



Research Paper

The Literary Witchcraft Of Depicting Grotesque Sexuality In Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance*

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Angela Carter, considered to be the witch of English literature, had an unbelievable tact in narrating the stories of her novels. The way literary devices are used by Carter draws a sense of bewitching disenchantment from the readers, because she profoundly deals with the vices of human nature. Carter's technique of writing, that is magical realism, was not accepted by her readers and the critics of her contemporary Britain because the genre had not yet entered the region. Salman Rushdie, being her bosom friend, in the Introduction to Carter's *Burning Your Boots*, comments, "... she was the most individual, independent and idiosyncratic of writers; dismissed by many in her lifetime as a marginal, cultish figure, an exotic hothouse flower, she has become the contemporary writer most studied at British universities -- a victory over the mainstream she would have enjoyed" (Rushdie v). Nevertheless, it is believed that Carter was the first British to have blessed her country with this technique. Considered to be a method of postcolonial writings, Carter employed it to prove the versatility of the genre and emerge herself as the sorceress of English literature. Another important aspect of her writing is sexuality and eroticism. The identity or the identity conflicts of the characters are wrought out by their sexual desires, either suppressed or volatile.

Shadow Dance is Carter's first novel, yet the depth of the human vices is so brutally articulated that it does not have the ineptness of the skill (her being literary witchcraft) usually associated with first novels. The novel revolves around three characters, Morris, Honeybuzzard and Ghislaine, stuck in the evils of the nature of human mind. By her literary witchcraft, Carter weaves horror and disgust into the significant events of the novel. She clearly depicts the extent to which human mind can reach, and as a result of which the actions that follow shall prove to be fatal. Carter teases this dark side of human mind which remains unconscious most of our lives, and if ignited in a bad way shall curse the human life with harsh consequences. Being a magical realist, Carter employs dreams and deals with the contemporary social issues by excruciating the human mind behind all the woes of the society. The work is also steeped in sexuality which makes the novel complex and ghastly. With the minute description of the events and of the thought processes of the characters, Carter has explicitly depicted the horror that sexuality has weaved into the novel.

Steeped in eccentric surrealism, *Shadow Dance* is set during a time when Britain witnessed a transition in culture with frivolity in sexual activities increasing. The bohemian and hippie culture of the 60's took its momentum and created nuisance in the lives of people who tried to accept and not accept the change it brought forth. The bleak, horrific and sad end of the female character Ghislaine (equally vicious like Honeybuzzard) is wrought out by the continuous teasing of sexuality in the male characters, Morris and Honeybuzzard. The aspect of grotesque is depicted in the waywardly doings of Honeybuzzard, though Morris is the central character of the novel. The absurdity of human thoughts, as articulated by Honeybuzzard gives a feeling of fear and grotesque. It is in two of the significant incidents of the novel that Honey showcases his absurd thoughts and inhuman actions. The first incident is evident when the novel starts with Morris suddenly and unwontedly meeting Ghislaine with the horrible fresh scar visible on her face. This reminds him of the beauty which once turned the town upside down. The author's description of the sexual beauty of Ghislaine, mixed with the innocence of her age is made in the past tense as she puts forward the thoughts of Morris,

She was a very young girl. She used to look like a young girl in a picture book, a soft and dewy young girl. She used to look like the sort of young girl one cannot imagine sitting on the lavatory or shaving her

armpits pricking her nose. She had such a little face, all pale; and soft, baby cheeks and a half-open mouth as if she was expecting somebody, anybody, everybody she met to pop a sweetie into it. (Carter *Shadow Dance* 2)

