

Artistic Aesthetics in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*



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ABSTRACT

Angela Carter's famous novel Wise Children is a great venture for the social, feminine and artistic values. She not only struggles hard to present a true picture of social conflicts in the society but a sense of realization for the females of 20th century world. She does it all with a keen eye on the aesthetic part of the text which heightens the values of the text to the next stage of supremacy in the literature in English. Present research paper is an attempt to explore it both artistically and universally.

Wise Children (1991) is about English culture. And it is about a Shakespeare who has been constructed as one of the originating myths of English culture. As the novel several times reminds us, Shakespeare's head appears on the Bank of England. Wise Children refers to Shakespeare's tragedies, but its heart is with the comedies. It rewrites the dark underside of the comedies just as it reinvents their happy endings. The novel is about the way in which English imperialism and patriarchy appropriated Shakespeare and cast him as a founding myth in their own image. It is about the ways in which aspects of Shakespeare can be re-read and used as an alternative model for English cultural identity; one which stands outside the inheritance of patriarchy and imperialism.

The central action of the novel takes place on a single day in the very late 1980s. The day is 23 April, traditionally Shakespeare's birthday, which is also the festival day of England's patron saint, St George. The novel's narrator, Dora Chance, tells of the events of the day after it is over and she intersperses her record with extensive accounts of her own life and of the lives of other members of her family in the preceding years. Dora, who has an identical twin sister, Nora, is seventy-five. They are the illegitimate daughters of an eminent actor, Sir Melchior Hazard. The family relationships in the novel are complicated but in their complication lies one of the basic allusions to Shakespeare's work.

Though Dora and Nora's biological father is Melchior, they are officially known as the daughters of Melchior's fraternal twin, Peregrine or 'Perry'. Melchior and Peregrine are sons of the marriage of Estella and Ranulph Hazard. Thirty or more years older than Estella, Ranulph Hazard was one of the "great, roaring, actor-managers" of the late Victorian stage, and he met Estella in 1888 when she played Cordelia to his King Lear" (Carter, WC 14). Melchior, whose birthday is the same as Shakespeare's and whose hundredth birthday it is on the 23 April recorded by Dora in her story, has had three

wives. The first, Lady Atalanta Hazard is the mother of two daughters, Saskia and Imogen. But while legally Melchior is their father, their biological father is Peregrine. There are no children from Melchior's second marriage to Delia Delaney. From Melchior's third marriage to a young woman known as 'My Lady Margarine' - who had played Cordelia to his Lear, just as Estella had played Cordelia to Ranulph's Lear - there issued two further fraternal twins, Tristram and Gareth Hazard. Dora's and Nora's mother, 'Pretty Kitty', "was a foundling who died very shortly after they were born, 'when the Zeppelins were falling'" (Carter, WC 2) during the First World War. They were adopted by the owner of the house where 'Pretty Kitty' had been lodging, a woman calling herself Mrs. Chance but who allowed Dora and Nora only to "call her 'Grandma', 'out of respect for the dead'" (Carter, WC 26). Dora and Nora have had no children of their own but live with Melchior's discarded first wife, Wheelchair, and they are close to their goddaughter, a black girl called Tiffany, who is the daughter of Brenda, a neighbour of Dora and Nora in the London district of Brixton.

The model of reciprocity, of mutuality or communication, in which human beings interact each as both subject and object, individually both thesis and antithesis, is one which defines the humane. It is the model which "sustains humanism and which prevents rationality from foundering" (Keyness 145) on itself. Juliette's adoption of egocentric, masculinist rationality grounds her capacity to murder her own daughter and to exorcise "the human responses that can only be learned through the society of others who are not accomplices, who are not aspects of the self that confirm the omnipotence of the self" (Carter, WC 99). She attains the freedom of the libertine, the freedom of the outlaw, that litigates against what Carter called "the common good" (Carter, WC 207), a freedom that is 'without any meaning in the general context of human life' (Carter, WC 99). Carter's model of reciprocity seeks to preserve reason not as the

property of the transcendent subject but as a function of the 'common good'. Sade's use of sexuality" (Kristeva 139) as a means by which to explore Enlightenment ideology exposes the insufficiency of that ideology as a means of supporting human life in general:

Sexuality, in this estranged form, becomes a denial of a basis of mutuality, of the acknowledgement of equal rights to exist in the world...by which she has come from the benefits of the united parts of women....from which any durable form of human intercourse can spring. (Carter, WC 141)

At the outset of *Wise Children*, an Englishman on his last night in a fantasy 1970s London before he sets out for New York. In her films, Tristessa, as her name implies, made a specialty of sadness and suffering. On his last night in London Evelyn goes to see one of Tristessa's films, and remembers the connection that had been induced in him as a boy between sexual arousal and the image of Tristessa's suffering, "the twitch in my budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in me" (Carter, WC 8). The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.

Whatever the rage and desperation, Mother reconstructs Evelyn as a woman in the same manner as she constructed herself: that is, effectively as a reflection of masculine images of the female. For all Mother's sympathies with the female, they are sympathies that Carter sees as inadvertently colluding with patriarchy and it is noticeable that Mother constructs Eve according to a masculine view of what the perfect woman should look like. Carter writes, "The feminine character,

and the idea of femininity on which it is modeled, are products of masculine society" (WC 110). So it is with Eve's appearance in *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve emerges as 'a variation upon what Leilah had been, an incarnation of male sexual fantasy, a 'not-self'. The new Eve records that:

When I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me... They had turned me into the Playboy centerfold, I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head, I had become my own masturbatory fantasy. (Carter WC 74-5)

It is from the imperialist, patriarchal England that Dora and Nora are disinherited, though it is a disinheritance that they scorned and which, as it all turned out, is a blessing. George narrates:

As regards the pink bits on his bum and belly, we knew already in our bones that those of us in the left-hand line were left out of the picture; we were the offspring of the bastard king of England, if you like, and we weren't going to inherit any of the gravy, so the hell with it. (WC 67-8)

One of the blessings of Dora's and Nora's disinheritance is their disengagement from the masculine cult of war, which is also seen in the novel as a symptom of patriarchal and imperial power.

Thus, Carter's novels *Wise Children* has come not only as a great treatise of world literature with its sublimity in the subject and aestheticism on the part of arts as piece of creativity. Carter's efforts of making it a rich text on both the levels as on the literary and non-literary aim at arousing the readers a sense of belongingness with its difference in opinions both for dealing it as a great text on feminine issues and social explorations.

REFERENCE

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