signify the loss of credibility of the world of false mythologies created by the Shaman. His power is challenged and his religion renounced by the tribal people who come to realize the real nature of the world. They abandon the world of mythology interpreted through the dreams of the Shaman, for a world of reality.
The novel ends with Fevvers’ carnivalesque laughter filling “the entire globe”. It is a triumphant laughter as Fevvers becomes successful in appropriating the narrative from Walser and taking control of her own story. The narrative is thus freed from the clutches of male subjectivity and helps propel feminist aims. It is not just Walser that she fools but the patriarchal set-up in its entirety. The laughter is directed at the patriarchal world that takes charge of every narrative and distorts it to its purpose. Carnival laughter is indicative of freedom from the old and the stale. It is gay, triumphant and mocking at the same time. Walser’s question as to why she takes so much trouble to make him believe that she is the only “fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world”, makes her laugh thinking how she fooled him: “The spiralling tornado of Fevvers’ 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” (NC 295). Bakhtin describes the nature of carnival laughter thus:

It is first of all, a festive laughter [. . .]. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope, it is directed at all and every one, including the carnival’s participants. [. . .] Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives (Rabelais 11-12).
Fevvers' carnival laughter denies the old order and welcomes the new. The carnival, according to Bakhtin, celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world. Fevvers's laughter is indicative of the winds of change that welcome the new century:

‘And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I . [. . .] The doll's house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed-' (NC 285).

Michael observes that the novel's ending on a note of laughter does not only indicate Fevvers' triumph over Walser, it also looks forward to potential new forms of feminist fiction that would be subversive and liberating both at the level of narrative and of politics (519). Substituting extant forms with a narrative mode solely controlled by them will enable women to express their reservations, anguish and aspirations free from patriarchal interference. The feminist utilization of carnival laughter opens up the way for the creation of new types of feminist fiction. Fevvers's laughter thus becomes a final disruption of the male-centred established order, a task that she and Lizzie have earnestly been engaged in.
Carnivalization allows Carter to subvert the established order and bring to the fore aspects in society which could not have been revealed otherwise. It underlines her faith in feminine power and its ability to disrupt patriarchal constructs. By bringing together high culture and low culture and uniting what is distant and diverse, the novel exposes the folly in assigning hierarchical position to people. The circus courtyard where a major part of the action takes place becomes a carnival square with its familiar contacts, disguises, scandals and decrowning. By using these techniques of carnivalization, Carter succeeds in presenting an utopian vision where without the barrier of gender distinctions, cultural disparity and social status; people exist side by side to create a better world.

*Wise Children*, Angela Carter's last novel too is a glorification of the carnival. The carnival grotesque, which gains predominance in her later novels, finds its culmination in *Wise Children*. It is a richly comic tale of the tangled fortunes of two theatrical families. It traces the history of the Hazard theatrical dynasty, from its nineteenth century heyday to its downfall with the popularization of television. The book's narrator is seventy five year old Dora Chance, an actress who has donned roles in Shakespearian plays and the vaudeville. She and her sister Nora are the illegitimate twin daughters of the great Shakespearian actor Melchior Hazard. Disowned by Melchior's family, they become chorus girls, working their way through London music halls to Hollywood.
The politics of "carnival laughter" builds its own world in opposition to the official world. It offers a completely different, non-official and extra-political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations. Thus, they build a second world and life outside officialdom. Unlike the distorted and alien notion of humour formed within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics, the carnival laughter possesses a creative power (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 4-6).

In *Wise Children* carnival laughter builds a world of the disowned parallel to the world of the legitimate, the loved. The laughter that characterizes all forms of grotesque realism or the carnivalesque, degrades what is high, spiritual or ideal. The legitimate world, which represents the official culture, suppresses the disowned continually in order to absolutize a given condition of social order. However, in the end, the carnival sense with its "joyful relativity" results in the victory of the disowned. The novel focuses on the elusive nature of paternity. Almost all the characters in the novel turn out to be subjects of disputed paternity. The idealistic notions about marriage, family and patriarchal supremacy are held up to ridicule.