The sexuality of Ghislaine, which is now a thing of the past, stands in contrast with the innocence she displays. The minute description of her face and the actions she does give an uncanny feeling to the readers. This unconventional employment of the grotesque way of depicting things pertains to the revolutionary mind of the author. The identity of Ghislaine resides in her sexuality for we see Carter describing the countenance of Ghislaine, bringing in her sexuality. In the words of Carter, she used to make “butterfly darts across the crowd to settle lightly at someone’s table, smiling her tremulous, shy, disingenuous smile and saying ‘Hallooo’... and she gathered them up in armfuls, her lovers, every night, in the manner of a careless baby playing in a meadow, pulling both flowers and grass...” (ibid. 3) The use of words in describing the picture of Ghislaine depicts a conglomeration of innocence and viciousness; Ghislaine’s is portrayed as a small girl yet with adult intentions in hindsight. The ironical portrayal of Ghislaine is a deviation from the conventional portrayal of women in the contemporary British literature. Carter includes all the aspects of psychological development that lead to the being of Ghislaine; an orphan and a nymphet of the town uses her beauty and sexuality to woo men; and this had created innumerable disturbances in the lives of the men, Honeybuzzard and Morris being two among them. The sexuality of Ghislaine is portrayed in a way that creates stir in the world of men. And because Morris had an unpleasant one night stand with her, he instigates Honey to teach her a lesson as a result of which the latter scars her face with a sharp knife and shatters her beauty. Termed as the “burning child” by Honeybuzzard, friend and fiend of Morris, known in the town for his dandyish nature, Ghislaine after her face was scarred by the former displayed a horror of ambiguity with her sexuality, eroticism and the innocence all taken the form of grotesque. The scar is described in the following words of Carter,

The scar went all the way down her face, from the corner of her left eyebrow, down, down, down, past nose and mouth and chin until it disappeared below the collar of her shirt. The scar was all red and raw as if, at the slightest exertion, it might open and bleed; and the flesh was marked with purple imprints from the stitches she had had in it. (ibid. 2)

The scar is also a connotation to the violation of women’s sexuality that resides in the vagina. The men folk around Ghislaine were not able to accept and acknowledge the frivolity vested in her sexuality. Honeybuzzard, the male chauvinist of the novel, does not tolerate the superiority that Ghislaine displays through her sexuality. He ultimately expressed his male superiority by scarring her sexuality inherent in her face. The inferiority that was imposed by Ghislaine on Honey is reflected in the crime he does. The bright light of the day does not let him express his superiority, as he takes shelter of darkness to commit the crime. Hence, it does not prove him guilty and the people of the town are intimidated with a different story, according to which a gang of boys raped her and knifed her face in the churchyard. This inhuman act turns the world of Ghislaine upside down as she could no more be frivolous with her sexuality and no more seek love from the men around, as she is no more beautiful. Honeybuzzard roams free because of the love Ghislaine has for him. Being deprived of love in her childhood, of power and of money, she challenges the inhumanity of patriarchy by teasing them, as in the thoughts of Morris, “-she so beautiful but never to be enjoyed” (Carter *Shadow Dance* 34) seemed to be the crime of Ghislaine. The indifference shown from the men who were once mesmerized by her leaves her devastated and desperate. The mental and emotional struggle of Ghislaine is ghastly portrayed because she finds an inexplicable and grotesque comfort only with her abuser. The brutal surrender she makes to Honeybuzzard is reflective of the principles of the infamous Marquis de Sade, known for his notorious views on sexuality and eroticism. Carter in her *The Sadeian Woman*, gives a description of how Sadeian mind works as she says, “The ignorance of one party as to the intentions of the other makes the victim so defenceless against predation that it can seem as if a treacherous complicity finally unites them; as though, in some sense, the victim wills a victim’s fate. But, if any of the Sadeian victims seem to incite their masters to their violence by tacitly accepting their right to administer it, let us not make too much of this apparent complicity. There is no defence at all against absolute tyranny.” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 139). This viewpoint of Sade is reflected in the murder of Ghislaine. Honeybuzzard, on the other hand, though is overpowered with fear of having committed such a crime, keeps on avoiding Ghislaine, and takes in Emily as his partner. His utter lack of guilt and the frivolity associated with his inhumanness lead the readers to another brutal episode of Ghislaine’s murder. The following ghastly description of the episodes stands in complete contrast with the fair and lovely narration of fairytales and depicts an inhuman Sadeian approach towards sexuality that crosses its limits:

