

Interrogation of patriarchal codes and misogynistic fantasies in Angela Carter's Shadow Dance

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Abstract:

*Patriarchy is a problematic term among the feminists and theoreticians of literature. It presents women's relations with men as invariably antagonistic and treats their oppression in a transhistorical light, ignoring those occasions in history when the sexes have worked together as allies. The paper makes an attempt to prove how Angela Carter tries to challenge the patriarchal institution by creating definite space for women, by creating characters such as Elna and Emily. The novels heroine though subjected to violence, tries to exert her sexuality by questioning the phallus and the power of patriarchy. The principal protagonist Morris is haunted by his failed first sexual encounter and later Emily's bold appearance and sows the seeds for a liberated woman.*

Bio-Statement

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Patriarchy is a contentious issue debated and discussed by feminists all over the world. Within patriarchy, men have absolute control over women and they also succeed in teaching and forcing women to look even at themselves from a male point of view. Angela Carter's first novel 'Shadow Dance' displays her early preoccupation with the destructive effects of patriarchal culture on both men and women.

Carter's first novel, Shadow Dance, is neither liberal nor realist. From the beginning itself, the text presents grotesque bodily representations saturated with a sense of deviancy. The novel echoes a cleansing operation, that is, removing the darkness and regressive attitudes of the past. In 1988 Carter had observed that “towards the end of sixties it started to feel like living on a demolition site” [Carter 1988:211]. Shadow Dance, written in the sixties, reflects such a kind of feeling. The two male protagonists, Morris and his partner Honeybuzzard, etch out a living, plundering Victoriana and the like from condemned houses and by selling the fragments on as “Observer Design – for Living Gear” [Carter 1994:90]. Morris, as we observe, Loved Junk. He loved to nose questingly among the abandoned detritus of other people's lives for oddments, fragments, bits of this and that..... The best times of his life were the dark nights when, in Honeybuzzard's van, they went secretly to the deserted, condemned old houses which the city council planned shortly to demolish and, by the light of guttering candles, would sort over and pick about in all their dead flotsam. [S.D 23-4]

'Dead flotsam' is not mentioned as a passing reference. Like the metaphoric 1960s demolition site Carter spoke of in 1988, the remnants of Shadow Dance symbolize the old, outdated cultural values. But, though the Victorian buildings are shattered, their inherent values retain strength to devastate contemporary lives.

Shadow Dance opens with the protagonist Morris accosted by a young woman, Ghislaine, who had been, until recently, familiar amongst his circle of friends. In this opening confrontation between the creepy and ineffectual 'hero' Morris and his former lover Ghislaine, there is a violent reversal of the conventions of romantic fiction:

The scar drew her whole face sideways, and even in profile, with the hideous thing turned away, her face was horribly lop – sided, skin, features and all dragged away from the bone. She was a beautiful girl, a white and golden girl, like moonlight on daisies, a month ago. So he stared at her shattered beauty. [S.D.-3]

Before the narrative opens, its pretty delicate heroine has already been slashed and disfigured. Initially we are invited to speculate about Morris's involvement in the attack. Though, he did not wield the knife himself perhaps he incited the violence of his friend Honeybuzzard. Morris after a night of failed lovemaking with Ghislaine, had said to Honeybuzzard 'Take her and teach her a lesson'[S.D-34]. He recoils from Ghislaine, who for the rest of the story haunts him, provoking disgust, guilt and fear. Soon, Ghislaine reappears; Honeybuzzard also makes his appearance in the scene with his new girl friend from London, Emily. The plot moves forward tracing the Junk-hunting forages of Morris and Honeybuzzard and slowly builds towards the finale where Honeybuzzard murders Ghislaine, and impregnates Emily with his child.

As the plot thickens, it gives a clear picture of the functioning of patriarchal code. It is very succinctly captured through a series of pornographic photographs of Ghislaine taken by Honeybuzzard with the complete support from Grey Morris. These snaps present the objectification of the female in old-world values, symbolized by the 'masculinity' of the junk-objects that Honeybuzzard uses to frame Ghislaine, as she submits herself to the masculine eye of the camera.

