

The Female “Carnavalesque” and Resisting Patriarchal Authority in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the concept of female resistance to patriarchal oppression in one of Angela Carter’s novels: *Night at the Circus*. The novel throws light on the lives of oppressed and marginalized women who occupy inferior positions in patriarchal culture. The concept of female resistance in *Nights at the Circus* is discussed in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the “carnavalesque”, which he introduced in his study on French popular culture in *Rabelais and his world*. Bakhtin uses the concept of the “carnavalesque” to describe the literary motifs that characterize Francois Rabelais’ writing and which can be traced to popular cultural expressions that surrounded him in the sixteenth century. Bakhtin regards the “carnavalesque” as a liberating anti-authoritarian force that challenges dominant world views and subverts the discourses of “high” culture.

The present research demonstrates the role of the female “carnavalesque” in challenging dominant patriarchal culture through the application of three main concepts in Bakhtin’s theory to Carter’s feminist novel: the concept of “heteroglossia” in a language, the image of Rabelaisian clowns, and the notion of physical excess and grotesque body. The research also makes use of Bakhtin/ Volosinov’s theory on the relationship between language and ideology, and provides a historical analysis of the different forms of English spoken language used in the novel. In the final analysis, this research argues for the value of Bakhtin’s theory of the “carnavalesque” in analyzing forms of female subversion of patriarchal authority in works written by women writers.

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مقاومة السلطة الأبوية فى واحدة من روايات

انجيلاً كارت ليالى فى السيرك

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الملخص

يتناول البحث موضوع مقاومة السلطة الأبوية فى واحدة من روايات الكاتبة البريطانية أنجيلا كارت: ليالى فى السيرك. تصور الرواية حياة المرأة المهمشة فى المجتمع الذكورى حيث تتعرض بطلّة الرواية إلى أنواع مختلفة من القهر والتهميش، إلا أنها تستطيع أن تتمرد على الدور السلبي الذى يفرضه عليها المجتمع.

يتناول البحث بالتحليل أساليب مقاومة المرأة للقهر فى المجتمع الذكورى وتمردها على السلطة الأبوية فى الرواية من خلال زاوية مفهوم "الاحتفالية" كما ورد فى نقد ميخائيل باختين وذلك من زاويتين الاجتماعيه واللغوية. كذلك يتعرض البحث لنموذج "السيرك" ودلالته فى الرواية كمكان تمتزج فيه الطبقات الاجتماعيه المختلفة وتقلب فيه علاقات القوة بين الرجل والمرأة.

كما يقدم البحث نقداً للرواية فيما يتصل بقراءة الجسد وذلك فى ضوء نظرية باختين وقراءته لدور الثقافة الفلكلورية الفرنسية فى أعمال الكاتب الروائى فرانسواز رابيليه كما ورد فى كتابه رابيلية وعالمة.

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The hierarchical divisions of “high” and “low” cultures function as a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and making sense in European societies. Whereas “high” culture is associated with sophisticated language, canonical literature, and academic discourses, “low” culture is manifested in the language of peasants, less-educated people and the literary productions of marginalized groups. According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White:

The ranking of literary genres or authors in a hierarchy analogous to social classes is a particularly clear example of a much broader and more complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low. (2) “High” culture is associated with powerful social and political systems that maintain their authority through the production of dominant definitions of “superior” and “inferior” cultures. The idea that “high” culture is essentially superior to other forms of culture serves the creation and consolidation of power relations. In other words, the opposition between “high” culture and the debased “low” cultures that threaten its existence maintains the hegemony of dominant social systems. Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of “hegemony” as the domination of a set of ruling beliefs and values through consent rather than coercive power. According to Gramsci, hegemony is the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant powerful group” (277). Hence, Gramsci makes a distinction between “rule” and “hegemony”. Whereas rule is practiced through direct political forms and by effective coercion, hegemony is a whole lived social process which involves individuals’ perceptions of themselves and the world that are shaped by dominant meanings and values. According to Raymond Williams, hegemony is “in the strongest sense a ‘culture’, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” (110).