The Hazards, the greatest theatrical family, as great as Shakespeare himself are considered as the cultural ambassadors of the British empire. The decline of British imperialism is traced in the decline of the Hazard theatrical dynasty. Ranulph Hazard, Melchior's father, travelled the continents with
missionary zeal to take Shakespeare and English values to the outside world. Carter’s heroines in _Wise Children_ who are illegitimates cannot make their way into their father’s theatrical world but have to be satisfied with music hall shows. They seem to raise the question of whether the illegitimates are not the rightful heirs to Shakespearean theatre. Kate Webb observes: “Shakespeare may have become the very symbol of legitimate culture, but his work is characterised by bastardy, multiplicity and incest [. . .]” (194). The obsessive demarcation of the British society into high and low culture is being questioned here. Carter celebrates the vitality of the illegitimate world and challenges the false claim to authority of the legitimate world.

The two central characters Dora and Nora are reminiscent of the Kersh terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags that so much influenced Bakhtin in formulating his concept of the grotesque body (_Rabelais_ 25-26). Like these figurines, Dora and Nora, though at the twilight of their life, embrace it with a surprising enthusiasm. They are seventy-five and gaunt with their hipbones and cheekbones sticking out – “two batty old hags” as they call themselves. However, they are not ready to give up on life:

> We’d feel mutilated if you made us wipe off our Joan Crawford mouths and we always do our hair up in great big Victory rolls when we go out. [. . .] We paint an inch thick. We put on our faces before we come down to breakfast, the Max Factor Pan-Stik, the false eyelashes with the three coats of mascara,
everything. [...] Our fingernails match our toenails match our lipsticks match our rouge. [...] The habit of applying war paint outlasts the battle (WC 6).

Though not pregnant like the figurines of the hags, at the close of the novel they affirm new life with the twin babies of their half brother Gareth given to them as a birthday present by their Uncle Perry: “[...] the barren heath was bloomed, the fire that was almost out sprang back to life and Nora a mother at last at seventy five years old and all laughter, forgiveness, generosity, reconciliation” (WC 227). Dora and Nora realize that they cannot “afford to die for at least another twenty years” that too when they have been thinking that it is “high time for the final curtain” (WC 230). Life is shown both in its degenerate and in its blooming aspects here. This dual nature is an important characteristic of the grotesque.

The “material bodily principle” that is, images of human body, especially those of eating, drinking and copulation reveal the devouring and regenerating lower stratum. The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in a festive and utopian aspect. The cosmic, social and bodily elements are presented as an indivisible whole. The grotesque body with its images of material bodily lower stratum emphasizes the activities like eating, drinking, defecation, and copulation. All these activities are offered in a joyous, regenerative aspect as opposed to the closed, false seriousness of official culture. The material bodily lower stratum is productive as it
engenders new life and thus assures mankind's immortality (Bakhtin *Rabelais*
18-20).

The peculiar festive character of the material bodily principle is retained in the novel through characters like Peregrine, Grandma and Dora Nora. Peregrine or Uncle Perry as he is fondly referred to by the twins is a Falstaffian figure who indulges in excesses of merriment, eating and drinking. Grandma Chance is in a way a female counterpart to him. She and Peregrine get along very well. Grandma Chance is a carnival grotesque figure with her eating habits, indecorous language and love for the rejected. She eats a lot, drinks like a fish but has a very big loving heart which is ever ready to give shelter to the disowned. Grandma hates the old men who perpetrates war in which the young are killed so that the old can hang on to power: "'Every twenty years its bound to happen. [. . .] So all the men all over the world get together and make a deal: you kill of our boys and we'll kill off yours. [. . .] Then the old men can sleep easy in their beds, again'" (*WC* 28-29). She reacts vehemently against the atrocities in the society. Grandma Chance is a naturalist who goes about in a bare minimum of clothes inside the house. Dora talks of Grandma's "family" consisting of herself, her twin sister Nora and Cyn, another orphaned girl: "Grandma invented this family. She put it together out of whatever came to hand – a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She created it by sheer force of personality" (*WC* 35).
Grandma Chance celebrates her carnival identity through eating and drinking, the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. In the scene at the restaurant where Perry takes the girls and Grandma Chance on their birthday, her demeanour is suggestive of Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*:

She’d overdone the rouge, perhaps because she’d overdone the gin, and she looked rakish as hell [. . .].