As the narrative proceeds, readers move further into darkness, and the text becomes more enmeshed in the

misogynistic fantasies of its male characters. Initially, Morris disfigures pornographic photographs of the victim with exaggerated facsimiles of her knife-wound. He also dreams of cutting her with broken glass to the applause of the gathered onlookers. Gradually these dreams become more ritualized and more homely:

He dreamed he was cutting Ghislaine's face with a kitchen knife. The knife was blunt and kept slipping. Her head came off in his hands, after a while, and he cut her into a turnip lantern, put a candle inside and lit it through her freshly carved mouth. She burned away with greenish light. [S.D PP 39-40].

Patriarchy's religious dimension is also revealed in one of Honeybuzzard's fantasies as he and Morris hunt for junk in a condemned house that had once been home to a religious community. They find a large Crucifix that has fallen from a wall in one of the rooms of the house. Immediately Honeybuzzard fantasises bringing Ghislaine to the house and having sex with her as she lies on the figure of Christ:

“We would take it in turns to lay her on that chap there.... And we could take pictures and sell them to the colour supplements' [SD -132].

Aidan Day interprets this fantasy: "This act of apparent profanation does not, in fact, contradict the religious meaning of the Crucifix for, in this novel, a part of the religious meaning of the Crucifix is precisely the demeaning of women that Honeybuzzard indulges in” [Day 1998:28].

Though Honeybuzzard is without any religious inclination, his mind is moulded by a culture oppressive to women that is revealed through these attitudes of religious patriarchy : “Chaining her to that symbol of her father over there and raping her-now, that would be really something” [SD – 132]. Ghislaine, seen in this scene of Honeybuzzard's fantasy as a female victim sacrificed on the altar of patriarchy, appears to co-operate in her own victimization. She is an important example of Carter's fictional study of the feminine mind that has been colonized by the masculine view of feminine. Even after mutilating her, Honeybuzzard tries to dominate Ghislaine completely. Quite shockingly, Ghislaine continues with her subservience. Soon after returning from the hospital Ghislaine writes to Honeybuzzard saying that she would forgive him.

Later, Ghislaine submits herself completely to Honeybuzzard by saying: “I've learned my lesson, I can't live without you, you are my master, do what you like with me” [SD – 166]. Honeybuzzard's final confirmation of his dominance and authority over her culminates with his obliteration of Ghislaine. The way in which she is treated as a commodity mutually shared by Honey and Morris, brings out the exchange of women as objects practiced within patriarchy.

Ghislaine, in her complicity with the masculine power that dominates and ultimately destroys her, has a metaphorical sister in the novel in the form of Morris's wife Edna. Like Ghislaine, Edna also displays a female internalization of masculine sexist values symbolized by the junk that clutters Honeybuzzard's and Morris's imaginations. The major difference is that Edna never needed to be taught a lesson. She willingly accepts the authority of men and is disturbingly subservient to the patriarchal status Quo. She appears as typical Victorian girl who internalizes the patriarchal view that marriage is submission.

Morris goes to the extent of remarking that if he had not married Edna, 'she would have aged into a cat-spinster in

a bed-sitter' [SD – 23]. Edna's subjugation in the beginning, later on transforms into more of assertiveness. Quite surprisingly, she develops and demonstrates a sexual independence that Morris never suspected her of being capable. She sets the trend for woman's empowerment, though in a mild way, which in Carter's later novels comes to a full-circle. Presumably, fed up of Morris's dominant attitude and self-castigation, she bounces back and finds solace with another man. Quite unsuspecting, Morris chances upon them asleep in bed, 'like babes-in-the wood their two soft mouths curved flower – like in tranquility, their tender eyelids waxen petals of response' [SD – 156]. Edna ultimately shows the confidence and power to free herself from the sterile relationship with Morris. She uses her sexuality to assert her independence. Ghislaine, on the other hand cannot achieve this feat, but ends up constantly abasing herself before the sadistic Honeybuzzard.