A collapsible trestle table had been assembled in the middle of the floor... On the table lay a mound, covered with a chequered tablecloth. At each of the four corners of the table burned a candle... He did not want Emily to see what might be lying under the cover but, as he tried to press her behind him, she reached across and turned the cover down... Naked, Ghislaine lay on her back with her hands crossed on her breasts, so that her nipples poked between her fingers like the muzzles of inquisitive white mice. Her eyes were shut down with pennies, two on each eyelid, and her mouth gaped open a little. There were deep black fingermarks in her throat. With pity and tenderness, for the first time unmixed with any other feeling, Morris saw how her fingernails were

bitten down to the quick and how shadows smoothed out the cratered surface of her cheek and how the chopped tufts of golden hair had grown no further than an inch or so below her ears and how there was soft, blonde down on the motionless flesh of her stomach. (Carter *Shadow Dance* 177)

This metaphysical representation of the terrible end of Ghislaine as portrayed by Carter is reflective of the ultimate Sadeian frame of mind. She proves to be defenseless and the only thing that united both the vicious aura of Ghislaine and Honeybuzzard is the former's acceptance of the violence inflicted on her and at the end succumbing to it. Honey performs his absolute tyranny with Ghislaine's complete blind acceptance of his actions and thus, he kills her at the end. The murder proves to be a deadly mutual agreement that does not comply to the conventional psyche of human mind. This grotesque depiction of the murder also proves the brutality hidden in the everyday life of a modern man and the novel unadulterated feelings of Morris prove the existence of the flickering humanity. The murder of Ghislaine not only marks the theme of alienation and moral bankruptcy of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, the contemporary youth of Carter devoid of "Datta, Dvayadhvam, Damyata", but also the entire process of setting oneself to fire and destruction. Ghislaine weaves the trap herself and it seems as if her salvation lied in the ultimate brutality of Honeybuzzard. Another aspect of spiritual bankruptcy usually associated with religion perfectly depicts the blasphemy in the arrangement of the candles by Honeybuzzard only to perform the brutal murder. The detailing of this eeriness and grim act also upholds the witchy and deadly sexuality and eroticism oozing out of the dead Ghislaine. Like the destroyed and murdered Ghislaine, the dilapidated structures of the beautiful British architectural buildings represent the horrid ruin of culture and tradition.

The witchery of Angela Carter in depicting the gross reality of human minds caters to the unconventionality of literary discourse. In order to comply with the theme of fairytales, Carter's novels include puppets, witches, fairies etc. *Shadow Dance* being the first novel does not have literal puppets or fairies, but has Ghislaine as the ultimate puppet. This brutal end of Ghislaine can be compared to the Bakhtin's (*Rabelais and his World*) opinion on the Marionette plays of Romanticism where the puppets are "the victim of alien inhuman force, which rules over men by turning them into marionettes" (Bakhtin 40). Here, Ghislaine is clearly the puppet contributing to the "peculiar grotesque theme of the tragic doll" (ibid. 40). Rebecca Munford, in her *Re-visiting Angela Carter*, compares the surreal art of doll-making with Carter's art of creating the character of Ghislaine. In the words of Munford, "The dolls, patched up like Ghislaine, confuse and conflate categories such as sexiness and innocence, childhood and adulthood, beauty and its destruction, eroticism, mutilation and death in a manner characteristic of surrealism. The pubescent dolls are splayed and twisted into poses which project an image of woman as simultaneously passive victim and powerful seductress" (Munford 24). The initial description of Ghislaine mentions about her "electronic" voice like that of a "ravishing automaton". Her soft pink cheeks depict the innocence of a doll with her conventional hair like that of a Barbie. Even, it is to be noted that the concept of Barbie Dolls was influenced by sex dolls that were prominent in the market to satiate the sexual hunger of men. Munford also talks about the dolls of Bellmer, influenced much by the thoughts of Sade. He speaks of his desire to control his dolls both physically and emotionally. In the words of Munford, "His desire to dominate his dolls extends even beyond the contortion of their limbs" and "he speaks openly about his wish to control even their thoughts and desires" (ibid. 25). Honeybuzzard, in the novel displays similar thoughts and actions towards Ghislaine as if she is his puppet. Through the surrender and submission, knowing that her end would be the brutal death, Ghislaine acted like a mute doll and according to his sadistic desires. Taking in account all the episodes of Ghislaine and Honeybuzzard, the readers witness the ascending of brutality that begins with the subtle sexual games played by both. These games that look innocent and harmless at the beginning, unknowingly take a toll on the psyche of Ghislaine, and she slips into the trap of Honey's evil patriarchal desires. A relationship of human-doll is created by their actions, and they are emotionally and physically dependent on each other giving it a ghastly touch. And not complying with his desires leads to Ghislaine's knifing of her face and eventually to her murder. These soft pornographic incidents in the novel depict the gradual drastic change in the contemporary Britain and also the identity of the characters steeped in the repressed thoughts of sexuality. Even though, Honeybuzzard, along with Morris, is a junk collector, his reality of life does not bring in a sense of realization for his betterment; rather, he is steeped in the frustration of reality and takes refuge in executing his dark desires thus satisfying his instincts which is rather impossible in collecting junks. Also, like a parasocial being, he feels a sense of superiority which is otherwise impossible in reality.