The waiter hovered: ‘For the first course may I suggest oysters, caviar, smoked salmon . . .’ ‘That sounds quayte nayce, thanks very much,’ she said so she had all three, washing them festively down with crème de menthe, lifting her pinky like a dog lifts its leg as she raised her glass (*WC* 93-94).

Grandma Chance, in her encounter with the world in the act of eating comes out triumphant; she triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured herself. According to Bakhtin the body in the act of eating transgresses its own limits and grows at the world’s expense. Eating is a weapon of transgression where the glutton violates all barriers and become one with the world (*Rabelais* 281).

Peregrine, Melchior’s twin brother is a trickster who turns reality into a realm of magic and illusion. Lady Atalanta Hazard refers to Perry as a “travelling carnival” (*WC* 169). Perry himself perceives life as a carnival (*WC* 222). If his brother seeks to regain the lost empire of the Hazards, Peregrine seeks exile. He makes brief but memorable appearances and
vanishes when he reaches “his boredom threshold”. Peregrine acts as father to his brother’s unacknowledged daughters. He is Melchior’s double and opposite. *Wise Children* abounds in twins. Peregrine’s wit, mental energy, his bodily gratification and rich delight in life, make him a true carnival figure. His human qualities claim the love and affection of all who come in contact with him. Dora and Nora adore him for filling the wide gulf left by the absence of a father. Perry defies the ravages of age. He is the picaro, never ageing, full of bounce and bonhomie, appearing in the right places at the right time and vanishing to an altogether different part of the world, in pursuit of newer adventures. Peregrine is the incarnation of the true carnival spirit in his gay, laughing libertinage.

The biological father of Dora and Nora Chance, Melchior Hazard, is the last Shakespearian actor in the Hazard theatrical dynasty. There is an aura of grandeur about him. Even his dispossessed daughters cannot think of him but with reverence and awe. In the Hazard family’s attachment to Shakespeare and the public’s attachment to the Hazards, Carter satirizes the extreme nationalism of the British that centres upon key cultural images, most notably that of Shakespeare. Melchior’s disowned daughters triumph in the end in a carnivalesque reversal of roles. Christina Britzolakis observes that, “music hall is the carnivalesque deflator of the bombast of ‘high culture’, epitomized in the myth of Shakespeare’s genius as ‘national treasure’ ”(187).
By means of carnivalesque debasements, Carter explodes several myths created by the official culture to maintain their importance.

The comic performances of the market place are important reflections of the carnival tradition. These performances are imbued with the atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity. The market place represents the world of the unofficial where people are free to speak their own language. Thus, elements of common speech such as profanities, oaths and curses are fully legalized in the market place. The market place is the centre of all that is unofficial. It gives a chance for the low culture to enjoy a certain "extraterritoriality" in a world of official order and official ideology (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 153-54).

Gorgeous George who is a music hall comedian and "patriot" becomes a paradigm of the market place performer who entertains people with his bawdy jokes and enlightens them with his patriotic songs and striptease shows. The episode pokes fun at the nationalistic fervour of the English. Gorgeous George takes off his clothes piece by piece to display the complete map of the world on his body. Only a strip of the Union Jack, reduced to the role of a loincloth, covers his private parts. Average Englishmen throng Gorgeous George's performances enjoying wholeheartedly his bawdy jokes. The representatives of the low culture who watch George's performance enjoy heartily the self-mockery involved in the performer wearing the
national flag as if it is a mere gee-string. The laughter, which echoes in George's performances, has all the ambivalence of carnival laughter. It is both directed at the jokes and towards the excessive patriotism of the British.

The downfall of George from the position of "Clown Number One to the British Empire" (WC 150), to that of a beggar runs parallel to the decline of the Empire itself. Kate Webb observes that "George shows us an empire falling: having once dominated the entire world, this Englishman can now be master of only one space: his own body" (197). Once he reaches Hollywood to take the role of Bottom in Melchior's dream project, he loses all his ability to make others laugh. Dora notices: "The moment he stepped off his native soil, he stopped being funny" (WC 151). Later when Dora takes off the costumes from the drunken Bottom, she realizes that she has "inadvertently exposed the British Empire" on his torso. So she covers him up as she does not want their "nations shame out in the open for all to see" (157). Finally, towards the end of the novel, Dora recognizes him in the street beggar who begs her for money to buy a cup of tea. By then the British Empire too has been shorn of all its glory. Through such subtle delineations, Carter illustrates the decline and degradation of an empire that hoped to colonize the whole world.