Apart from Edna, another female character who exhibits remarkable confidence in resisting the male attempts to belittle women is Honeybuzzard's girlfriend Emily. She makes a dramatic appearance in the narrative, with silver enamel fingernails, eclectic dress-sense and drugged white cat, creating a feeling that she belongs to Honeybuzzard's world completely. Her features also reflect the gender ambiguities:

With her height and her strong face and her heavy tread, one might almost have taken her for a boy dressed up as a girl in the Elizabethan Theatre, when transvestism was an art form; what a foil she made for Honey's golden softness. [SD – 66-7]

Initially, like Ghislaine though Emily is completely mesmerized by Honeybuzzard's appearance and her love for him, she comes out of it in a strong way. As Lorna Sage observes, Emily is a matriarch in-the-making – she sets about getting Honeybuzzard's life organized according to her own rigorous standards of cleanliness and order. At the outset, Morris also considers her as quite an ordinary woman with nothing in her head. But, she surprises him later with her critical views about Honeybuzzard. She does this with the help of the story of Bluebeard and his murdered wives. She reveals to Morris that in one of Honeybuzzard's pockets she has found a key to a locked room in the junk shop.

Emily also articulates her innate suspicions about Honeybuzzard's behaviour and nature, quite maturely. The seeds of doubts about him is already sown in her mind and she is not prepared to bear it in a condescending way. Her unease about Honeybuzzard is again confirmed when Ghislaine visits him and abases herself before him. Not happy with the revelations made by Ghislaine, she later tells Morris that she is already aware of the shocking obliteration of Ghislaine's face by Honeybuzzard. This realization provokes her to destroy the paraphernalia in Honeybuzzard's room and junk shop. It also throws light on her rejection of the past and its patriarchal perversities; she throws away Honeybuzzard's jar of pickled foetus.

This act of Emily is quite significant; it indicates that she has decided to free herself from the patriarchal shackles imposed by Honeybuzzard. She has ultimately removed him and the things he represents completely, from her mind. She works as a perfect foil to Honeybuzzard's monstrous conduct. She even boldly makes the startling revelation to Morris that she is pregnant with Honeybuzzard's baby. The exchange between Morris and Emily on this issue reveals her decisive mind:

'He could whistle for me for ever but I wouldn't come.'But

you say you're pregnant –'  
'Do you want an abortion?'.... He spoke more barely and cruelly than he intended. She stiffened as if he had slapped her.'No, I do not! I called my piper, so I'll pay for my tune, thank you very much'....  
She had decided to love her baby. That was all. [SD – 168, 180]

Emily's innate strength and assertion of her individuality and independence are substantiated by her decision to erase Honeybuzzard completely from her mind. She proclaims her love for the baby and accepts that it is the result of her own action. Emily is not prepared to bear the brunt of Honeybuzzard's idiosyncrasies just because she is pregnant. Emily is one of the female characters of Carter who sets the stage for an empowered, individualistic woman. Such characters function as the forerunners of the kind of subversive female figures who will assume great importance in Carter's later fiction. Emily is the torchbearer of the new order, that displaces the old reality. She shatters the patriarchal entrapment created by Honeybuzzard. Finally, Emily doesn't hesitate at all to hand Honeybuzzard over to the police after she and Morris discover Ghislaine's mutilated body. This final act of her symbolizes Emily's empowerment and total freedom from the make-believe, patriarchal world of Honeybuzzard.

Emily's matriarchal persona is echoed by another minor character in the novel, that is, an elderly café waitress known only as Struldbrug. The name is reminiscent of the immortal beings in Swift's Gulliver's Travels. They become old, ugly and senile but are denied the final salvation through death. According to Lorna Sage, Emily and the effervescent, cheerful Struldbrug 'Spell hope in the midst of the underworld of gloom' [Sage 1994: 13], which Shadow Dance, otherwise evokes. Being aged, Struldbrug effectively prevents male appropriation. Struldbrug straddles between masculinity and femininity. For instance for Morris, who lost his mother in an air-raid during the war, Struldbrug represents “protective and benevolent” [SD – 38] maternity, Thus Carter makes Struldburg interrogate the rigid gender roles by making him perform woman-centered care-giving.