Another character, Emily, girlfriend of Honeybuzzard and the to-be mother of his child, does not completely fall prey to his viciousness. Unlike Ghislaine, Emily displays a mastery over her life and does not let Honey to trap her. Emily's encounter with Ghislaine depicts a modern day jealousy-stricken woman who tries reestablishing her lost empire of seduction and sexuality lost as a result of her scarred face. Ghislaine, in her continuous search for Honeybuzzard after her shattered beauty, comes in search for him at his junk shop, only to find Emily. Ghislaine shows her the obscene pictures of Honey and Ghislaine together and in the manner of a horror movie, she goes near the face of Emily showing her the ghastly scar on her face. When Emily, later,

accounts the episode to Morris, says, “she kept pushing her face, her horrible face, all scarred and torn, into mine and said he would cut me up like that if I did anything he didn't like”(Carter *Shadow Dance* 166). This behavior of Ghislaine towards Emily is not a sign of concern but of a warning to move out of Honeybuzzard's life, so that she can satiate her jealousy-stricken soul. But, it was the drastic change in the attitude of Ghislaine from acting as a master with her to a slave with Honeybuzzard, left Emily shocked. Emily recounts the desperation of Ghislaine to Morris when she says, “...She said: ‘I've learnt my lesson, I can't live without you, you are my master. Do what you like with me.’... And he just laughed...” (ibid. 166). Unlike the fairy tales, Angela Carter's tale of love and crime has her heroine vulnerable to the core and thus breaking the conventions; Ghislaine does not wait for a prince charming to rescue her, but bends down on her knees pleading to be rescued from the want of being wanted. This is an explicit portrayal of colonization, where the mind of Ghislaine is colonized with the conventional ideas of inferiority imposed on women for the benefit of patriarchy. Unlike any prince charming in fairytales, Carter's Honeybuzzard acts as the devil depicting the reality of the crude harshness portrayed by the contemporary Britain.