According to Bakhtin, debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of the carnival grotesque. Everything that is sacred and exalted is combined
and mixed with the images of material bodily stratum in the process of bringing them down to earth. Degradation has not only a destructive, negative aspect but also a regenerative one. It encourages the participants of the carnival to change their outlook on the world. The success of parodies and travesties lies in the fact that all that is high becomes tiresome in the end and the uncrowning of such high matters brings about immense pleasure. Apart from parodies and travesties, there are several gestures of grotesque debasement like thrashing, abusing; besmirching with dirt, excrement and urine (Rabelais 370).

Carter makes wide use of the carnivalesque modes of debasement in the novel to undercut the pretentiousness of the high culture. The inaugural ceremony of “The Dream” a movie based on Shakespeare’s A Mid Summer Nights Dream, is utilized to demystify the traditional cultural milieu in which the English take so much pride. “The Dream” is Melchior’s first Hollywood movie. The grand function held to launch the production of the movie begins with the salutation to the Bard, where, in a dramatic gesture Melchior sprinkles the earth from Stratford-upon-Avon on the sets of “The Dream” and delivers a grandiloquent speech: “‘And yet it is especially precious to me because it is English earth, perhaps some of the most English earth of all, precious above rubies, above the love of women. For it is earth from William Shakespeare’s own hometown, far away, yes!’” (WC 134). But, the earth which Melchior so dramatically and proudly sprinkles on the set happens to
be Californian soil. The Chance sisters throw away the original earth as Daisy Duck’s cat has urinated over it. The earth carried so reverentially to Hollywood, all the way from the Bard’s own land has been desecrated by the action of the cat urinating over it. Through the highly carnivalesque gesture of drenching in urine, Carter deflates the undue importance attached to images of culture. The process of desublimation is completed when a macaw lets its droppings down with a great splat into the midst of the gathered crowd. Drenching in urine and defecation, the important gestures of grotesque debasement are employed in this episode, to undermine the blatant pomposity of the high culture. The episode is narrated with a mock seriousness, which emphasizes the comic and subversive undertone.

The party scenes in the novel become sites of carnival degradation. They are created in the fashion of the carnival feasts in popular culture, which are sites of unrestricted celebration and desublimation. Such feasts are marked by open-air amusements and the participation of people in the guise of dwarfs, monsters, giants and such fantastic creatures (Bakhtin Rabelais 5). Apart from the last banquet scene in the novel that marks its climax, there are two other party scenes in the spirit of the carnival grotesque. “Lynde Court Twelfth Night Costume Ball” is meant to be a gigantic audition for Melchior's Hollywood debut production, “The Dream”. A motley crowd of stars, everyone dressed up as Shakespearian characters, is gathered there. There is a gay festive air, which is destroyed suddenly by shoutings, screams and cries.
The Manor catches fire, but the funny description of the confusion and pandemonium that reigns takes away the horror of the incident completely. The undoubtedly comic verve of the description induces the reader to respond with amusement or mirth, blotting out the tragic overtones. When the house burns in a carnivalesque bonfire, a kind of madness is unleashed among the gathered guests. Some try to put out the fire, hurtling whole crates of champagne into it, while some others urinate into the fire as their own contribution to the jets of water directed by the Fire Brigade, and yet others who are consumed by the fires of lust are indulging in orgiastic pleasures.

In the meanwhile, Melchior Hazard the master of the Manor and the King of the "Hazard Theatrical Dynasty" manages to heave the big carved chair, his "throne" from the fire and slumps down on it, calling for champagne in a grotesque parody of the Emperor who played on the fiddle when Rome was burning. But he suddenly realizes that he has lost his crown, the heirloom of the Hazard dynasty – a battered gilded cardboard crown – to which he is superstitiously and foolishly attached. Peregrine Hazard as usual comes as a saviour and salvages the crown from the fire, but makes his brother jump for it clownishly before handing it over to him. His brother's exclamation "Give me the crown, your bastard!" extricates a toast from Perry, "Now God, stand up for bastards!" (WC 107). The carnival laughter that ensues results in the temporary decrowning and degradation of the high, the world of the legitimates, and becomes a victory for the opposing world of the
low, the illegitimates. The sheer ludicrousness of the whole incident and the hilariously comic manner of the description fill the atmosphere with carnival spirit. "The many sparks of the carnival bonfire renew the world" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 126). Carnival fire simultaneously destroys and renews the world. The fire at Melchior's manor signifies the destruction of the Hazard theatrical dynasty but Melchior's Hollywood dream materializes out of its ashes. The Hollywood producer Genghis Khan, whose cigar causes the fire, promises to take them all to Hollywood, the "Land of Make-Believe".

