



# The Achievers Journal

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## **Subversion and the Aesthetics of Eroticism in *The Magic Toyshop* And *The Nights at the Circus* of Angela Carter**

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### **Abstract**

*Bluebeard dominates the folk tales of France written by Charles Perrault. He is womanish; sadistic, oppressive and callous. Angela Carter took inspiration from the Gothic tales and French tales of Perrault to depict the plight of contemporary women. In this research paper the various stylistic techniques used by Angela Carter have been explored. She got Nobel Prize for her feministic ideas and innovations in the themes in the context of modern age. Carter contended that in spite of the tremendous changes in society women are subjected to sexual oppression and marginalization. It is quite paradoxical to note that on one hand there are radical changes in the society all over the world, but at the same time women are subjected to all forms of sexual oppression.. Women are active in all fields but their sexual molestation and oppression by the male dominated society still persists. The present paper is an attempt to depict the conspicuous role of Bluebeard who plays vital role in the plot of *The Magic Toyshop* and *The Nights at the Circus* of Angela Carter.*

**Keywords: oppression; marginalization; molestation; paradoxical; eroticism**

Angela Carter emerged as a forceful modern feminist who raised the voice of women in the 1960s. Carter died in 1992 and became an international celebrity (Gamble 1). She was canonized as the one of the “most important British writers of the post-war period” (Nicol 141). She was presumably



# The Achievers Journal

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---

considered “too quirky, too original, too avant-garde, too subversive” (Roberts 2). Rebecca Munford observes that “Carter’s work sits uneasily in relation to both Gothic and feminist discourses, especially as they converge through the category of the ‘female Gothic’” (Munford 61). Carter explores the complicity of myth, desire, and social control. Carter uses the image of mask to depict the character of Honeybuzzard in the novel *Shadow Dance* who is the chief villain of the novel. He is a demonic protagonist belonging to the Gothic tradition and horror films of Hollywood. She gives binary perceptions; protagonists and antagonists and feminine and masculine.

Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* depicts her imaginative transformation of folkloric elements and examination of their mythic impact on sexual relationships. Carter made new innovations in her *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Carter’s main focus is to puncture the traditional morality and to destabilize the patriarchal supremacy. In most of her novels Carter uses mythical Gothic tales to reinforce gender. Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* is written under the influence of Kafka, Beckett and Joyce. *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), is loaded with Gothic myth, theatrical magic, revenge, incest and sexuality. The editor of *Sunday Times Magazine* reviewed *The Magic Toyshop* thus:

The debut novel of Angela Carter is about dreams, myths, fairy tales, and metamorphoses. The plot is structured around the epic journeys and a highly sensual celebration of sexuality. The novelist has given the darkest



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---

manifestations of sexuality in the relationships. (*Sunday Times Magazine*, 9 September 1984, 42)

The plot becomes problematic as Carter alludes to many texts of the prominent writers from Coleridge to D. H. Lawrence. The issue of inter-textuality disturbs the readers but it is the strength of the beauty and originality of the novel. Carter's use of myths makes the plot subtle and invigorating like Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Caryn James in his review of *The Magic Toyshop* in his *New York Times* eulogized Angela Carter for her innovative techniques and unconventional themes: "Angela Carter's fiction turns legends and fairy tales inside out, revealing the dark psychology beneath the golden glow. Her images are at once blunt and lush, as a woman becomes part swan and a man becomes a wolf... (Caryn James 3).

Carter confounded the critics by her cultural subversive stance. Carter uses the tools of bizarre and fantastic dealing with questions of sexuality and violence. In *The Magic Toyshop* Carter juxtaposes romance with realism; picaresque with pornographic and the Gothic with the grotesque. The plot of the novel unfolds Freudian concept of Oedipal sex relations. Carter confounded the critics by her cultural subversive stance. Carter uses the tools of bizarre and fantastic dealing with questions of sexuality and violence. In *The Magic Toyshop* Carter juxtaposes romance with realism; picaresque with pornographic and the Gothic with the grotesque. The plot of the novel unfolds Freudian concept of oedipal sex relations. It is pertinent to note that the



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---

feminist revival was fast taking place as women rejected the conventional morality; they demanded equal opportunities; better jobs and respectable treatment equal to their male partners.