There are a few other significant instances that prove the grotesqueness in the depiction of sexuality and eroticism. Since the story of *Shadow Dance* is being viewed through the lens of Morris, it is quite distracting for the readers to acknowledge the exertion of impact Morris has on the lives of Honeybuzzard and Ghislaine. Even though the heinous act of transgressing against Ghislaine is performed by Honey, it is Morris who plays a passive yet dangerous and active role in the execution of these acts. Carter portrays him with low self-esteem and all throughout the story he remains a shadow of Honey. He takes equal pleasure in violating Ghislaine even though he is hit with guilt and remorse for having instigated the crime. Even though he does not directly enjoy the sadistic pleasure of knifing Ghislaine on her face, his sadistic desires materialize in his frequent dream of knifing Ghislaine. It is at the end of the novel, after witnessing the brutally murdered dead body Ghislaine, that he silently confesses to himself about his secret desire to hurt her. With a mixed feeling of guilt and realization he says, “But I wanted it. I am to blame, too” (ibid. 178). After the sudden meeting with the scarred Ghislaine at the beginning of the novel, which was uncalled for, Morris suffers from guilt, anger and fear. When he escapes her and runs back to his home, he takes out the pornographic pictures of Ghislaine, clicked by both Morris and Honeybuzzard, where, she “contorted herself, spread herself wide, arrayed herself in a bizarre variety of accessories” (ibid. 17). These actions of Morris are evident of the suppressed sexual desires and his identity steeped with those suppressed feelings. Carter describes the mixed and confused feelings of Morris in the following lines:

Finally, he searched around for the pot of Indian ink; he intended to blot out her face in each pose, as they do in newspaper photographs of men in prison. He thought that would duly extinguish her. Yet, once he had the pen in his hand, he found he was finely, carefully, striping each image of her with a long scar from eyebrow to navel. All the time, he wondered why he was doing it; it seemed a vindictive thing to do and he had never thought of himself as vindictive man. But he did not stop until he had finished marking them all in. When he looked at them spread all round his feet to dry, he was filled with all revulsion at himself. (ibid. 17)

These lines not only depict his frustration over Ghislaine but his suppressed sexual desires for her aided by the social institution of a failed marriage with the Victorian Edna, and also his failed one-night stand with Ghislaine. This creates in him an extreme sense of frustration at the unfulfilment of his patriarchal desires leading to his sadistic desires to hurt Ghislaine. This brutal encounter with Ghislaine not only stirred Morris up with the feelings of guilt and remorse, “His moral complicity in Ghislaine's mutilation translates into a haunting and all-pervasive feeling of guilt, which only exacerbates his rage” (Munford 29). These frustrating and revengeful desires that he had for her were also evident for his wife Edna when she irritated him with her constant pestering. But, it is also clear that he despises himself for generating such evil desires for a person like Edna who thought “marriage was for submission and procreation” and who was “by nature a nest builder, a home maker, a creator of warm cosiness, a real woman, a fine woman” (Carter *Shadow Dance* 42). Even though Morris is well acquainted with the meek Victorian characteristics of his wife, the fact that her breasts were flat somehow disappointed him. In the novel, the sexuality of the female characters, as portrayed by Carter, is nothing more than a piece of meat or flesh. It is evident in the characters of Ghislaine and Edna. It is when Edna is compared with ‘a poor flat fillet on the marble slab of her bed’ (ibid. 13) whom Morris feels like slicing it open. This absurd reduction of women sexuality is reflected in the dreams of Morris where he initially cuts the face of Ghislaine and later turns on to Edna. The following lines of absurdity depict the patriarchal structure of mind that reduces women to mere meat or flesh:

He dreamed he was cutting her face with a jagged shard of broken glass and blood was running on her breasts not only from her but from himself, from his cut head... And then he and Ghislaine were in his own bed and her head rolled on the pillows and all the yellow hair went brown, as if it was blighted, and then it was Edna he saw that he was slicing open and there was blood everywhere, on her and on his hands and in his eyes and mouth. (ibid. 18)