The "Dream Land," Hollywood possesses a wealth of carnival grotesque images ranging from Puck to the hooded shadow of Genghis Khan's ex-wife. It takes on the festive air of a typical carnival square. The carnival square knows no hierarchical order. The life of the carnival square is "free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 129-30). The set of "The Dream" turns out into a merry eccentric world of transformations.

The magic of Hollywood makes the participants heady and they indulge in all manners of eccentricities. The gay abandon that rules the atmosphere affects the participants resulting in two divorces and three engagements. Melchior divorces his wife Lady Atlanta Lynd to be engaged to Genghis Khan's divorced wife Daisy. Melchior thinks that he is marrying
Hollywood itself by marrying Daisy Duck. He believes that he is going to bestride the globe once he is in charge of the fabulous machine that is Hollywood. But all his calculations go wrong and his production heads towards disaster.

The wedding ceremony is the culmination of the carnival in the Hollywood episode. There is a crowd consisting of fairies, goblins, spirits, mice, rabbits and badgers gathered around the three brides. The swapping of partners, profanation of the sacred ceremony of marriage, abuses, blows and smirching with dirt mark the carnivalization of this scene. Dora sacrifices her marriage dreams by abandoning her bridegroom Genghis to his true wife who comes in her guise. Dora in her turn participates in the wedding disguised as Bottom. Peregrine Hazard in the disguise of a cowboy blesses the wedding and he unleashes a flurry of activities. Nora’s Italian bridegroom’s mother empties a vat of bloody red tomato sauce over the bride. The popping of champagne corks is mistaken for the firing of machine guns and pandemonium sets in resulting in the termination of Melchior’s Hollywood dreams.

The episode ends with the desublimation of Melchior Hazard, the King of English theatre and the debasement of the Hollywood producer Genghis Khan. “The Dream”, Melchior’s dream project that aims at getting Shakespeare’s name and English culture established in the Hollywood, proves
to be just a “masterpiece of kitsch” (WC 111), a self mockery. It takes too long for him to realize that English culture is something outmoded and that it no longer sells. After his adventures in the Hollywood Melchior comes back a broken man, “wifeless, childless, jobless, hopeless, quenched” (WC 161). Along with the fall of the Hazard dynasty, it becomes the debasement of Shakespeare whose fame Melchior wants to take to the other end of the world.

Lady Atalanta Hazard’s fall from the position of the Queen of the Royal Family of the British Theatre to a cripple relegated to a wheel chair begins with the divorce. Saskia and Imogen’s twenty first birthday celebrations become the site of her final downfall. The forced liveliness in the birthday party caused by the presence of the Chance sisters breaks when Melchior announces a new stepmother as a birthday gift to his recognized daughters. Saskia and Imogen turn wild when they know that the new mother is none other than their friend Margarine. Saskia behaves madly seizing the cake knife and destroying every piece of article on the table. Melchior’s smart smack on her cheeks brings her sharply back to sanity from her hysterical excesses. There again one discerns a fall of the high, a victory for Melchior’s natural daughters, Dora and Nora, who witness the scene.

The feast ends with a scuffle between Lady Atalanta and her daughters. It becomes a lowering in every sense. Lady Atalanta, the most beautiful lady of her times, one of the richest in the British Empire is reduced to a crippled
bankrupt, left at the mercy of her husband's natural children. The pretentiousness that goes with high culture is exposed in the transformation of Lady Atalanta Hazard to "Wheelchair" as she is nicknamed by Dora and Nora. No longer a Lady, she relinquishes the upper class decorum and becomes bawdy and coarse. Refinement is shown here not as something inherent but, something, which is forcefully inculcated as a part of being accepted into the circle of the high culture.