Carter begins her novel as a fairy tale introducing her young growing Cinderella, Melanie. She is fifteen years young and beautiful girl entering into womanhood. At the outset of the plot, Melanie is an adolescent trapped in the dilemmas of her transformation as her body is growing and breasts are blooming. Melanie is overwhelmed when she looks in the mirror her beautiful and sexual figure. She expresses her "sheer exhilaration since she looks at the mirror and discovers that she is no longer a little girl" (*Toyshop* 1). Melanie gazed at the mirror for hours obsessed with love, marriage and sex experiences: "Please God, let me get married. Or, let me have sex." (*Toyshop* 98) She tries to transform herself into a desirable sex object in her own eyes: "She used the net curtain as raw material for a series of nightgowns suitable for her wedding night" (*Toyshop* 2) Melanie starts dreaming of her honeymoon; prepares herself for the event and even decides the places where she wants to celebrate her honeymoon night. Carter gives a flood of images of love, sex and nymphomaniac romance. in the opening scene of the plot. Trapped in the sexual fantasies, Melanie is fear-ridden: "Physically, I have probably reached my peak and can do nothing but deteriorate from now on..." (*Toyshop* 9) Melanie is set to play multiple roles in the novel as she looks at the mirror with sexual impulsiveness. She tries to construct herself assuming roles of art, fairy tales and magazines. Carter uses myth, romance, fairy tales, surreal art to create her identity. The interesting part of the opening scene is her different assumed roles as she" posed holding



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---

things” She emerges as a Cinderella holding “a tiger-lily from the garden under her chin, her knees pressed close together.” (*Toyshop 1*) Melanie looks like a sensuous and voluptuous coquette as she “dragged her hair sluttish across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet” (*Toyshop 2*). Carter refers to D.H. Lawrence’s famous erotic novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to highlight the sensuality of Melanie. The heroine is presented in the early pages of the novel like the Eve stressed with her own beauty as she gazes her lovely growing sexual figure in the mirror. It is her sexual anxiety and impulsive erotic image of her female virginal body that tempts her to wear her mother's wedding dress with "Moonlight, satin, roses" to enjoy nature, beauty, romance and the fragrance of the flowers of "un-guessable sweetness". Carter creates the sensuous and luxuriant atmosphere of the Garden of Eden thus:

A fresh little grass-scented wind blew through the open window and stroked her neck, stirring her hair. Under the moon, the country spread out like a foreign and enchanted land, where the corn was orient and immortal wheat, neither sown nor reaped, terra incognita, un-trodden by the foot of man, untouched by his hand.

Virgin. (*Toyshop 16*)

Melanie imagines her future husband so powerfully that “she could almost feel his breath on her cheek and his voice husking 'darling'" (*Toyshop 2*). She is in the bedroom of her mother and imagines the sexual activities in the moonlit night. She felt the “bed was hot...She turned and twisted and thumped her pillow.” (*Toyshop 9*) Melanie is sleepless as she imagines her mother



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---

sleeping with her Daddy. Carter depicts the sexual mood of Melanie as she lies on the luxuriant bed: “Melanie tried to imagine her parents making love. This seemed a very daring thing to think of on such a hot night. She tried to picture their embraces in this bed.” (*Toyshop* 9) She imagines herself a nude model for Lautrec. Soper Kate in her famous article *Naked Human Nature and the Draperies of Custom: Wollstonecraft on Equality and Democracy* (2001) observed:

Melanie unconsciously reflects the social discrimination of the society since, “there is much in the *Rights of Woman* which suggests that the enfeeblement and male dependency of a woman is traceable to her own self-derelection” (Soper 56).

