

Construction of Femininity in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*

A. Arul,
Ph.D Research scholar,
Department of English,
Annamalai University,
Annamalai Nagar,
Chidambaram
Mobile number: 9486490049
Email id: drarulji@gmail.com

Dr. K. Ganeshram,
Assistant professor,
Department of English,
Annamalai University,
Annamalai Nagar,
Chidambaram
Mobile number:9865666995
Email id: kgram19.gr@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper surveys sharply and empirically how the feminism is evolved in Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991) and how she resists patriarchal roles with her unconventional female characters in this novel. Femininity is increasingly seen as the behavioural norm with masculinity regarded as an aberration or distortion. The various problems that form the terrain of psychoanalysis like bisexuality, lesbianism, dreams, fantasies, rape, incest, claustrophobia and psychosis are studied and the importance that Carter accords to these in her study of women is taken into account.

Keywords: Masculinity, Women, Femininity, Dreams, Fairytales

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Angela Carter is a renowned British novelist who takes pride in her contributions to English Literature. Her novels are structured from retold fairytales to exhibit the anarchic life of women and men. Her writing created a path in literature evolving an individual identity. She began writing in an age where women voiced out their opinions to render a new dimension in the society. Her entire fiction is an argument questioning the existing socio-cultural system and the age-old assumptions informing all its social practices. As she is herself

a student of literature, she is quite familiar with the intellectual atmosphere of the period through her extensive reading of the writings of the French and the other European intellectuals. Her questioning of the Enlightenment thought and her feminist inclination influenced the themes and issues she takes up in her fictional works. Entire fiction of Carter is, therefore, organized around themes and issues related to patriarchy, socio-cultural construction of femininity, male/female sexuality, and biological essentialism, maternity gender violence and so on. In her fiction she tries to expose the assumptions behind patriarchy, culturally constructed binary divisions in the society.

In her novel, *Wise Children*, Carter thematizes socially acceptable notion of identity based on legitimacy, and subverts it. The socially defined identity in a patriarchal system crumbles after the revelation that original identity itself is a fraud. Dora and Nora, who are branded as illegitimate are discovered to be the legitimate daughters as illegitimate are discovered to be the legitimate daughters of Melchior Hazard, while Saskia and Imogen are revealed to be the illegitimate ones, perhaps the biological daughters of Peregrine. In *Wise Children*, Carter mocks at the notion of definite paternity and the conventional means of deciding identity. Here, she explores the theme of otherness also, as well as the binary oppositions in culture to justify domination and exclusion of others.

Wise Children is concerned with the tangled history of two theatrical families: the Hazard dynasty, which has dominated English Shakespearean theatre for one-and-a-half centuries, and its illegitimate progeny, represented by Dora and Dora Chance who had a novelty act but also worked as extras and took part in strip shows. Although the action of the novel takes place in one day, which are Dora and Nora's birthday and Shakespeare's birthday- it takes up one hundred and fifty years of family history. Apart from the fact that the action takes place on Shakespeare's birthday, the novel is written around a mock Shakespearean plot involving disguises, the search for true parentage and false trails.

Dora and Nora Chance are the illegal children of Shakespearean actor Melchior Hazard, who himself has a twin brother, Peregrine. While Melchior denies his fatherhood, Peregrine supports the sisters and becomes their substitute father. Dora records over hundred years of Hazard and Chance family history, and because both branches of the family are in show business, she plans the changing trends and fashions in the entertainment industry as well. The novel takes place over one day, April 23, the shared birthday of the Chance sisters, the Hazard brothers, and Shakespeare. Dora and Nora are celebrating seventy-five years; Melchior and Peregrine, hundred years; in the course of the day, while Dora and Nora wait to go to their father's festival birthday ball, Dora unties the complicated web of their lives. The novel includes a "Dramatis Personae," a handy reference guide to the genealogy (family tree) of the cast, for familial relations are by no means what they seem, fatherhood is everywhere in dispute, although motherhood, too, is surrounded in some mystery. The "natural" daughters of Melchior, Dora and Nora never knew their mother, who died at their birth. They are raised by the woman who ran the hostel for down-at-the-heel actors where their mother is a housemaid, and although they call the woman Grandma and take her name as their own, she may or may not be a blood relative. All the twins know of their mother is her name, Kitty, and what they know of their birth comes entirely from what Grandma Chance has told them, Peregrine has been asked by Melchior to acknowledge the twins publicly as his own, Peregrine becomes Dora and Nora's sugar daddy. He sends them money for dancing lessons, takes them on tour, performs wonderful magic tricks, and makes every visit seem like Christmas. He has, however, little tolerance for boredom: "life had to be a sequence of small treats or else he couldn't see the point" (61). Although he is much loved by his nieces, his presence in their lives is only irregular.

