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Faculty of Foreign Languages-Department of English

M.A Thesis on English Literature

Subject: Exploring the concepts of Gender Role and Identity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* in the
Light of Judith Butler's Ideas

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In the Name of God

To My Mother

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Abstract

The present study seeks to investigate the concepts of gender role and identity in Angel Carter's dramatic novel *Nights at the Circus* in the light of Judith Butler's theories. Regarding these two concepts, Butler believes that one's gender and one's identity, as a much broader concept, are performative. That is to say, both of these concepts are artificially constructed through the citations of the norms. So, they can be broken down and can be reconstructed in a way to fit the demands and the desires of each independent individual. In Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, which is the main text of this study, it seems that the characters, especially females, defy the conventional gender roles prescribed by patriarchal society. By doing so, they question the socially accepted heterosexual norms, and come to define their own sexuality and gender function. To prove this point, the researcher reveals some strategies used in the novel which demonstrate the instability and 'performativeness' of all gender categories, as Butler believes. Additionally, regarding the concept of identity, the researcher investigates the ways through which the main characters in *Nights at the Circus* claim their own desired identities regardless of the regulative forces of the external world. She does so by showing the process of transformation within the main characters of the novel in the course of the story. This demonstrates how Angela Carter grants some degree of agency for individuals in shaping their own identity.

Key words: gender, gender role, identity, performativity, Judith Butler, *Nights at the Circus*,

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Introduction

1.1. General Background

Angela Olive Carter was born in Sussex, England in 1940. She was forced to live with her maternal grandmother shortly after due to the bombing raids of the Second World War. Angela's father, Hugh Alexander Stalker, was a journalist. At the age of nineteen Angela started working as a journalist, like her father, for the *Croydon Advertiser*. In 1962 she began studying English literature at Bristol University. After graduating from university, she worked for *New Society* and *The Guardian* as a journalist. Carter was a prolific writer of fiction who was especially fascinated with fairy tales and old myths. She was famous for her unique imagination as well as her feminist and political insight. Carter's early novels include *The Shadow Dance* (1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968), and *Heroes and Villains* (1971). Carter

spent a couple of years in Japan. This stay in a foreign country helped her produce many pieces for *New Society* that were later collected in a volume called *Nothing Sacred* (1982). Carter adopted a number of her short stories for radio and some of her novels like *The Company of Wolves* and *The Magic Toyshop* were made into films. Her novel *Nights at the Circus* published in 1984 won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Literature. Carter taught Creative Writing at the University of Sheffield and the Brown University. She also held posts at Rhode Island, the University of East Anglia, and the University of Adelaide. In 2008, *The Times* named Carter in their list of “the 50 greatest British writers since 1945”. Carter died age 51 at her home in London after developing lung cancer.

In this research the researcher would work on Carter’s dramatic novel *Nights at the Circus* first published in 1984. The story takes place in 1899 and focuses on the life of its main character, Fevvers, who is a famous aerialist hatched from an egg laid by unknown parents. It begins in Fevvers’ dressing room in London where Jack Walser, a young journalist, is interviewing Fevvers. During the interview Walser becomes so fascinated by Fevvers’ life story that he decides to run away with the circus in order to discover the truth of her story and the nature of her identity. In section two of the novel the story moves to Petersburg in which Fevvers joins Colonel Kearney’s circus on its ‘Grand Imperial Tour’. Finally, in the last section of the novel, the story ends in Siberia where the train on which the circus group travels, clashes in an expansive wilderness.

What the researcher aims to do in this research is to trace the concepts of gender role and identity in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* applying Judith Butler’s (1965-) ideas. In this way, she seeks to show how in this novel the main characters, especially females, escape the boundaries of conventional gender roles, and come to define their specific identity and gender function. As this novel is set at the time when the new century begins, it seems that the characters also begin to

embrace new identities and new ways of life. What is so evident in this novel is the characterization of women who defy the conventional gender roles characteristic of their age, and escape the oppressive forces of the patriarchal society. Another important feature of Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is the way the main characters struggle in order to define their own desired identity regardless of the oppressive forces of the society.

