

Fevvers: A Fact or Fiction?

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Abstract

Angela Carter, a British novelist creates her own feminist version of fairy-tale. Surreal characters are prevalent throughout her novels. Female body and sexuality are the common themes in her books. Sophie Fevvers, a character in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is a half-bird and half-human. Anyone who is different from the social norms are capable to question the social norms imposed on them by the society. The concept of woman is a fixed notion and in reality it has to be questioned. Fevvers is given wings and serves as a concept of New Women who deconstructs the identity formed by patriarchal society. She claims that the view on the idea of women is fixed framed by the society. In contrary to this concept, characters in this novel prove that gender is an illusion. Therefore, this paper ventures to analyse whether the character Fevvers is a fact or fiction and how she is utilized by Carter to represent the symbol of female power.

Key Words: Deconstruct, Gender, female power, surreal characters

Carter's eighth novel *Nights at the Circus* is the most commercial success in her writing career. *Nights at the Circus* takes the reader along with Colonel Kearney's circus on its Grand Imperial Tour. The protagonist in the novel is a winged woman. Fevver: a 'fact or a fiction?'

is an incessant question that revolves around her as an unresolved puzzle. This paper therefore analyses whether Fevvers is a fact or fiction and then symbolically talks about the portrayal of female power in the novel. This paper will also highlight the notion of male domination in the society.

In this novel, the notion of gender is subverted. Each character talks about how they are associated with the society and further throws light on the role with which they are associated in the society. Angela Carter's Fevvers challenges the role of female and attempts to break the belief that the role of female is fixed. This is achieved by giving Fevvers the 'wings' which symbolises her liberalization from the male dominated society. The wings give her the financial freedom and helps her to escape from male domination

Fevvers is partly factual and partly fictitious. This is evident when she claims that she was hatched from an egg. She has constructed herself and Lizzie her foster mother brings her up. Lizzie plays an important role in constructing the character of Fevvers. For her women are equal to men and are therefore meant to walk hand in hand with men.

Fevvers parents abandon her when she was a baby. They put her in a laundry basket and leave her in front of Ma Nelson's brothel house. Fevvers grew up there with Lizzie and many others. When Lizzie the foster mother, notices the extra growth of a lump like structure besides her both arms while giving her a bath, calls her the living cupid. Ma Nelson and Lizzie do not consider the extra growth as something negative. Ma Nelson further teaches Fevvers about her powers and how to use them in a male dominated society.

When Ma Nelson dies suddenly the inmates in the brothel house are not able to come out of the shock. The lifestyle of them gets changed. In meantime Ma Nelson's brother comes to

claim the authority. However, the women rise against it and fight for their authority. They mentally prepare themselves to adapt to the change in lifestyle.

On the other hand, Fevvers disturbs the notion of how a woman should be. She is neither a man nor a woman in appearance. Her appearance as the winged woman challenges the notion of identity. She performs on the stage for economical purpose. When narrating her life to Walser, she talks about how women become commodities to men and discusses the dangers of identity and its claim.

Her birth itself can be considered as a challenge to the constraint of existing identity. This simply means that Fevvers will not be a slave to serving men. Fevvers throughout the novel faces a situation which forces her to lose her identity but she never gives up. She does not respect the society, but rather is empowered by her abnormality. Therefore, in Carter's novel women are re-defined. The scope of female identity expands and breaks apart the male chauvinistic society. Carter's Fevvers creates an evolution in terms of feminism.

When Walser interviews her, she narrates about how women are confined to the patriarchal society. Then she talks about the hierarchy and the reversal of hierarchical order. At the end of the novel when Walser and Fevvers unite, it is clearly evident that women's future no longer belongs to men. Fevvers also re-visits the idea of women being considered as fragile. In the opening of the novel, Fevvers struggles against the patriarchal society. As soon as she enters the circus and becomes a trapeze performer the identity issues arise. However, despite all crises in the manipulative turn of events when Walser comes to interview her, she becomes the author of her text.

Walser speculates that Fevvers is a man in disguise. He sees Fevvers to be a woman who possesses the courage and strength of a man and does not wait for men to come to her rescue nor does she complain about being a woman. Fevvers blurs the distinction of male and female and is disruptive not only because of her appearance but her job as an aerialist forces her to

be submissive. She is tied to the social norms. She also uses her performance to raise a question among her audience whether she is a fact or fiction.