Carter's treatment of women especially Ghislaine in Shadow Dance has raised many an eyebrows, specifically her attitude towards female sexuality. But, on close reading one can understand her postfeminist concerns and strategies. In his study Angela Carter [1998], Linden Peach observes the influence of Leslie Fielder, on Carter, and basically his analysis of Gothic genre. Peach says that “The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés to the limit of grotesqueness” [Peach 1998: 2]. So far as sexual politics is concerned, the Gothic functions as an extreme articulation of domestic ideology, which stipulates femininity as 'passivity', dependency and innocence, and also associates uncontrollable sexual desire with madness. Since, these sexual-political conventions are deep rooted in the gothic genre, it is also open to subversion and appropriation. Peach adds: “The Gothic is a mode, which often uses extreme representations of gendered sexual identity as a kind of symbolic vocabulary with which to explore the constitution of gender and sexuality themselves” [Morrison 2003:161]. Shadow Dance most directly explores what constitutes gender and sexuality.

Carter's novels are the subversions of the Gothic genre; the themes and ideas explored in Gothic writing, are re-examined, challenged and then expanded. Carter exploits the very hybrid nature of Gothic fiction, that functions as a

mode for creating awareness within the novels and at the same time allows to be subverted. Gothic appears to be ambiguous and ambivalent at the same time. Shadow Dance too is a subversion of the traditional Gothic as it makes fun of androcentric fascination for the bizarre.

The very clichéd quality of Carter's characters in Shadow Dance follows the Gothic set of conventions. Honeybuzzard, himself appears to be a comic version of Gothic villain at the outset. He is portrayed with the melodramatic paraphernalia of the “Wolf-pointed ears, an inexpressibly carnivorous mouth, and fangs, brilliantly white, sharp like wounding little chips of milk glass” [SD – 56].

Ghislaine's mutilation in a graveyard and final murder near the Crucifix, are significant in many ways. At the outset, Honeybuzzard proves his patriarchal power by completely silencing Ghislaine. The Crucifix is symbolic of Christ's sacrifice for the humanity and the oppression of innocence by the dominant evil force. It is also the crudest weapon of torture and execution. By making this very symbol a mute spectator, Honey inflicts serious bodily wounds on Ghislaine before murdering her. He is absolutely fearless and succeeds in establishing his patriarchal supremacy. One can associate Honeybuzzard's horrific act, with the way in which women are seen as flesh and meat by the dominant males. This flesh trope is evident as Honey visualizes himself selling pornographic photographs of Ghislaine on the Crucifix. This highly interrelated but contrasting trope of flesh signifying absolute pleasure and meat objectification of female body occurs in Carter's fiction. Carter explains the flesh trope in The Sadeian Woman:

'The word fleisch', in German provokes me to an involuntary shudder. In the English language, we make a fine distinction between flesh, which is usually alive, and, typically, human, and meat, which is dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption... the pleasures of the flesh are vulgar and unrefined, even with an element of beastliness about them, although flesh tints have the sumptuous succulence of peaches because flesh plus skin equals sensuality [Carter 1977:5].

Through The Sadeian Woman, Carter further elaborates how she has developed the flesh/meat trope in Shadow Dance by the depiction of Ghislaine's mutilation, and the bodily horror explored by the novel. Carter adds: “Sexuality, stripped of the idea of free exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty. Carnal knowledge is the infernal knowledge of the flesh as meat” [Carter 1977:5]. These views of Carter are reinforced by the presence of Crucifix when Ghislaine is mutilated. Carter's reading of de Sade is that: “The strong abuse, exploit and meatify the weak” [Carter 1977:140]. Through out Shadow Dance one experience a sense of horror at the transformation of flesh into meat during death, along the Sadeian axis. For instance, Morris is reminded of it whenever he opens the door of his junk shop and is 'punched in the stomach' by the smell of rotting meat from the butcher's shop next door. May be because of this, he thinks of his sick wife, Edna as “a poor flat fillet on the marble slab of her bed” [SD – 13]. This image of a woman devoid of any feelings and sensuality is quite disturbing. It also reinforces patriarchal objectification of female body.