The degrading of Melchior, which begins in the fire episode, is completed in the episode of his hundredth birthday celebrations. A Carnival in the sense of the combination of all diverse festivities and grotesque images giving rise to a new world order is brilliantly presented in this episode. The reserve between people crumbles and there is a free and familiar contact. People separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers come together and are even accepted by each other. The illegitimate daughters of Melchior who live on the wrong side—"the bastard side of Old Father Thames" (WC 1) cross the river to the legitimate side. The truth about their birth is revealed in front of the gathered guests. Tiffany their Goddaughter, who is deceived in love by Melchior's son Tristram, too is accepted into the Hazard family but she spurns the invitation. The truth about the parenthood of Saskia and Imogen—who are really Perry's daughters—, is also revealed in this episode.
The language of the market place – obscenities, abuses and blasphemes mingle with the sophisticated and affected language of the elite. The shift of truth gives rise to a shift of world order. Melchior's kingdom is lost, of all the Shakespearian roles he has played; he comes closest to that of Lear. He presides over the closing carnival more as the ghost of imperial majesty than as the lord of the British Theatrical Dynasty. In the same episode, Saskia and Imogen the wicked daughters too lose their honour and the hitherto disowned twins are publicly given recognition as his own daughters. Peregrine, of whom nothing is heard for quite a long time makes a dramatic entrance on the birthday party scene upstaging his brother. Not only does Peregrine rise from the dead, but he brings with him Tiffany, Dora and Nora's goddaughter who is believed to have drowned herself. He also gives new life to Dora and Nora, a valid reason to look forward to life once again when he brings them the twin-children of their half-brother Gareth. He gives the twin children as birthday gifts to Dora and Nora who then realise that they cannot afford to die for another twenty years or so.

The high point of the carnivalesque in the novel comes when Dora seduces Peregrine, her surrogate father. For a while she thinks that her action will bring the whole house of the Hazards down and shatter all that which turned their lives into “mere peep shows”. But she realizes that it is not to be so: “There are limits to the power of laughter [. . .]” She realizes that “the carnival’s got to stop, sometime” (WC 222). It is almost as if Angela Carter
has realized the limitations of the carnival. After having served its function of desublimation, it has to stop.

The bastard branch of the family, Dora and Nora, discover in the course of their long life that the father who had disowned them has joined the ranks of the disreputed. The stage itself from which he has ruled has been upstaged by television. The greatest Shakespearean actor Melchior Hazard appears on television game shows that are not rated high even according to the standards of the electronic media. The battered cardboard crown, which Dora places on her father's head, sits askew symbolizing the desublimation of the King of the Hazard theatrical dynasty. The purpose of the carnival – desublimation of all that is high and holy – having been fulfilled, it stops and things go on as they did before.

*Wise Children* has been acclaimed as a wonderfully rich and funny book. There is a touch of pathos – the pain, the sorrow and the shame of the dispossessed. The pain that Dora and Nora feel, living as they do as the unacknowledged daughters of Melchior, is brilliantly camouflaged by the funny, flippant tone adopted by Dora, the narrator of the novel. In a way, it only heightens the sense of pity, allowing the readers to take part wholeheartedly in the happiness of the twins when they are acknowledged by their father in the end. The humour in this novel is not to be treated trivially. It serves to intensify the feeling of despair in Dora and Nora's sad plight. Even
Melchior, the cruel, selfish father, comes to be pitied and forgiven in the final banquet episode, the ultimate scene of the fall of the mighty and the crowning of the low.

The carnival spirit with its freedom and its utopian character is oriented towards the future. Even Dora and Nora in their ripe old age and looking towards oblivion are promised a future in the form of the twins they get as birthday gifts. The carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook at the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.

These two novels by Carter become the site of victory of the marginalized. The sinister patriarchal figures of the earlier novels are altogether absent in *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. The women characters are shown as having immense courage to face the dangers and difficulties that life in a patriarchal society offers them. As Dora in *Wise Children* says, their victory is the “Triumph of nature over nurture” (28). They defy the official culture with its closed system and salute the life of the low culture with all its carnival glory. Carnival laughter that rings throughout the two novels is suggestive of the triumph of the representatives of the low culture over the efforts of the high culture to marginalize them.