Morris, who was “totally impotent, helpless, useless as the junk in his shop” does not feel any different for both these female characters and they are reduced to “passive objects” (Munford 34). The guilt amounted as Edna consistently took care of and appreciated his miserable paintings, and yet, he expressed his disappointment at her shortcomings as for the benchmarks of sexuality and eroticism set by patriarchy. Overpowered with guilt, Morris’s suppressed desires materialize in his thoughts. In another instance, when Morris saw a hoarding of a girl “he had fleeting but disturbing fantasies about her, a panting, wet-lipped nymphet with jutting nubile breasts, flourishing her crop and crying ‘Faster! Faster!’” Here, Morris represents the suppressed desires that take the form of weird images and dreams. It is also reflected when Morris did not intend to say but spontaneously asked Honeybuzzard to “Teach her (Ghislaine) a lesson” which proves the sexual frustration associated with his repressed and mocked desires for Ghislaine and the sexual deprivation he faces in his life. The frivolity of sexual affairs, as depicted by Carter, pertaining to the then contemporary Britain, disregarded the social institutions like religion, marriage. Well, Edna being the epitome of an ideal Victorian, the angel in the house, is conditioned in a way that aids to the patriarchal violence. In an instance, Edna was molested by Oscar, friend of Morris who let his friend commit such a crime. But, instead of despising the male insanity, Edna prefers to blame herself of whose reactions are well captured by Cater in the following lines:

Yet it was not Oscar whom she blamed and eventually she had decided it would be best for all of them to keep the attack secret, since Oscar had been overruled by passion and was not quite himself, surely, at the time. She blamed herself; she must, somehow, have tempted him. The long and painful crawl she made back to self-esteem after she had decided she had tempted Oscar had brought Morris down terribly. (ibid. 47)

These shocking thought processes that Edna nurtured in her represent the minds of the entire women clan of the pre-contemporary Britain of Carter. But, she overcomes these conflicts when she is found sleeping with Henry Glass, another minor character in the novel. As the debt of guilt was cancelled, at this moment Morris felt free. The actions of Edna broke the conventional ideal picture of “angel” in the house and rather glorified the unconventional and emerging liberality towards the idea of fallen woman which has been theologically passed down to the generations until the Victorian age.

Edmund Gordon, in his biography of Angela Carter describes this state in these following words, “Psychotherapists – especially those influenced by Melanie Klein, whose work Angela read with enthusiasm in the 1970s – often speak about the twin fears of ‘abandonment’ and ‘engulfment’. The former is usually dominant among people who’ve felt neglected or insufficiently loved during childhood; it manifests itself in a frantic insecurity about adult relationships, a desperate fear of losing the loved one. (Gordon 29). This state is reflected in and justified of the identity of Morris and the actions he does. A sense of insecurity that is generated from a failed marriage and from a failed identity as a painter shapes the events in the novel. Thus, he finds his subdued shadow in the vicious character of Honeybuzzard. Again, this psychological explanation given by Gordon is also reflective in Ghislaine’s character. Ghislaine fears the abandonment and reacts in a way that would, she felt, reconcile her with her lost power associated with her beauty and sexuality.

Apart from other aspects of grotesque and gothic present in the novel, it is the artful narration of the gruesome and grotesque nature of feminine that piques the psyche of the readers. The setting of the important ghastly erotic events in the novel like the haunted places, crypts, abandoned buildings, symbolic ruins of the conventional or the pre-modern culture of Britain, dark nights and so on, also adds to its grotesqueness. This novel also proves that he destruction that patriarchy is subjected to only women but men as well. The violence inflicted on women is unconventionally portrayed by Angela Carter portraying it in a fairy-tale-like picture. Even though her explicit portrayal of sexuality brought her a lot of criticism, Carter succeeded in bewildering her readers with her unconventional portrayal of reality which is greater part of the patriarchal structure. The vulnerability that oozes out of the suppressed sexual feelings shapes the identity of the individual. The women of Carter are representative of the “fallen women” that the Victorians termed, defying the characters set for ideal women or for the “angel of the house”. She questions the conventional male desires unlike the Victorians who exclude the unconventional women of their time. The illicit relations and the exploitation of women sexuality unmask the conventional patriarchal motive. It is the aspect of sexuality that brought in the vast difference in the psychoanalysis of Freud and Jung. Freud’s belief in sexuality being the only basis of human psyche and of the formation of identity does not comply with the theory of Jung, according to whom sexuality does play an important aspect of the unconscious mind but not in entirety.

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