Carter's approach to Morris is distinct in many ways. Honey mutilates Ghislaine at his instigation. He is haunted by his failed one night relationship with her through out the novel. Morris's ego is badly hurt at the thought of his



inability to satisfy her desire. When he meets her in the bar, his immediate reaction is that of revulsion and guilt at “the memory of her naked, threshing about beneath him”[SD – 5]. He is also annoyed at her 'unfeminine' display of economic independence as she asks: “Shall I buy a drink for you, Morris? Have you no money? Always penniless, poor Morris” [SD-P.1]. Still, he is able to transfer all his guilt onto her by categorizing her as the monstrous representative of a voracious, predatory, female sexuality. Ghislaine's scar symbolizes for him her unsatiable sexual desire. Later in the novel, Morris dreams of Ghislaine as “a vampire woman, woman, walking the streets on the continual quivive, her enormous brown eyes alert and ever-watchful, and the moment she saw him she would snatch him up and absorb him, threshing, into the chasm in her face”[SD – 39]. The use of the word 'threshing' is quite significant here. Earlier it was used by Morris, referring to Ghislaine. But now, it is about himself. It signals Ghislaine's transformation from 'sexual prey' to 'Street-walking predator' [Gamble 1997]. Though Ghislaine is presented as a figment of male imagination in the beginning, towards the end of the novel, her passivity itself turns out to be highly destructive for Morris. She becomes monstrous and rebounds upon him with fatal consequences. Morris is devoured by his own guilt feelings.

Morris is aware of his involvement in Ghislaine's obliteration, since Honey has just done what Morris “had always wanted but never defined.... Choking out of Ghislaine her little-girl giggle... filling up her voracity once and for all by cramming with death the hungry mouth between her thighs”[SD – 178-9]. Morris is disturbed with Ghislaine's sexuality. He succeeds in subjugating her through Honeybuzzard. Mary Russo's view can be evoked in this context. She observes that misogyny and Grotesque spectacle have always had a certain affinity, enabling woman to be “cruelly observed in intricate detail, but never allowed to make words” [Russo 1994:6]. In her later fiction, Carter gives her female characters the power to appropriate and subvert this process, but Ghislaine doesn't enjoy this power and she is a mere victim of Morris's misogyny.

Carter speaks about the doubleness and sickness of an individual's personality in the novel and through the portrayal of Morris's doubleness, she substantiates that this itself is the result of the social construction of masculinity. Here, Carter is inspired by Fielder, who, in his account of the Gothic shadow, specifies that “there is a sense in which, the evil principle is mythically male” and that “it is the shadow projected as male which most impresses itself upon the imagination” [Fielder 1967:125]. Morris stands for this principle as he instigates Honeybuzzard to teach Ghislaine a lesson, and he indicates the working of social discourses which sanction male dominance over female and the legitimate men's right to abuse women. The black cat which emerges from the bushes and spits at Morris is symbolic of Morris's sense of complicity with Honey and also society's perception of women in general. The black cat brings to our mind the persecution of women as witches, and how it is utilized by men as a means to control and punish female sexuality. Preempting Desiderio, in Carter's later novel, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* Morris is confronted with his involvement in the dehumanisation of the objects of his desire.

Ghislaine's obliterated face also brings to the forefront, the extreme representations such as virgin and whore, to which females are subjected, by male fantasies. In the beginning, Morris considers Ghislaine as an innocent girl “a white and golden girl, like moonlight on daisies” [SD –

03]. But, later he thinks of her in terms of binarism: as a picture book girl or as a shocking, rude woman. The one image is tender, like the one side of her face, while the other is shocking and disturbing. Ghislaine's Janus face forces Morris to confront the contradiction that is within himself and also the masculinised realization of women as social objects. We also get a glimpse of Morris's psyche, though socially constructed, through his dreams and fantasies. It sheds light on his role, along with Honey, at the disfigurement and dismembering of Ghislaine:

He dreamed he was cutting her face with a jagged shard of broken glass... There was a gallery of people watching them, and applauding sporadically, like the audience at a cricket match, among them he made out Honeybuzzard and Edna, both smiling and nodding their heads. And then he and Ghislaine were in his own bed and her head rolled on the pillows... and then it was Edna he saw that he was slicing open and there was blood everywhere. [SD – 18]

Carter's agenda is twofold in the novel. Firstly, she traces back to the gender conventions of the Gothic mode in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transplanting them into a contemporary setting. Then, she moves those representations to their sickening and violent conclusions. This point is reached, when Honeybuzzard ultimately enacts his fantasies of rape and murder on Ghislaine's body mounted upon a crucifix. Later, when Morris gazes at the body and fantasies about his friend being executed, the text underlines his equal complicity.