Dora and Nora's career on the stage begins when they play birds in a pantomime at the age of twelve, and by the time the twins reach their sixteenth birthdays, they are old pros. As

identical twins, they are a star turn in the music-hall, and they become worldly-wise in matters of both performance and sexuality. Once Dora and Nora return to England, they find that the demand for dancers has diminished. They end their careers playing in nude reviews. Despite the rise and fall of their fortunes, a long list of former lovers, the death of Grandma Chance and the presumed death of Peregrine, their father lack of recognition, two world wars, and a host of other tragic events, According to Grandma Chance, wars are the revenge of old men on young ones because “they can’t stand the competition” (28). When the bombs fall during World War I, she rebukes the sky because she knows the old men “hated women and children worst of all” (29). Dora’s is an unofficial history, one that the old men might consider illegitimate, although many things of which these old men might approve are eliminated from, or parodied by, Dora’s narrative. Not that legitimate - that is, officially sanctioned - history does not impinge on the story, but Dora refuses to treat it without irony. The disappearance and possible suicide of Dora and Nora’s godchild, Tiffany. She and Tristram Hazard, Melchior’s son by his third wife, host a live game show, but on a special birthday tribute to Tristram’s father, Tiffany appears unscripted in an Ophelia-like trance. Her feet bleeding from a long walk in dagger heels, she carried handfuls of flowers and sings as she descends the studio staircase, it becomes clear that she is pregnant, but Tristram, who feels he is not ready to become a father, has rejected her. When the police call to say that the body of a young woman has been found in the Thames, it seems as though the worst has happened.

The controlling consciousness of *Wise Children* is female. The female narrator of each novel assumes a position of authority, taking control of her own story-history and asserting herself as the author of her own words and actions. Through a narrator who is both elderly and a woman, Carter conflates feminist appreciation of the importance of autobiography to women and the changing values ascribed to oral histories of the elderly from the 1970s. As Pam Morris points out in *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*, autobiography helped women

discover that their emotions, circumstances, frustrations, and desires were shared by other women. In *Wise Children*, Dora is energized by her past. In depicting those aspects of women's lives which in Morris's words, "have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized" (60). Autobiography is one of the strategies by which women can take responsibility for their own sense of self in a restricted and restrictive environment or milieu, challenging the traditional appropriation of women's lives and histories by men. Self-making is an essential element in women's autobiography and the notion of the self.

In a patriarchal, dualistic culture the male needs the female in order to define himself. Consequently, if the female is to define herself outside of the male structure, she must find a new basis for personal identification. It is being other in a group that is already other that Carter establishes as a means for that self-identification. In *Wise Children* being an identical twin is one of the primary ways by which the female character removes herself from the defining domain of the patriarchal structure through the blurring of her self. Nora and Dora Chance are conscious of their common individuality, and they direct events to confuse their public or external identities at the same time that they affirm and define their personal or individual identities. They recognize that knowledge is power, and so long as they have knowledge of themselves, they will maintain their control; their identity is their power. By veiling their differences, both between themselves and between themselves and others, they assume power to direct and to initiate events. Carter further alters the definition of woman by removing her central female characters from the standard roles and stereotypes associated with them, especially marriage and motherhood. By looking at Carter's unraveling of the patriarchal definition of woman, one may perceive that in a postmodern world, identity, like any other means of signification, becomes more and more tenuous. Through the rupturing of the strict definition of woman, she opens up a surplus of space in which women can find and create new definitions of self, and, at the same time, through her excessive use of otherness.

