Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus: a Historiographical Perspective*

Wiem Krifa
University of Sousse, Tunisia

Abstract

*Nights at The Circus* (1984) is a provocative novel, written by the British writer Angela Carter. It is a feminist postmodern work which combines fantastic events, to convey historiographical happenings. Contrary to the postmodern critics who advance the principle of death of history, feminist postmodernists tend to reassess history, from which they were excluded, by uniting fantasy and history. Historiographical metafiction is an attempt to rewrite history from a female critical angle. In *Nights at The Circus*, the narrative tracks back the past historical events of the 1890’s, with an endeavour to plan a more successful female future. Carter’s dealing with history implies a corrective political undertone that pays tribute to the marginalized females. The postmodern herstoricism is intermingled with fantasy to inscribe a more even history.

As an example, we can take the character of Fevvers in *Nights at The Circus* who evokes Margaret Thatcher: The iron Lady. This example is used to introduce hidden historical truths. Fevvers with her fantastic wings is the symbolic "New Woman" of the late 19th century who seeks to enjoy her economic, social and civil rights. She unveils the historical and political atrocities imposed on women, and deconstructs the patriarchal identity. Through the female herstoricism, Fevvers mould and reconstruct "The New Man" who can fit "The New Woman". Walser, the journalist who embarks on writing the biography of fevvers is deployed by her to integrate into history, all the female tales that have been erased from the bygone historical records. Throughout the whole novel, fevvers cherishes her clock as the emblem of history. When she loses it during the train crash, she lives the Siberian experience, which is depicted by her, as being before history. For Fevvers, as a female representative, history is vital, consequently should be revisited to incorporate women into it.

Key words: feminism- postmodernism- historiography- herstory- fantasy
The feminist movement has usually challenged the western metaphysical truths from which they have been excluded. Actually, the females have been deprived from a sense of subjectivity as well as a historical past. The official western history has depicted the story of the white male and overlooked the female history. However, the feminist postmodern alliance has strengthened women, and provided them with an opportunity to regain their subjective essence and historical past existence.

In this context, the feminist postmodern rewriting of history has come as a reaction to reinscribe their historical records and pay tribute to the excluded females. Historiography and historiographical metafiction are feminist postmodern attempts to rewrite history through a fictional and fantastic literary style. The conventional historical events are revised from a feminist fantastic perspective. As far as historiographical metafiction is concerned

The narrativization of past events is not hidden: the events no longer seem to speak for themselves but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed— not found— order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure. The process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines (Hutcheon 66).

The postmodern writers start from some historical sequences to weave whole fictional and narratorial plots. Amongst the postmodern feminist writers, the British writer Angela Carter is innovator in writing historical novels. Her book Nights at The Circus (1984) can be considered as a “herstorical” novel, rather than a historical, since it attempts to regain the lost female historical voice.

Throughout the whole book, various historiographical instances are conspicuously deployed to pinpoint the ignored feminist historical record. What is appealing in Nights at The Circus is Carter’s deployment to historiographical metafiction through fantastic fictional plots. The historical setting of the novel which is the late 19th century, provides significant historical revision of this period, and opens horizons forward to the 20th century.

Without disregarding the fantastic and mythic elements, the historical references are clearly anchored within the writing. To use Sarah Gamble’s words, “Nights at The Circus…is a fantasy which ends up by negotiating its way out of fantasy […] . There is real experience, authentic emotion, to be had in the world outside the circus, and the novel concludes having firmly staked its claim there” (Gamble qtd. in Stoddart 56). The novel hovers around the historical context of the late 19th century which is purposefully chosen by the writer.

In point of fact, it is a period that has witnessed the emergence of Women’s rights which would become a British parliamentary legislation during the 20th century. As a historical fact, in 1865, being elected as a member of the British parliament, John Stuart Mill advanced the issue of Women ‘suffrage as a prior bill in his electoral list. Though Carter does not explicitly mention these facts, she alludes to them through her fantastic depiction of her heroine: fevvers. The latter, is presented to the reader as a woman with wings. Symbolically speaking, her wings would uphold her to be the equal of males.

This is clearly shown through the words of fevvers’ foster mother. After the apparition of her wings, Ma Nelson describes Fevvers as “The pure child of the century that
just now is waiting in the wings, The New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground” (Carter 25)

This alludes to the coming of the 20th century with the liberation of women and their undeniable right to suffrage. Nights at The Circus is typically herstorical, in that it rewrites historical evidences from a female perspective, meanwhile it questions the internalized male historical accounts. To refer to Carter’s utterances, Nights at The Circus is set at exactly the moment in European history when things began to change. It is set at that time quite deliberately and [Fevvers] is the new woman. All women who have been in the first brothel with her end up doing ‘newwomen’ jobs, like becoming hotel managers and running typing agencies, and so on (Carter qtd.in Gamble 144).