The novel contains events that are not ordinary and the characters present too do not exist in the real world. Fevvers uses the male power for her survival. She denies her womanliness and exaggerates the symbol of feminism. She imitates female role throughout the novel to escape from the societal chains. She is not ashamed to sell her body to men and least cares about male gaze as she wears the mask as a trapeze artist. Through the character of Fevvers, Angela Carter questions the notions of patriarchal notions prevailing in the society. The novel deconstructs the notion of women through Fevvers.

Nights at the Circus presents New Woman as someone who gulps food, drinks and do not depend on man. It could be observed in lines: “she gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife...until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied, she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched” (*Nights at the Circus*, 17) .Carter states that she is going to talk about gender oppression.

When Fevvers tell Walser: “nought but the painted, gilded sign of love and you might say so it was I served my apprenticeship in being looked at, being the object of the eye of the beholder” (*Nights at the Circus*, 18), Stoddart believes that “ the emphasis ... is on the *codification* of female display” (*Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*,27), which once again reiterates the constructed ideology of feminism according to men.

As already mentioned, Carter’s Fevvers stands as the symbol of female empowerment. Her wings are the metamorphical representation for freedom and symbolises women who do not follow the gender hierarchy. To quote, “Her face painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies” (*Nights at the Circus*,27), talks about how female are living with male behaviour.

The way Carter portrays her female character is an example how Fevvers plays a dominant role. “Her white teeth are being carnivorous as those of Red riding Hood’s grandmother” (*Nights at the Circus*,13), talks about the masculine nature possessed by a female character and a parallel comparison can be drawn to the wolf which is the most powerful animal in the woods. Women during the time when the novel was written were deprived. It was the time when women were fighting for equality. The novel therefore draws a comparison to Margaret Thatcher, at the time when capitalism was meant for men. Carter compares Fevvers to the iron lady to state that women can also be liberal and Fevvers economic freedom in a way could be compared compared to Margaret Thatcher’s British Capitalism.

According to Linden Peach, women’s body are represented as a counter-notion to western ideology. When Carter talks about the bodily changes which Fevvers undergoes during the time of puberty, she talks about the responsibilities that are entrusted upon women. Women’s body should not be always approached from a negative perspective. In the novel *Olga Alexandrovna*, the protagonist in order to communicate with the prison guard uses her menstrual blood for writing messages. Similarly, Fevvers on the other hand, talks about the development of wings, which symbolically represents freedom, when Walser interviews her. Fevvers performance in Ma Nelson’s brothel house and in Madame Schreck’s museum has different meanings. Judith Butler in *Gender trouble* elaborates on this by stating that Fevvers’ performance is an embodiment of multiple selves and liberating identities.

Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and his World* talks about looking at the world differently. This is evident in the behaviour of Fevvers. Instead of getting triggered by the behaviour of Fevvers, Walser gets impressed by her as the interview progresses. The

carnival grotesque figure, Fevvers disrupts about how the women should be and distorts the social behaviour.

The novel ends with Fevvers' laughter. The laughter here is a sign of success of Fevvers as she takes control of her story. The laughter also talks about freeing the clutches from male domination. To quote, "The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed everywhere was laughing" (*Nights at the Circus*,227) and Bakhtin explains this laughter as follow,

It is first of all a festive laughter....carnival laughter is the laughter of all people. Second it is universal in scope, it is directed at all everyone, 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)

Therefore, it is evident that Fevvers laughter indicates the birth of a new world and the carnival laughter. According to Bakhtin, it is the destruction of the old law of living and in the novel Fevvers; laughter triumphs over Walser which shows the indication of freeing oneself from patriarchal interference. Carter therefore through Fevver talks about the feminine power and the power to disrupt male domination.

When Rosencreutz, a psychologically troubled rich buys Fevvers from Madame Schrek's Museum for extracting a substance from Fevvers' body in order to be immortal, Fevvers escapes from the gothic house. Her escape can be considered as the liberation of women from the clutches of men during 19th century. Carter's Fevvers grows up to be a woman who is responsible for her happiness. Carter in order to create an identity for

women exploits the power of men and through Fevvers she subverts the patriarchal view and shows how women are empowered. *Nights at the Circus* is therefore a Postmodern Fairy-tale that foresees the future of women and through her 'New woman' Fevvers, she gives a message to all women about the power and strength of woman.

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