Since identity is itself a signifying process, the idea that there could be a privileged or originary identity is exposed as fraudulent through Carter's exaggerated use of otherness. Nora and Dora are other first because they are female. From this position as other Carter begins her assault on the masculine need for a signifying/ significant other; the male is forced to create an external definition of himself. By placing her protagonists obviously in the place of other, Carter nearly mocks the need for otherness, which is actually a veiled desire of the male for an origin; she shows that otherness is not the sign of an origin, but the sign of a lack of origin. Once the signifying or identifying process is exposed as original and other, the process becomes impossible to limit. Carter emphasizes this lack of origin in *Wise Children*, primarily through the lack of definitive fatherhood and, in a sense, maternity. Nora and Dora are not acknowledged by their true father, Melchior Hazard, but are instead said to be the daughters of his twin brother, Peregrine, who is himself more absent in their lives than he is present. Nora and Dora's half-sisters, Imogen and Saskia Hazard, although claimed by Melchior, are actually the biological daughters of Peregrine. These two examples of Carter's dissolution of conventional means of identity - the name and identity of the father - provide access to one of the major functions of this work, to challenge the very notion of true or final identity. How can a patriarchy exist if the very patriarchs/fathers themselves are not known? Without a clear patriarchal lineage, there can be no patriarchal privilege.

Motherhood is the final women's role that Carter re-evaluates. Dora thinks to herself "a mother is always a mother, since a mother is a biological fact, whilst a father is a movable feast" (216). She recognizes the inherent and integral role of the mother in the transmission of identity; however, since the mother is responsible for passing on identity, she is also implicated when she passes on the patriarchal mode of identification. Although Dora states that "mother" is dependent upon biology, she and Nora become mothers when they turn seventy-five by taking on as their own the twins of the priest/father Gareth. Peregrine gives

the three-month-old twins - their day of conception is the same as Nora and Dora's birthday - to them in an act which functions as a very non-biological birth: Peregrine takes the babies out of his pockets and gives them to Nora and Dora. Motherhood is no longer purely biological; Nora says to Dora, "We're both of us mothers and both of us fathers... They'll be wise children, all right" (230). Although the birthing process is not gender independent, the roles of mother and father are no longer limited to biology or gender. Having mother and father be interchangeable allows the child to escape, or have diminished, the culturally imposed stereotypes and roles assigned according to gender. These children will be wise because they will create their own identities, more so even than Nora and Dora. One twin is male and the other is female; this will allow for the opportunity to remove gender as the basis for identification. It is possible that Carter has created one male and one female so that when these children see each other as their own mirrors, each will see him - or herself, not the gender difference. Identity will have, on this microcosmic scale, removed itself from gender.

Carter in *Wise Children* challenges the very ideas of definition, identity, and origin. By creating a novel in which otherness is the standard, she provides a new perspective from which one can see that original and other are merely signifiers that have no essential meaning. Identity changing and masking both serve to expose patriarchal identity as an institution that bases its authority on the belief that there is an origin and that the origin is the phallus. Once it is realized that, in the postmodern world, there cannot be an origin or a privileged perspective and thus a basis for external identity, then the individual is forced to find a new space in which to exist. For Nora and Dora, and most likely for their children, the new personal identity is communal; the opposing forces exist together, not as self and other but like the two halves of the Tao, simultaneously separate and integrated: good and evil, male and female, white and black, us and them.

Carter's fiction is an argument questioning the established socio-cultural practices and

myths and assumptions responsible for creating divisions in society such as high and low male and female, legitimate and illegitimate, self and the other, etc. Her fiction is very bold in style and her mocking subversive way of presentation can put off some readers, specially her unabashed use of pornography. She has made use of all kinds of sub-genres such as fantasy, gothic, science-fiction, romance and spy thriller, for presenting the themes which deal with the material reality. Though she uses fantasy, she keeps it under control and uses it to focus on the day-to-day world.

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