The main focus of Angela Carter is on Melanie and her exploration of sexuality. She is young and beautiful girl just on the verge of womanhood. The novel begins with her biological sex; she is entering into a world of adulthood and she must know all the aspects of her sexual growth. Carter depicts the stages of her sexual growth through a ritual. She opens the trunk of her mother and wars her wedding dress in a romantic ecstasy: “Physically, I have probably reached my peak and can do nothing but deteriorate from now on”. (*Toyshop* 9)

Melanie cannot sleep so she starts sexual adventure entering into her mother’s bedroom; looking at the photographs; recollecting the dress of her father and mother. She recollects her father wearing” hairy tweed jacket” and mother wearing “black, going to-town suit” (*Toyshop* 10) She tries her long black hair in silk ribbons to emulate Degas ballerina. Melanie puts her mother’s



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---

perfume of Chanel; the smell of perfume transforms her into her mother. In romantic ecstasy she wears her mother's wedding dress and goes into the garden in the moonlit night. Melanie emerges as Eve in her Garden of Eden. Melanie starts with exploring her body as she discovered she was made of flesh and blood' (*Toyshop* 1). Melanie looks at the mirror and discovers herself as a sexual being in the eyes of men. She is depicted as a Sleeping Beauty waiting for her prince

Melanie walks around the garden and is shocked to discover that she is locked out of her house. She climbs the tree to get into her room but her wedding dress is destroyed. She feels guilty; looks her naked pose into the mirror like a fairy. She feels shameful, "chastened and humiliated" (*Toyshop* 23) Carl Jung contends that myth is a rich source of truths about human psychology. But Barthes holds other view about fairy tales and myths. He contends that myths present false ideologies and mislead people. (Jung 3-5) In the beginning of the novel Carter introduces Melanie as a Sleeping Beauty. The world of *The Magic Toyshop* is a juxtaposition of elements of fantasy, myths, and fairy tales. Sarah Gamble compares Melanie to Alice in Wonderland, as she moves "into a dimension where the real and the fantastic mix and mingle...However, this is no escapist fantasy, but one which like a fairytale, is continually referring back to the social conditions out of which it is produced." (Gamble 70) Carter uses the image of mirror in the tradition of fairy tales. The image is used to depict the "female's socially imposed identity. Elaine Millard claims that "Melanie's 'quest for self definition is at the centre" of *The Magic Toyshop*. (*Toyshop* 135) Like a mythical heroine of an old fairy tale Melanie discovers her self-image in the mirror and performs



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---

the role of a sensuous fairy longing for love and sex. Melanie is soon punished for her sin; she gets a telegram informing her of the tragic death of her parents in a plane crash. . She looks at the mirror with guilty consciousness.” She once again looked at the mirror with guilt and examined her “white face, black hair”. Carter puts all the blame on Melanie and holds her responsible in killing her parents: “The girl killed her mother. She packed up the hair brush and flung it at her reflected face “(*Toyshop* 25).

To conclude, the ritual of marriage ends with the shattering of the mirror symbolizing the impending doom for Melanie. Again like a fairy tale she is orphaned. “She feels, her brother, and her sister as the forlorn passengers from a wrecked ship.” (*Toyshop* 30). With the death of her parents Melanie has to move to South London to live with her uncle Philip Flower. She is sexually oppressed and psychological tortured by the Bluebeard. Carter introduces the gothic villain; a tyrannical Bluebeard living in a haunted castle with his witch like dumb wife. Melanie and Aunt Margaret are victims of the oppression of Uncle Philip who is a modern Bluebeard.

Uncle Phillip is the main puppet master and his shop is a place for his experiments and sex games. His house has been depicted as the horrifying castle of the Gothic Bluebeard. Rebecca Munford has highly praised Angela Carter for her revival of the Gothic tradition in the modern British fiction. In this chapter the researcher has explored the deconstructive and grotesque techniques employed by Carter in her *The Magic Toyshop* and *The Nights at the Circus*. Sarah Gamble is





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another critic of Angela Carter who contends that “Her heroines cover the whole range from objectified victims to oppressors of others.” (Gamble 61) Bluebeard emerges very powerful in her novels that control and dominates women. Carter explores the complicity of myth, desire, and social control in her novels.

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