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Research Paper -English

History and Modernity in Angela Carter's Night at the Circus

*** Harvinder Pal**

*** Ph.D. Research Scholar,Regd. No.- 1150100730 ,Singhania University, Pacheri Beri Jhunjhunu, Raj.**

A B S T R A C T

Angela Carter's famous novel Night at the Circus refers back to an age before the consolidation of English patriarchal imperialism to find in a dimension of Shakespeare's work the seeds of an English identity which is more accommodating than that later provided by imperialism and patriarchy. There are hints, in the variety and multiplicity of life on the streets of her beloved London and elsewhere that an alternative English cultural model of reciprocity, tolerance and equality may be in the making, as Carter would have wished it. Thus, the present research paper is an attempt to bring out the historical aspects of the text.

The novel, Night at the Circus is historical to the extent that it contains references to actual personages and events. It is a historical novel to the extent that it gives details on and voices to women involved in historical events - details and voices typically left out of conventional history, or, for that matter, "left out of conventional historical novels. The mixture of historical realism" (Butler 34) and the extraordinary in this woman's story may be seen to parallel - in an admittedly extreme form - the processes that go on in the making of conventional history. In 1974, in a book entitled On Style in History, the historian Peter Gay discussed the question of the relationship between facts and interpretation in the writing of history. He observed amongst some historians a scepticism about the reality of historical fact and an ensuing relativism in respect of historical interpretation:

The decay of the cultural limits between 'high' and 'low', so that the culture can no longer define itself in terms of either but only in terms of some new thing, is not to be understood as a carnivalesque disruption of the boundaries between the elevated and the debased. That disruption was only ever temporary and was superseded, as Carter pointed out, by the reinstatement of established order. It is, rather, a real mixing and blending which involves a permanent erasure of the "old boundaries and which demands a new definition of English cultural identity" ().

This is a mixing and blending in the actual 'history' that Dora, m her old age, lives in; it is not an escape - a la Peregrine - from history. This is a mixing and blending which embraces the multiplicity of cultural phenomena, avoiding the iniquities of the old lines of demarcation ^and exclusion. The vision of the novel embraces rather than represses differences of sexuality in late- twentieth-century England.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, historians have reiterated that progressive historians write progressive history and bourgeois historians bourgeois history, and that, tike their controlling assumptions…Historical facts, Carl Becker wrote, are not out there, in the world of the past, but in here, in the mind of the historian. And the popular conclusion has been summarily put by E. H. Carr: 'The belief in a hard core of facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate. (Gay 197-8)

Gay does not go along with this conclusion. He believes in objective facts. The 'pressure towards objectivity', he writes,

is realistic because the objects of the historian's enquiry are precisely that, objects, out there in a real and single past. Historical controversy in no way compromises their ontological integrity. The tree in the woods of the past fell in only one way, no matter how fragmentary or contradictory the reports of its fall, no matter whether there are no historians, one historian, or several contentious historians in its future to record and debate it. If this sounds like naive Realism, I can only plead that I mean it to be Realism, though not of the naive variety. (Gay 210)

It is not naive because Gay allows for the constitutive role played by the act of interpretation, but he will not go the whole way and assert that the act of interpretation is all there is. Such a move would not answer to the sense of outrage that might be felt if, for example, some relative of one of those who died in the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City were told that the event and the loss were not objective facts. The importance of interpretation does not preclude the existence of objective facts however hard it may sometimes be to recover those facts. What the importance of interpre-

tation does mean is that history is a never-finalized process:

I am not suggesting that this process will ever end; the landscape of the past is too remote, too obscure, or, in modern history, too over-crowded for that. In fact, such a conclusive interpretation - the map that will never need revision - is unrealizable in principle. One commonplace way of stating that principle is to say that every generation must rewrite the histories of its predecessors. The commonplace is true, but not for the reason usually offered on its behalf. It holds true, rather, because events have posterities that may continue to the end of time. History, in a word, is unfinished in the sense that the future always uses its past in new ways. (Gay 212)

The fantastic dimension in Nights at the Circus underpinned by the factual frame of historical reference, the objective reality of the women's movement and so on parallels Gay's notion of new uses and meanings being given to events of the past.

The fantastic story of Nights at the Circus articulates meanings associated with historical events that are not articulated in conventional history. It is a rewriting of the historical events from a feminine perspective and in that sense Nights at the Circus is a 'historical' novel.

The historicism of Nights at the Circus never loses sight of the material realities of women's lives at the end of the nineteenth century. It never cannibalizes its preoccupation with women's suffering and disempowerment. The novel offers, in fact, within its narrative, a critique and mockery of the principle of carnival. That principle is dramatised, appropriately enough, by the circus clowns and their leader Buffo. Buffo is described as "the Lord of Misrule himself" (Carter, NC 175). His act enacts the subversion of order and form, including his own:

At the climax of his turn, everything having collapsed about him as if a grenade exploded it, he starts to deconstruct himself. His face becomes contorted by the most hideous grimaces, as if he were trying to shake off the very wet white with which it is coated: shake! shake! shake out his teeth, shake off his nose, shake away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment. (Carter, NC 117)

This convulsive self-dismemberment is seen as adding up to nothing in the real, practical, political world. 'Angela Carter's clown', Christopher Norris writes, is an adept of deconstruction before the letter, "of a gestural writing that effaces all signs of origin and exists only in the moment of its own production" (Bronfen 52). Buffo, in a phrase that alludes ironically to Lear's words in Shakespeare's King Lear asserts that "Nothing' is precisely what he celebrates, Nothing will come of nothing. That's the glory of it" (Carter, NC 123). The problem is that King Lear questions the value of nothingness while Buffo nihilistically delights in it. Fevvers and Lizzie may see that gendered identity is something that can be reconstructed. But they do not lose the sense that there is a connection between the idea that identity is malleable and the empirically verifiable, material facts of people's lives.

Thus, Angela Carter's novel Night at the Circus is a great historical novel which focuses on the different historical aspects which resemble truly modern as well as ancient. Carter's efforts to make it more stronger as a text of history is realized to the extent till it is viewed as a symbol of truth and honesty as part of world literature. It not only focuses on the historical aspects of the new system at the same time it is indeed an effort to bring out the realism and truth both.

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