1.2. The Argument: Statement of the Problem

What the researcher tends to do in this research is to explore the concept of 'gender' in Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* in light of Judith Butler's theories. According to Butler 'gender' is a performative act. The 'performative' aspect of gender implies that gender roles are culturally constituted in time and are imposed upon individuals through repeated citation of norms. In *Bodies That Matter* Butler defines performativity as "the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (2). So, Butler believes that there is no recourse to an essential 'gender' that gender performances express. As she herself puts it in her article "performative acts and gender constitution", "gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self', whether that 'self' is conceived as 'sexed' or not. As performance, which is performative, gender is an 'act', broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Conboy et al. 279). Butler rejects the common assumption that sex and gender exist in relation to each other; instead, she believes that 'gender' is unnatural, i.e. there is no necessary relationship between one's biological body and one's gender. As a result, one may be a 'masculine' female or a 'feminine' male. So, Butler rejects gender divisions according to heterosexual hegemony.

As belonging to Radical Feminism Movement, Angela Carter is among those contemporary writers who oppose traditional compulsory gender roles defined according to patriarchal society. She follows those critics who believe that gender is not to be interpreted in terms of masculinity and femininity only, and that sexuality is not to be interpreted in terms of maleness and femaleness only. Instead, there exist multiple genders and multiple sexualities. In most of her writings which explore the theme of gender identity, Carter questions the heterosexual assumptions which forces individuals perform certain gender roles according to their biological sexes. So, she focuses on gender as 'performance' rather than 'substance'. In most of her fiction Carter depicts unconventional characters who defy the stereotypical gender roles as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Therefore, it seems that there is much similarity between Judith Butler's and Angela Carter's ideas regarding the concept of gender role.

The main strategy that Carter uses in her fiction in order to reveal the performative nature and 'fictiveness' of all gender identities is through her genuine skill in rewriting the old myths and legends that are handed down to us. As she herself claims in "Notes from the Front Line", "I'm in the demythologizing business" (*Shaking a Leg* 5). According to Carter, myths define gender roles according to traditional assumptions which restrict individuals to 'masculine' and 'feminine' identifications. Therefore, myths are repressive of both men and women who have gender tendencies that are not defined and accepted according to traditional assumptions. So, it seems that in her "demythologizing business" Carter tries to allow for alternative gender relations outside traditional patriarchal paradigm.

In Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* which includes fairy tales and myths such as Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Helen of Troy, and Leda and the swan, it seems that the author tries to show how gender construction is influenced by folk tales and myths. By doing so, Carter tries to

instigate some thought on ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. The researcher tends to study this novel in order to show how throughout the story the influence of old myths and fairy tales upon gender construction is demonstrated, and how the characters escape these influences through their performances which reverse the traditional gender roles. For example, in one case, Fevvers- the central female character- says: “the prince who rescues the princess from the dragon’s lair is always forced to marry her, whether they’ve taken a liking to each other or not. That’s the custom. And I don’t doubt this custom will apply to the trapeze artist who rescues the clown” (*Nights at the Circus* 281). But later on in the novel, in a reversal of traditional gender role, it is Fevvers who rescues Walser from the attack of the wild tigress. Another example which shows the female characters’ refusal to accept conventional gender roles, and their attempt to construct their own gender identity is demonstrated when fevers says: “ sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited; I waited...although I could not have told you what it was I waited for. Except, I assure you, I did not wait the kiss of a magic prince, sir” (*Nights at the Circus* 39).

Another concept which the researcher would study in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* is the concept of identity. She is going to study this concept in Carter’s novel in light of Butler’s ideas. According to Judith Butler, one’s identity is shaped as a result of the impact of some external forces which are beyond the control of the subject. So, she believes that identity is constructed within the dominant discourse of the society. As she puts it in her influential book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, “there is no ‘I’ outside language, since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the cause of discourses that conceal their workings” (145). In Carter’s fiction, however, it seems that individuals are granted some degree of agency in creating their own desired identities.