Finally, the time has come, in the late 1960s, for Edna to free herself completely from the burden of history, and the patriarchal ideology associated with it. “Morris a poor shivering wretch”, is no longer fit to be a romantic lead: “I cannot make an adequate job, even of squeezing a pimple” [SD – 42]. Even when he sees his wife Edna in bed with a rival, he is quite indifferent to it and doesn't react. Maybe, Morris has realized that it is the ultimate punishment given to him for his wayward ways. He appears to be resigned to his ultimate fate. He is continuously haunted by his first encounter with Ghislaine, that ends abruptly. The very act, in which Ghislaine asserts her sexuality by questioning the phallus and the power of patriarchy, drives him mad and haunts him throughout the novel. Edna's act, is the starting point of the crushing of patriarchal hegemony that takes curious turns in Carter's later novels. Ghislaine, though subjected to cruel bodily horror, partially succeeds in asserting her sexuality. Further, she appears to enjoy the outcome of her objectification by repeatedly asserting her sexuality. This very carefree attitude of hers itself is enough to intimidate the male characters like Morris and Honey. Ultimately, though, Ghislaine pays a very heavy price for it, the final outcome can be considered as the subject position obtained by her.

Towards the end of the novel, ultimately it is left to the petite and quite confident, Emily to call up and inform the police, about Honey's murderous act. With her final act, crouching on the pavement, “vomiting as if she would bring her heart up”, [SD – 182] it is as if she has purged herself of the whole misogynistic diet of an earlier era. The fact that she is ready to give birth to Honey's child who is in her womb, highlights her assertiveness as a new age woman. Further, Emily also enjoys her sexuality and she is ready to accept the fruit of it.

The principal male characters of the novel, Morris and Honeybuzzard are not given any room for redemption in the novel. Morris, cannot free himself from the strange

figures of Ghislaine, ever since she returned. The form she takes in this haunting of his mind itself is a symptom of the way in which he cannot free itself from the archetypal images of women. The thought of Ghislaine itself, creates a variety of images of her such as a witch-like siren, vampire and so on in his mind, which ultimately draws him to destruction. He cannot come to terms with the reality that Ghislaine has a composite identity and not the stereotyped one which he imagines:

When he came back to the cafe out of his dream, he found himself trapped inescapably in the town, in a private circle of hell, locked to the memory of Ghislaine like Paolo to Francesca in Dante. There was the memory of her, waiting for him, and he left the café and, invisible old woman of the sea, all ugly and piteous, she went with him, clutching him with her white legs and her long, slender arms.

Ghislaine... all the spring, she went about with him, weighing him down, although he never saw her in the real world. In the night, she laid her wet, invisible mouth on his and he woke up choking. [SD – 36-7]

Morris genuinely longs to free himself from this nightmarish stereotyping of the female. He is drawn towards Emily's staunch exorcism of Honeybuzzard. But Morris cannot come out of the darkness and values of the past which change his life completely, which obliterate and destroy Ghislaine, and that will ultimately spread onto and catch up with Honeybuzzard too. The final line of the novel informs us that 'Morris vanished into the shadows' [SD-P.182]. He still turns back to the irreparable, highly destructive world of Honeybuzzard, whom he thinks he “cannot betray” [SD –181]. Carter doesn't give either of her male protagonists, any chance to resurrect. But, prior to Morris's vanishing, we observe Emily kneeling 'in a pool of vomit' [SD – 182]. This symbolizes joy and renewed hope of the female characters, to appear in Carter's later novels. Not only does Carter mystify and empower her women like Emily and Edna in Shadow Dance by enabling them to perform 'nonfeminine' acts but also critique men like Morris and Honeybuzzard who frustrate themselves in trying to keep women simple and passive.

Carter's novel brings to the readers images of human lives that are caught up in the regimental gender roles. But through characters like Kay Kytes she also challenges the patriarchal hegemony by creating carrivalesque mood and by playing multiple roles which emphasize the performative nature of gender.

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