The novel anticipates women’s freedom at the dawn of a new century, when women had to be economically active, similarly to males and hence should enjoy the same rights as men. Fevvers is presented to us as a female hungry for money. Carter advances a significant characteristic of the twentieth century woman which is economic involvement. “You’d never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers” (Carter 12). By comparing Fevvers’ love for money to the patriarchal materialist pursuit, the writer strives to equate both of them at all levels.

Amongst the most significant herstorical aspects of the novel is the identification of Fevvers with the political figure: Margaret Thatcher. During the 1980’s the Thatcherite period was characterized by aggressive capitalism which might be reserved for males, rather than females. However, the comparison of Fevvers, to the iron lady is an attempt by the writer to fortify the new liberal woman of the twentieth century. The winged victory embodies the type of females, dreamed of by Thatcher. “Everywhere you saw her picture; the shops were crammed with “Fevvers” garters, stockings, fans, cigar, shaving soap…She even lent it to a brand of baking powder (Carter 8). The economic success of Fevvers is paralleled to the British capitalist development of Margaret Thatcher.

Like Fevvers, Thatcher combined a thirst for elevation, status and fortune with a powerful populism.[and] Fevvers, like Margaret Thatcher, is a self-promoting individualist, who emphasizes the importance of hard work and self-help, always with an eye on the main chance when it comes to national and international money-making opportunities (Stoddart 8-9).

Though the novel tackles real historical occurrence, it weaves it with fantasy. “The setting of Nights at The Circus is firmly historicized, placed at the end of the nineteenth century, the year 1899; the novel does not simply mix the real and the surreal. It mixes reference to specifically historical facts and personages with fantastic characters and events” (Day 170). This is the essence of herstoricism, as a feminist postmodern re inscription of historical events from which women have been kept out. Within herstoricism, history and fantasy are tightly linked together. Therefore, the fantastic dimensions in Nights at The Circus make sense, only in relation to the historical context of the novel. According to Christina Crosby,

To historicize [for postmodern feminists] is first to discover women where there had only been men, to see women in history, and recognize a fundamental experience which unites all women, the experience of being “The other”…Such a reading obviously is no
longer wholly within the discourse which produces history as man’s truth, no longer accepts that history has only to do with men (Elam 68).

Herstoricism unfolds copious feminist histories that represent the various female categories. It is important to note that feminist herstorical novels should be analysed in relation to their concrete historical context in order to get their meaningful implications. To study another historiographical instance in *Nights at The Circus*, we can refer to the parliamentary member Rosencreutz, who fiercely opposed the extension of the franchise to women during the later period of the 19th century. Carter ironically deploys this particular political figure, though with a covert implication. To quote from the novel, Fevvers addresses the American journalist: Walser in the following way:

> You must know this gentleman’s name! Insisted Fevvers and, seizing his notebook, wrote it down…on reading it: ‘Good God,’ said walser. ‘I saw in the paper only yesterday how he gives the most impressive speech in the House on the subject of votes for women. Which he is against. On account of how women are of a different soul-substance from men, cut from a different bold of spirit cloth…” (Carter 78-9)

Carter writes about the parliamentary Rosencreutz via a herstorical vision. He is conveyed as a psychologically troubled rich male who purchases Fevvers from Madame Schreck’s meuseum to kill her and extract from her female supernatural body, a substance that would keep him immortal. This fantastic literary depiction finds meaning only in relation to the authentic historical reputation of the parliamentary Rosencreutz.

His endeavor to kill Fevvers can be explained by his opposition to extend the Franchise to women. However the heroine’s escape from his gothic mansion alludes to the females ‘liberation during the twentieth century, including the acquisition of the electoral right. The fantastic features associated with the British parliamentary Rosencreutz can be recovered only in rational historical terms.

History is not only ideological, in most cases it is also imbued with perspective, written as it is from an official, masculine point of view that omits the private, the personal-and the feminine. Consequently, […] (women) writers and historians have engaged in the project of recovering the lost female voice of the past; ‘herstory’ can be characterized as an attempt to “recover women’s submerged or unrealized past” […]The desire to reclaim and recover a feminine past” (Gruss 245).

This feminist objective can be carried through, by intertwining fantasy with historical evidences that results in a fantastic feminist herstorical writing. Moving to another historiographical exemplary instance, we can mention Lizzie: Fevvers’ foster mother. By the end of the book, Fevvers divulges to Walser, that Lizzie belongs to the English radical tradition. She has been keen to draw her clients ‘attention to numerous political issues and therefore she fails to assume her role as a good prostitute in Ma Nelson’s academy.