The hierarchical division of “high” and “low” cultures constitutes a cornerstone in Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnavalesque” in

which he emphasizes the subversive role of the counter-culture of "lower" groups. The "carnavalesque" is a term coined by Bakhtin which refers to literary forms that subvert the assumptions of official culture through humor and chaos. Bakhtin traces the origins of the "carnavalesque" to the concept of carnival which refers to popular and festive celebrations in folk culture that offer an alternative social space of freedom, abundance and equality. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin explains the way carnival festivals had an important significance in medieval Europe that continued to exist during the Renaissance period. Carnival festivals included fairs, popular feasts, competitions, comic shows, dancing and playing with costumes and masks. They also involved comic verbal acts such as parodies, farces, tricks and jokes. Hence, the strict hierarchies of official culture were challenged by the emergence of popular cultural expressions manifested in the world of carnival festivals. Bakhtin writes:

Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man ... They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extra ecclesiastical and extra political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. (RW 6)

Carnival was a time when all the hierarchies that were so firmly established in medieval life were inverted. The lowest groups were placed at the same level of those who were socially superior and sometimes even elevated above them. Carnival was marked by inclusion rather than exclusion, for it embraced the diversity of humanity in all its forms and imperfections, and even privileged those imperfections over the perfected. The activities of the carnival square, therefore, involved: collective ridicule of officialdom, inversion of hierarchies and violation of norms. Medieval carnival was a nonviolent form of social transformation as it overturned oppressive structures in society and subverted established orders of power. According to Bakhtin:

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As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete. (*RW 10*)

There is a difference, therefore, between the terms “carnival” and the “carnavalesque”. While “carnival” refers to a specific kind of celebration that flourished during medieval times; the “carnavalesque” refers to the distinctive spirit of carnival in other cultural contexts, including literature. Whereas the term “carnival” refers to a concrete cultural event that has a specific time and place, the “carnavalesque” refers to the diverse reflections and varied manifestations of carnival in literature and art. According to David K. Danow:

[T]he “carnavalesque” ... designates the general application of a certain carnival “spirit” to the world of literature, which responds in multifarious but related ways to an attitude that is both social and cultural, mythological and archetypal. In effect, the carnivalesque provides a mirror of carnival; it is carnival reflected and refracted through the multi-perspectival prism of verbal art ... the carnivalesque denotes a diverse “carnivalized attitude” or “spirit”, reflected in a myriad of equally varied, yet necessarily related manifestations in world literature. (4)

Bakhtin uses the concept of the “carnavalesque” to describe the literary motifs that characterize Francois Rabelais’ writing and which can be traced to popular cultural expressions that surrounded him in the sixteenth century. These motifs include: the use of the language of the market place “in which various speech patterns excluded from official discourse could freely accumulate” (*RW 17*), the comic play with masks and disguises, and the representation of the grotesque body. In all these instances, Bakhtin identifies a literary pattern that emphasizes the way Rabelais’ writings are influenced by the carnival and popular cultural forms of his time. In the carnival square, social hierarchies of everyday life were profaned and overturned by marginalized groups. Thus, fools became wise, kings became beggars,

and opposites were mingled. In the world of carnival, therefore, the ideas and truths of “high” culture are subverted and contested. Rabelais’ novels represent this “carnavalesque” spirit of reversal and inversion of official hierarchies and dominant beliefs. They subvert authoritative discourses of power through their indebtedness to popular culture and “low” folk humour. Bakhtin writes:

Rabelais’ images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook ... Rabelais’ images are completely at home with the thousand-year-old development of popular culture. (RW 31)

According to Renate Lachmann in “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture”, the concept of the “carnavalesque” in Bakhtin’s theory is an expression of the conflict that exists between two opposing forces in a culture: the centripetal and the centrifugal. The centripetal aspect of a culture works for the closure and unification of ideologies and languages, it tends towards “the univocalization and closure of a system, towards the monological, towards monopolizing the hegemonic space of *the* single truth” (116). The centrifugal forces, on the other hand, work for the transgression of boundaries and the subversion of cultural norms. The centrifugal aspects of a culture represent the spirit of the “carnavalesque” that disrupts fixed categories and transgresses the limits of official culture. The “carnavalesque”, therefore, is a liberating anti-authoritarian force that challenges dominant world views and subverts the centripetal discourses of “high” culture. According to Bakhtin:

[The “carnavalesque” functions] to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world ... from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. The carnival spirit offers a chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (RW 34)

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Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* employs the concept of the "carnavalesque" in a subversive feminist context. The novel demonstrates the conflict between the centripetal aspects in a culture which work for patriarchal hegemony, and the centrifugal forces which allow female transgression of dominant cultural norms. Sophie Fevvers, the female protagonist in the novel, belongs to the world of carnival culture. She works as an acrobat in the circus who performs on a tightrope or trapeze. As a working class woman who performs a non-prestigious profession to earn her living, Fevvers is at the margins of dominant patriarchal culture that excludes her for being socially and sexually inferior. The motif of the "carnavalesque" in the novel is an expression of female empowerment and transgression of oppressive hierarchies. *Nights at the Circus* opens in 1899 with Jack Walser, an American reporter, conducting an interview with Fevvers, an apparently winged woman, in an attempt to find the "truth" behind her myth. Fevvers' unusual shape and talent made her the most famous woman in the circus, so her audience calls her the "Cockney Venus" and "Helen of the High Wire" (NC 7). Walser's intent as a male reporter preoccupied with writing "facts" is to discover a secret "real" story which Fevvers' ostensible fantastical appearance obscures: "Walser is here ... to 'puff' her; and, if it is humanly possible to explode her, either as well as, or instead of. Though don't think the revelation she is a hoax will finish her on the halls" (NC 11). Walser's aim is to replace Fevvers' "false" story about her miraculous nature with a "true" version of his own in which he exposes the myth of the winged lady as a hoax. According to Sally Robinson:

Nights at the Circus is particularly concerned with enacting the contradictions between Woman as an object of official narratives and women as subjects of self-narratives. The text enacts a conflict between the female protagonist's story and the story a male reporter attempts to tell about her. (123)

The novel demonstrates the role of the female "carnavalesque" in challenging dominant patriarchal culture represented by Walser. Female subversion of masculine authority is achieved through different motifs associated with carnival culture, like: the use of

"heteroglossic" varieties in language, the play with masks in circus shows, and the display of female excess and grotesque.

In *Nights at the Circus*, the "carnavalesque" is a means of women's resistance to patriarchal authority through subverting the language of "high" cultural discourses. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Bakhtin/ Volosinov emphasizes the role of language as a medium of power relations and a site of social and ideological conflicts. He introduces a materialist theory of language that explains the relationship between language, ideology and the sign as the basic medium of social and ideological communication. According to Bakhtin/ Volosinov, language is a system of signs that are grounded in the material world of social and ideological values. It is not only the articulate words that people say or the marks that they write that carry meaning. Rather, many of the material objects and artefacts in society can, in particular circumstances, carry meaning as well. In other words, meanings are produced in language through a system of signs which have a material existence as well as social and ideological dimensions. Bakhtin/Volosinov writes: "Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation ... The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. (10)

Language, therefore, is a social and ideological phenomenon that is constituted by the "multiaccentuality" of the sign (Bakhtin /Volosinov 23). The signs of language, mainly words, bear different accents, emphases and meanings with different inflections and different contexts. Meanings emerge in society which is not a homogenous entity, but is itself divided by social class. Signs, therefore, do not have fixed meanings but are always inflected in different ways to express the varieties of social classes and ideological attitudes in society. According to Bakhtin/Volosinov:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena

of the class struggle. (23) Bakhtin/Volosinov's theory of the sign as a site of social and ideological conflicts reveals language as a vehicle of power. Speakers are not passive users of language, but are active agents in the continuing production and transformation of language to express their social positions and ideological attitudes. Bakhtin/Volosinov writes: "*The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence ... [it] is the purest and most sensitive medium of social intercourse*" (13-14).

In *Nights at the Circus*, language is an expression of the liberating power of the female "carnavalesque". The novel reveals language as a means of female transgression of the conventions of patriarchal official culture. In the interview which takes place between Walser, Fevvers and Lizzie (Fevvers' foster mother), language becomes an expression of power relationships in patriarchal society, as it reflects the different social positions and conflicting ideologies of the three characters. Walser's formal language expresses his position of authority and power in relation to Fevvers and Lizzie, who, as working-class women, are at the margins of patriarchal "high" culture. His world-wide experiences as a traveller and his perfect use of words are the reasons of his success as a professional reporter in a prestigious American newspaper:

In the course of his adventuring ... [Walser] discovered in himself a talent with words, and even greater aptitude for finding himself in the right place at the right time. So he stumbled upon his profession, and, at this time in his life, he filled copy to a New York newspaper for a living, so he could travel wherever he pleased whilst retaining the privileged irresponsibility of the journalist, the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing. (NC 9-10)

By contrast, Fevvers and Lizzie work as show girls in the circus and prostitutes in a brothel. They have received no education and speak in local dialects that appear vulgar and irregular in comparison with the educated reporter's Standard English. Fevvers' sentences are grammatically incorrect and semantically incomplete. She tells Walser at the beginning of the interview:

And ... [Lizzie] who found me on the steps at Wapping, me in a laundry basket in which persons unknown left me, little babe most lovingly packed up in new straw sweetly sleeping among a litter of broken eggshells, she who stumbled over this poor, abandoned creature ... and took me in. 'Where, indoors, unpacking me, unwrapping my shawl ... all girls said: "Looks like the little thing's going to sprout Fevvers!" Ain't so, Lizzie,' she appealed to her dresser. (NC 12)

The interview highlights Bakhtin's view of the novel genre as one that expresses the multiplicity or "heteroglossia" of language. The term "heteroglossia" refers to the social diversity of speech types in a language. According to Bakhtin, the use of any language is governed by the different social circumstances in which this language is uttered. Hence, within a single language there are different dialects and jargons used in different social and professional mediums, like scientific language, literary language, the language of industries and so forth. Language, therefore, is not a neutral medium; rather it is appropriated by the speaker under different social and historical conditions. Bakhtin, therefore, regards language as dialogical and various, for it is constituted by its internal stratification into "social-dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generation and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles ... [and] languages that serve the specific socio-political purposes of the day, even of the hour" ("Discourse" 262-3). This stratification is dynamic as various discourses within a language respond to and address one another. They also compete with and challenge one another for prominence and authority.

The interview between Walser, Fevvers and Lizzie takes place in London in the second half of the nineteenth century. It exemplifies the struggle that Bakhtin identifies in the history of languages between a "monoglossic" unitary version of language and the forms of linguistic and cultural "heteroglossia" that threaten its authority and dominance. The interview demonstrates the linguistic and socio-cultural conflicts between Standard English language and the non-standardized versions

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of English which existed in British society at that time. As he enters the world of the circus to start the interview, Walser is faced with two different types of English dialects that violate the rules of Standard English language as he learned it. Whereas Fevvers speaks in a Cockney English dialect, “Lizzie chimed in, in a dark brown voice and a curious accent, unfamiliar to Walser, that was, had he known it, that of London-born Italians, with its double-barrelled diphthongs and glottal stops” (NC 13).

Whereas Fevvers’ and Lizzie’s dialects express their low social status as poor uneducated women, Walser’s sophisticated language highlights his prestigious social position as a reporter who belongs to journal and academic spheres. Walser’s language is that of “high” culture, it is the normative language created by educational and academic discourses. The dialects of Fevvers and Lizzie, on the other hand, are those of socially and culturally marginalized groups who speak non-prestigious versions of standard language. They reflect the two women’s inferior social positions as well as their deviation from the linguistic and cultural norms of their society. However, Fevvers and Lizzie use their “inferior” languages as a means of resisting Walser’s patriarchal authority. In their disruption of the rules of standard official language, Fevvers’ and Lizzie’s stories lack the clarity and logic of scientific discourses and journal reports which Walser has full acquaintance with. Walser, therefore, is frequently confused by his inability to fully comprehend and organize the stories of both women:

Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the aerialiste [Fevvers] were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds ... he felt himself trembling as if he ... stood on an unknown threshold. Surprised by his own confusion, he gave his mind a quick shake to refresh its pragmatism. (NC 30)

The interview, therefore, demonstrates the conflicts and contradictions between three different speech types within English language that struggle with one another for dominance and authority, creating linguistic and cultural “heteroglossia”.

According to Bakhtin, each and every language that makes up the "heteroglossia" must itself have its own system of norms. The normative or unitary pole of language represents the standardized version of this language. It has an active and powerful presence as an imposed norm or unified version that conflicts with the "heteroglossic" aspects of language. Bakhtin writes:

A common unitary language is a system of linguistic norms. But these norms do not constitute an abstract imperative; they are rather the generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable, linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language, or else defending an already formed language from the pressure of growing heteroglossia. ("Discourse" 270-1) In other words, whereas the "heteroglossia" represents the linguistic and socio-cultural diversities within a language; a unitary or standard language represents the authoritarian suppression of this linguistic variety. Standard language reflects the dynamics of power exercised in society at a particular historical moment to unify, evaluate and control the speech of non-powerful groups. The conflict between "heteroglossic" and standardized versions of a language, in any stage of the historical development of this language, reflects social and ideological strategies of power that aim at controlling, devaluing, and marginalizing the varieties of opposite discourses. Bakhtin writes: "a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" ("Discourse" 271).

Fevvers' Cockney dialect and Lizzie's Italian English have social, cultural and historical significances that place them in a direct opposition to Walser's Standard English. Cockney dialect is used by working class Londoners, particularly those who live in the East End. It has been regarded as inferior and corrupted by the majority of

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London society since the eighteenth century. According to Matteo Santipolo:

Standard (British) English and Cockney are the varieties of English placed on the opposite ends of the linguistic continuum in the London area ... [Standard English is] the dialect ... that raises critical judgments about itself and is generally considered overtly prestigious. (403) Santipolo explains that in the second half of the eighteenth century a distinction started to be made between the language of the London lower classes and that of the Court and Universities. The habit of sending children of the upper classes to public schools in the middle of the eighteenth century established the language of the educated higher classes as the new standard one. From then on, the speech of upper-class educated Londoners was increasingly identified with Standard English, whereas the language of the poorer part of London in the East End was identified with Cockney. Hence, the Cockney dialect was excluded from academic and official discourses and was regarded as an inferior version of the Standard English language.

Lizzie's Italian English reflects another aspect of the process of verbal and ideological unification in the history of British English language that can also be traced to previous centuries. The emergence of London as a political and commercial centre of England attracted people from other countries to migrate to the great city. The immigrants' attempts at conforming to their new society produced new dialects in which they altered the rules and vocabulary of Standard English language to suit their foreign tongue. According to Santipolo, these immigrants were "somehow compelled to abandon their native accent or even dialect to adopt that of the capital, the resulting variety, quite obviously, could not sound completely natural, but rather a sort of self imposed and therefore artificial type of speech" (408).

In the light of Bakhtin's theory and Santipolo's historical analysis, Walser's Standard English represents "the centripetal" forces of language that are endorsed by "high" culture and dominant ideological systems. The "centripetal" forces of language work toward unifying

and stabilizing meanings and utterances. The dialects of Fevvers and Lizzie, on the other hand, represent the decentralizing “heteroglossic” forces of language which attempt to disrupt this linguistic and cultural unification by introducing multiplicity. According to Bakhtin, “the centripetal forces of the life of a language, embodied in a ‘unitary language’, operate in the midst of heteroglossia ... alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification go forward” (271-2). The languages of both women do not simply express their illiteracy or the harsh life they survived. Rather, they represent the disruptive force of the female “carnavalesque” that challenges Walser’s patriarchal authority through breaking the rules of the standardized version of language he uses. According to Julia Kristeva in “Word, Dialogue, and Novel”:

Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law. (65)

The circus in *Nights at the Circus* is as a site of female “carnavalesque” where patriarchal relationships are reversed and social hierarchies are challenged. Walser personifies dominant patriarchal culture in the face of a low popular one represented by Fevvers. However, as he follows Fevvers to Petersburg, Walser joins the circus and loses all his privileges as a powerful patriarchal figure. He disguises as a clown and gets his arm injured. He, hence, ceases to be a journalist and is deprived of his status as a prestigious reporter associated with “high” culture. Instead, Walser becomes a real member of low marginal society:

[H]is right arm is injured and ... he cannot write or type until it is better, so he is deprived of his profession. Therefore, for the moment, his disguise disguises –nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a real clown, for all practical purposes, and, what’s more, a clown with his arm in a sling—type

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of the 'wounded warrior' clown. (NC 145) As a "real clown", Walser reproduces the image of the clowns and fools in Rabelais' novels. These clowns never take-off their masks because they are in constant advertisement for the circus. They represent the comic and humorous spirit of medieval carnival culture where identities are concealed and social hierarchies are suspended. According to Bakhtin:

Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais' novel, are characteristic of medieval culture of humour. They were the constant accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season ... They were not seen as actors playing their parts on a stage ... but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. (RW 8)

The image of Rabelaisian clowns is reproduced in the *Nights at the Circus* to represent the disruptive role of the "carnavalesque" in challenging patriarchal power relationships. The carnival world of the circus is a site of role reversal and topsy-turvy inversion of social and cultural hierarchies that characterize patriarchal society. Losing his status as a journalist and hiding his masculine identity behind the comic mask of a clown, Walser occupies an inferior position in relation to Fevvers in the world of the circus. As a famous acrobat, Fevvers is admired by her world-wide audience who comes to watch her extraordinary trapeze performance. By contrast, Walser becomes an object of ridicule and contempt in the circus, for he lacks the talents of other clowns. As the circus starts its journey to Siberia, Walser disguises as a human chicken and gets lost in the Siberian wilderness. He eventually loses his consciousness and is rescued by a group of women who feel pity for his condition. Feeling powerless and crippled by his injuries, Walser could not stop himself from crying:

Walser crouched over the basket of eggs but found they were easily crushed. Disgruntled, he kicked the basket over and had some fun watching the eggs that remained whole roll around ... Bored, he flapped his arms, again ... When he realized the kind ladies were all gone, tears ran unhindered from his eyes. Crowing like a cock, flapping his arms up and down, he sprinted off among

the trees in search of them but soon forgot his quest in his enchantment at the sight of dappled starlight on the snow. (NC 223-4)

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin appreciates an aspect of Rabelais' writings that emphasizes the material functions of the body and its engagement in biological processes that maintain its regeneration. Bakhtin calls this motif in literature: "grotesque realism" which reflects a central attitude in the world of carnival feasts and popular festivals. The celebration of the body's material activities in carnival culture represents "the collective ancestral body of all people" (RW 19) that preserves the physical continuity of human life, its regeneration and renewal. Bakhtin writes:

The grotesque image ... never presents an individual body ... It is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, in the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception ... In the endless chain of bodily life [the grotesque image] retains the parts in which one link joins the other, in which the life of one body, is born from the death of the preceding older one. (RW 318)

Related to the grotesque image is a distinction that Bakhtin makes between the "classical body" as a symbol of "high" official culture and the "grotesque body" as a symbol of "low" popular one. Whereas the human body in classical art is represented as a perfectly completed object, the grotesque body in Rabelais' works is unfinished, for it is a body that is marked by its material function and destiny. The ideal or classical body, therefore, is a "strictly completed, finished product ... isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies" (RW 29). It is represented by the ancient Greek sculptures which display perfect and complete human bodies raised on pedestals high above viewers. This ideal body is appreciated in Western "high" culture as the perfect model of a human body that is culturally and socially desirable. According to Stallybrass and White:

[T]he 'classical body' denotes the inherent form of the high official culture and suggests that the shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of

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discursive material and social norm in a collectivity ... 'high' languages attempt to legitimate their authority by appealing to values inherent in the classical body. (21)

By contrast, the grotesque body is "entirely different from ready-made, completed being" (RW 25). It is ugly and monstrous from the point of view of classic aesthetics and it violates the form and proportion of the ideal body. Unlike the classical body, the grotesque body is neither closed off nor unattainable. It is constantly in the process of becoming and is unhindered by stable boundaries. The grotesque body, "transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects" (RW 310). The main feature of the grotesque body, therefore, is regeneration rather than completion. It is a body that affirms its openness to, rather than its isolation from, the material world. As it destabilizes the perfect shape of the ideal classical body, the grotesque body allows human liberation "from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés" (RW 34). In other words, the grotesque body represents the power of the "carnavalesque" in challenging the standards of "high" culture which alienate bodies that do not have an "ideal" shape.

The image of the classical ideal body which Bakhtin identifies in ancient Greek sculptures is reproduced in patriarchal culture through prevalent depictions of the perfect female body. Advertisements and billboards frequently represent the "ideal" female body through larger-than-life pictures which viewers look up to. Patriarchal culture, therefore, perpetuates women's powerlessness in pursuit of a perfect body that satisfies male desires. In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers' shape displays the features of the grotesque body as defined by Bakhtin in contrast to the classical body. Her grotesque body challenges the standards of female beauty in patriarchal culture. These male-dominated standards marginalize women whose bodies lack the features of the perfect female body which has specific dimensions and characteristics. Teresa Jane Mclean writes:

[T]hose women who ... do not meet the idealized version of the classical body, are made aware daily of their failure and of their grotesque difference ... [they] perceive themselves as lacking, in part because they have been unable to fit, literally and metaphorically, into the restricted cultural space or boundary which has been allotted to the current female classical body. (22)

As a winged woman, Fevvers represents the power of the female grotesque in challenging the standards of female perfection in patriarchal culture. The perfect female body is forbidden to become large or massive; it should be small and slim, taking as little space as possible. According to Sandra Bartky, "massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman's body is met with distaste. The current body of fashion is taut, small breasted, narrow hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation" (64). The "ideal" images of the female body, therefore, are those of an extremely slim body that is restrained, finished and closed. By contrast, Fevvers has a giant-like shape; she is at "six feet two in her stockings" and her body is extraordinarily huge in size (NC 12). Fevvers' grotesque body is a model of physical abundance and excess that destabilizes the image of the perfectly slim body.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin regards the biological processes of eating and drinking as the most distinctive features of the grotesque body, as they emphasize its openness and interaction with the material world. Bakhtin regards the character of Sancho in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as one that displays the features of the grotesque body, for his "appetite and thirst ... convey a powerful carnivalesque spirit" (RW 22). In a similar way, Fevvers' enormous appetite for food is frequently emphasized in the novel. She constantly complains of being starved to death and is described as a glutton who consumes food vigorously: "she gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked peas from the knife ... she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched" (NC 22). In another instance, Fevvers devours a bacon sandwich "with relish, a vigorous mastication of large teeth, a smacking of plump lips smeared with grease" (NC 53). Food plays a crucial role in the construction of the perfect female

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body in patriarchal culture. According to the standards of female beauty, woman's appetite for food should be firmly monitored to maintain her perfect slim shape:

[T]he space occupied by the ideal body is not only diminishing but also shifting to the extremely "thin" end of this invented range ... the bodies which fit within the borders of this space are more highly valued than those bodies which are excluded ... As a result, the women who constitute the position of "Other" and fail to escape that position experience shame, low self-esteem, and a sense of failure. (Mclean 37) Food and appetite, therefore, are used in the novel as a site of female resistance to the oppressive cultural standards of bodily perfection. Fevvers violates the strategies of self-starvation that women employ to possess an ideal physical shape. Instead, she shamelessly reveals her excessive appetite for food and finds pleasure in satisfying her physical needs. Fevvers demonstrates the liberating power of the female grotesque that is unconstrained by the patriarchal standards of female beauty.

Fevvers' grotesque shape violates the regulations and restrictions imposed on the female body to keep it from occupying too much space. According to Bartky, women are more restricted than men in their manner of movement and spatiality:

[A] space seems to surround women in imagination that they are hesitant to move beyond: this manifests itself both in a reluctance to reach, stretch, and extend the body to meet resistances of matter in motion—as in sport or in the performance of physical tasks—and in a typically constricted posture and general style of movement. Woman's space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined. (66) By contrast, Fevvers' body is an excessive, unrestrained one which is constantly in the process of growing. Fevvers' wings began as small buds under the surface of her skin when she was an infant. They erupted when she reached puberty and have continued to increase in size as she matures. Unlike upper-class ladies who

manage to confine their bodies to a restricted space, Fevvers moves freely and never cares about the space her giant body occupies: "she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk" (NC 52). Fevvers represents Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body as one that is physically and spatially unbounded, and is constantly in the process of transformation and becoming. It, therefore, transcends the confining borders of the classical body. According to Stallybrass and White, the grotesque body is "always in process, it is always becoming, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits ... a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion" (9).

The grotesque body is biologically linked to its past and future. It represents the collective biological life of people rather than the private isolated body of the individual. Bakhtin writes:

[The grotesque body] is opposed to the severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earthy and body ... The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people who are continually growing and renewed. That is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (RW 19) The grotesque body, therefore, affirms its connection to the biological life of people through its exaggerated indulgence in material activities (like eating, drinking, and giving birth) that maintain its regeneration and continuity. Fevvers' grotesque body emphasizes her connection to the material world of other female grotesques in the novel. Fevvers' manners violate the aesthetic standards of female propriety appreciated in patriarchal "high" culture. She represents the lower and less civilized aspects of culture that belong to the material world of corporal activities. Fevvers frequently indulges in bodily acts as yawning, belching and sweating that connect her with the material world. Her carelessness about hiding her body odour or wearing clean clothes

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further highlights her disruption of the female body as a perfect ornamented figure. Fevvers' body, therefore, enacts the Bakhtinian grotesque in its openness and connection to the material world of other bodies. According to Betty Moss:

Fevvers' body and physical manner obviously are not the classical ones of "high" aesthetic standards which alienate the body from materiality; they belong to the "low" regions of the material world where the social, material body resides. The grotesque body represents the broader social body in its connection to the material realities of others' bodies. (147)

Hence, Fevvers' experiences as a grotesque figure are related to the world of other female grotesques in the novel. She has worked in Madame Schreck's museum of women monsters which is inhabited by "prodigies of nature" like: Fanny Four-Eyes, the Wiltshire Wonder who is three foot high, and Albert/Albertina who is half woman and half man (NC 59). There is also Madame Schreck's servant Touissant who has no mouth and Madame Schreck herself who is described as a "Living Skeleton" (NC 60). As a female grotesque, Fevvers is immersed in this world of physically distorted women who deviate from the cultural standards of female perfection and beauty. Her excessive physicality and transgression of the boundaries of the classical body affirm her connection with the material world of female "Others" who are at the margins of dominant patriarchal culture.

In conclusion, the opposition between "high" superior culture and "low" inferior cultures maintains the hegemony of powerful social and political systems. Hegemony shapes individuals' perception of themselves and the world through consent rather than coercion. Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque" illustrates the disruptive role of popular culture in resisting the hegemony of "high" culture. The term refers to the literary works which reproduce the carnival spirit of inversion and transgression of social hierarchies. In the world of the "carnavalesque" all official certainties are inverted and parodied, and all elevated principles are degraded and debased.

In *Nights at the Circus*, the "carnavalesque" is a means of female

subversion of the rules of patriarchal official language. Fevvers' and Lizzie's non-standardized dialects represent the disruptive forces of linguistic and cultural "heteroglossia" in the face of unified Standard language used by Walser. The circus, where Fevvers achieves success as an acrobat, is a site of female "carnavalesque" where social hierarchies are inverted and patriarchal relationships are challenged. As he enters the carnival world of the circus, Walser loses his social privileges and becomes a real clown. He is lost in the wilderness and is, ironically, saved by a group of women. Finally, Fevvers' grotesque shape violates the classical image of the female body appreciated in patriarchal culture. Her physical excess and indulgence in corporal activities highlight her connection with the material world of other female grotesques in the novel. *Nights at the Circus*, therefore, demonstrates the role of the female "carnavalesque" in challenging patriarchal authority and resisting social and cultural marginalization

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