As the characters in *Nights at the Circus* enter into the new century, it seems that they represent new ways of living and reflect new ways of thinking. In this way, they embody and define the concept of 'identity' in a new way. This is especially evident in the characterization of the females who defy the boundaries of conventional gender roles and refuse to be subservient to patriarchal society. Even the women who work in Ma Nelson's brothel cannot be defined according to traditional representation and definition of prostitutes by patriarchal society. As we see, in Carter's special characterization of these women, they are depicted as forward-thinkers who participate in "intellectual, artistic or political" (*Nights at the Circus* 40) activities. In one instance, Lizzie-Fevvers's adoptive mother- who works in the brothel tries to warn Fevvers against falling into the trappings of 'marriage' because she believes that it is a personal and social imprisonment: "Marriage? Pah! 'Snapped Lizzie in a pet.' Out of the frying pan into the fire! What is Marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many? No different!" (*Nights at the Circus* 10). Moreover, instances of giving agency to subjects in creating their desired identity can be seen in the characterization of the clowns in Carter's novel. For example, in section two of the novel when Buffo the Great- the chief clown in the circus- is talking to other clowns during the dinner time he says: "It is given to few to shape themselves, as I have done, as you have done, young man, and in that moment of choice- lingering deliciously among the crayons; what eyes shall I have, what mouth...exists a perfect freedom"; or when he claims that: "We can invent our faces! We make ourselves" (*Nights at the Circus* 70). It seems that even the animals in this novel embrace new identity as the new century begins: "the magic circle was now occupied by Mr. Lamarck's Educated Apes. A dozen chimpanzees, six of their age, all in sailor suits, were sealed in pairs at little wooden double desks, each with a slate pencil clutched in their leathery hands" (*Nights at the Circus* 62).

Regarding the two concepts on which the researcher aims to work, the following questions need further investigation:

1. What is the function of the images of fantasy in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and their impact upon the two concepts mentioned?
2. Can a winged woman (Fevvers) as the protagonist of the story, be a certain signifier in the novel regarding the notions of identity and gender role?
3. Do the images taken from fairy tales (such as Sleeping Beauty) suggest subversion of the females in a patriarchal society?
4. In what ways do the characterizations of the prostitutes working in Ma Nelson's whorehouse contribute to the discussion of the two concepts mentioned?
5. Can literature of fantasy in women's writing be a gender-bending tool and subvert patriarchal definitions of gender role?

1.3. The Argument: Significance of the Problem

In her dramatic novel *Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter tries to challenge the traditional representation of women throughout literature. Using her skill in rewriting the old myths and fairy tales, Carter criticizes the way these tales affect our everyday perception of 'gender role', and also presents alternatives for individuals according to which they can construct their own desired gender identity. While it seems that in Carter's fiction male characters are entrapped by the traditional definitions of gender role, most of the females seem to be cognizant of their place out of fairy tale ideals and try to rebel against it. So, in the world which is created by Carter in her novel *Nights at the Circus*, it seems that women are no longer victims of conventional ideal gender roles, but they attempt to gain their freedom from

the control of men and the patriarchal society. As Magalie Cornier Michael points out: “With its extravagant playfulness, Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* waves together elements of the carnivalesque and fantastic with those of harsh material realism as vehicles for feminist aims. Set in 1899, *Nights at the Circus* purports to usher in the twentieth century” (492). As a result of what was mentioned, the researcher decided to work on this specific novel of Carter, regarding the concept of gender role.

Another feature of Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* which seemed interesting to the researcher and encouraged her to choose this novel for her study is that while reading the novel, it seems that the characters--especially women-- are amazingly true to their own selves trying to escape the oppressive forces of the external world and shaping their own desired identity. In this regard, it rejects Butler’s theories which consider the formation of the self and identity as a result of some external forces beyond the control of the subjects.

1.4. Delimitation and Limitation

In this research, the researcher is going to explore the concepts of gender role and identity in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* in light of Judith Butler’s ideas, specially applying her theory of ‘performativity’. According to this theory, one’s identity and gender are social constructions created as an illusion through discourse and ideology.

The critical available sources for the researcher are mainly Butler’s major books and articles in which she discusses the two concepts mentioned. Additionally, the researcher has gained some information from several books and articles by various authors on Butler and Carter, and on the novel which is the focus of this study. Also, she has benefited from reading some Ma and PhD dissertations which were relevant to her thesis.

1.5. Literature Review

Based on the exploration of the two concepts of gender role and identity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* in light of Judith Butler's theories, the researcher has used several sources in this research. As it was mentioned earlier, the researcher's main sources are basically Butler's own books and articles which include discussions of the notions of identity and gender.

One of the main sources used in research is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, focusing on its main article "Gender Trouble". In this book which was first published in 1990, Butler discusses the work of some prominent thinkers as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, and Michael Foucault. The gist of Butler's argument in this book, especially in its main article "Gender Trouble" is that the natural seeming coherence of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, is, in fact, constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. In this sense, she theorizes gender, sex, and sexuality, as performative. So, the concept of gender performativity is central to this book. The researcher has used this book to support her thesis because as it seems throughout *Nights at the Circus* the author tries to show how 'gender' is something constructed through the stylized repetition of 'performances' in fairy tales and myths.

Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* published in 1993 is another major source used in this study. In this book, using Derrida's theory of 'iterability', Butler discusses the importance of the role of repetition in her theorization of the concept of

‘performativity’. As one of the concepts on which the researcher has worked is the concept of gender as a performative act, this book has been used in this researcher as a major source.

Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) in which the author borrowing from different thinkers as Adorno, Foucault, Nietzsche, Cavareno, Levinas, and Laplanche, discusses the formation of the subject as a relation to the social norms which are beyond its control, is another useful source used in this research for supporting the researcher’s thesis regarding the notion of identity.

Butler’s *Psychic Life of Power* in which the author combines social theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis in order to offer an analysis of the process of subject formation, is another main source used in this research. Drawing upon thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Althusser, this book discusses the psychic effects of social power upon the formation of the subject.

Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” is another source used in this research. In this article Butler argues that since gender is constituted through performative acts, it contains the possibility of being performed differently. As one of the notions studied in this research is the notion of gender according to Butler’s theories, this article is used in this research.

Two other articles by Butler “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*” and “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Witting, and Foucault” which discuss the formation of gender as construct and process, are also used in this research.

Sarah Salih’s *Judith Butler* published in 2002 by Routledge is another influential book which helped the researcher approach Butler’s original texts and her key ideas. Examining

Butler's major works in light of different contexts, Salih discusses some key ideas such as gender, sex, language, the subject, and the psyche according to Butler. This book was the ideal starting point for the researcher who was new to Butler.

Helen Stoddart's *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus* (2007) that offers a considerable selection of critical essays on this novel and discusses it from a range of perspectives including gender studies, psychoanalysis, post structuralism, and postmodernism, is another useful source used in this research.

Joan Rivière's article "Womanliness as Masquerade" is another source used in this research. In this article Rivière claims that "womanliness" is something that "could be assumed and worn as a mask" (38), in a way that both covered up the assumed masculinity and diverted attention from it. As this idea emphasizes the 'performative' aspect of gender role, it was appealing to critics such as Butler who believe that there is no necessary link between one's biological sex and one's gender identity.

Angela carter's the *Sadeian Woman* is another source used in this research. In this book carter appropriates the writings of Sade to further her feminist project of 'demythologising' traditional and patriarchal conceptions of female sexuality. As she points out in this book, Sade's "straitjacket psychology relates his fiction directly to the black and white ethical world of fairy tale and fable" (82). So, in rewriting fairy tales and myths Carter attempts, just as Sade did, to expose the reality that these "black fairy tales" sought to disguise.

In addition to the books and articles which have been mentioned as the main sources in this research, the researcher has benefited from reading some dissertations which were related to the subject of her thesis. Ayşe Gül Karaman from Turkey, Middle East Technical University, in

2009 worked on MA dissertation entitled “An Analysis of the Social Pressure and Alienation of Women in Angela Carter’s the *Magic Toyshop* and Jeannette Winterson’s *Oranges are not the Only Fruits*”. This research discusses the effect of social pressure on women whose sexuality is ignored, and focuses on the development of women’s sexuality in relation to the female model described by heterosexual hegemony. It aims at examining the alienation of conformist and non-conformist female characters under patriarchal force in Carter’s and Winterson’s works.

Hope Jennings from Canada, University of St. Andrews, in 2008, worked on ph. D dissertation entitled “Journey Towards the (M)other: Myth, Origins and the Daughter’s Desire in the Fiction of Angela Carter”. In this study, the researcher examines Angela Carter’s demythologizing of origin myths and investigates the extent to which her fictions offer viable alternatives that allow for productive representations of women and gender relations outside patriarchal paradigms.

Shaghayegh Mohebi from Iran, Islamic Azad University of Tehran, Central Branch, in 2006 has worked on a M.A dissertation entitled “A Feminist Study of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*”. In this research Carter’s novel is analyzed under the light of Feminism. This study deals with debates emerged in recent years within and outside Feminism. It seeks to investigate how Angela Carter, as a leading figure of Post- feminism, benefited from the debates of this new wave in her novel. This research clarifies Carter’s subtle use of the margins of the society in order to represent manifestations of Post-feminism.