Her habit of lecturing the clients on the white slave trade, the rights and wrongs of women, universal suffrage, as well as the Irish question, the Indian question, republicanism, anti-clericalism, syndicalism, and the abolition of the House of Lords. With all of which Nelson was in full sympathy but, as she said, the world won’t change overnight and we must eat (Carter 292).
The writer strives to assert the female political awareness during the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Lizzie epitomizes woman’s political activism which has been neglected and excluded from historical records. Ma Nelson’s brothel, where Fevvers has grown up, proves to be a place that has promoted female political activism. Besides, when they have been in Russia, Lizzie begs the American journalist Walser to send her letters, together with his own ones, to Britain.

Actually, he did so, thinking they were personal. “It turns out that these were not just personal communications but news of Russian internal politics to Russian dissidents in exile; dissidents who would eventually produce the Revolution of 1917” (Day 175). Thus, within the fantastic supernatural narrative events, we are confronted with historical evidences that clearly maintain the female political eminence.

The writer hints to the female radicalism, within her herstorical writing, to highlight the rebellious female nature that succeeds to overthrow the suffocating patriarchal dominance. To quote from the novel, Fevvers informs Walser that “those letters we sent home by you in the diplomatic bag were news of the struggle in Russia to comrades in exile, written in invisible ink...Liz would do it, having made a promise to a spry little gent with a ‘tache she met in the reading-room of the British Museum” (Carter 292). The novel opens horizons for gender equality where “the New woman” represented by Fevvers would fit “the New Man” who is the embodiment of Jack Walser. Carter believes in fairness between the sexes rather than the supremacy of one sex over the other. The narrative puts forward, female and male political comrades who are equal radical activists.

This feminist postmodern utopia is conspicuously articulated in most herstorical novels. Feminists endeavor to recover their veiled historical past. Hence “if they want to evade the danger of re-inscribing patriarchal categories into their own works, they have to re-imagine history as a process” (Gruss 245). By rewriting historical traces of women’s political activism, the writer acts in response to the female exclusion from the officially male-written history. “Women authors return to [ the historical novel] over and over again, and places this interest in the historical “in the context of a literary rebellion against the exclusion of women from historical discourse”(Gruss 245).

By setting the example of Lizzie as an English radical activist, Carter associates her name with authentic political leaders. The fantastic characters are intermingled with the real historical figures, to give birth to an original postmodern literary historiography. “The historical roots of Lizzie’s radicalism are with the English radical movement of the 1790s, a movement associated with the names, among others, of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft” (Day 175). The writer’s dealing with history starts from a realistic point of view, though intermingled with fantasy, to accomplish a reconceived male history or a herstorical account. Knowing that the conventional historical narratives have precluded the female material life, women writers have responded to re-inscribe history.

Another visible herstorical example in the novel deals with the suffragist British naval: Lord Horatio Nelson. Carter has intertextually borrowed the leader’s name, who died in the battle of Trafalgar square, to draw some hidden political as well as personal similarities. From the onset of the novel, we are presented with the character of Ma Nelson, the owner of the brothel. To introduce her to Walser, Fevvers explains that she was “called Nelson, on account
of her one eye, a sailor having put the other out with a broken bottle the year of the Great Exhibition” (Carter 22).

This description is drawn from the fact that Lord Nelson himself, during his service "had lost his right eye and right arm, and been severely wounded and bruised in his body” (Rhys 100). The heroic description of Lord Nelson is employed by the writer to depict the brothel’s manager: Ma Nelson, who is conveyed as a great suffragist, similarly to Lord Horatio Nelson. Besides, Carter’s choice of Ma Nelson to be the owner of the brothel implicitly alludes to Lord Nelson’s affair with the married Lady Emma Hamilton. The writer strives to align her female character with the historical leader: Horatio Nelson. Ma Nelson is described as a brave woman, equally to Lord Nelson.

Following the death of Ma Nelson, Fevvers inherited her sword, the symbolic implication of braveness, and her clock which epitomizes the importance of history in woman’s life. She says “I took my sword, victory’s sword, the sword that started out its life on Nelson’s thigh” (Carter 53). Similarly to Lord Nelson, the females of the brothel are equipped with courage and determination to fight their ways in life and achieve their obscured rights.

Carter aims to equalize her female characters with the authentic political and historical leaders, though via a fictional and fantastic way, which is the prominent tendency of historiographical metafiction or the female herstorical narratorial writing. By all postmodern literary criteria, we can judge Nights at The Circus as a herstorical novel that tends to sustain women’s historical and material life, by bringing back the official history in order to reinstate the concealed female historical activism.
References

Primary Source:

Secondary Sources: