

بين الذات والآخر: دراسة تحليلية نفسية للهوية والذاتية في رواية "ليالي في السيرك" لأنجيلا
كارتر (1984)

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الغرابة، الكبت، النبذ، الذاتية والهوية، النظرة الاستقصائية، الأجساد
المشوهة.

كيفية اقتباس البحث

عبد الصمد ، زيار سرکوت، بين الذات والآخر: دراسة تحليلية نفسية للهوية والذاتية في رواية
"ليالي في السيرك" لأنجيلا كارتر (1984)، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آب
2026، المجلد: 16، العدد: 8.

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Between Self and Other: A Psychoanalytic Study of Identity and Subjectivity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984)

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Keywords : The Uncanny, Repression, Abjection, Subjectivity and Identity, Investigative Gaze, Grotesque Bodies.

How To Cite This Article

Abdulsamad, Zhiar Sarkawt, Between Self and Other: A Psychoanalytic Study of Identity and Subjectivity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, Auguts 2026, Volume:16, Issue8.



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الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليلاً أدبياً نفسياً لرواية "ليالٍ في السيرك" (١٩٨٤) للكاتبة أنجيلا كارتر. تتركز الدراسة على فكرة أن الرواية تعكس هويات غير مستقرة، وعدم يقين نفسي، وانهايار الحدود الثابتة بين العقلانية واللاعقلانية والحقيقة والخيال وذلك من خلال الأطر النظرية لسيغموند فرويد، وجاك لاكان، وجوليا كريستيفا.

خلافًا للأبحاث والدراسات السابقة التي تناولت "ليالٍ في السيرك" من منظورات نسوية، وكرنفالية، وواقعية سحرية، وإحياء للأدب القوطي، يتبنى هذا العمل التحليل النفسي كمنهج نقدي أساسي. وبذلك يقدم قراءة تربط بين اهتمامات الرواية بالهوية والتجسيد وبين نقاشات التحليل النفسي الأوسع نطاقاً المتعلقة بتكوين الذات والكبت والرغبة والنبد.

وتُعدّ شخصية صوفي فيفرز، الشخصية الرئيسية في هذا البحث، محوراً أساسياً في التحليل، حيث يُمثل جسدها المجنح مفهوم فرويد عن الغرابة. تتخذ فيفرز موقفاً من الغموض الجذري الذي يقاوم التصنيف الثابت. ويتعمق البحث في هذه الديناميكية من خلال مفهوم فرويد

عن عدم اليقين الفكري، الذي يتجلى عندما يعجز نظام الفهم المؤلف عن توضيح المعنى الثابت ومع استمرار البحث تتضاءل ثقة والسر بالعقل تدريجيًا مما يؤدي إلى أزمة عميقة في الذاتية. وتجادل الدراسة أيضًا بأن الأجساد الغريبة في الرواية تمثل عودة المكبوت عند فرويد. فجسد فيفرز الهجين يجسد الرغبات والمخاوف التي تحاول الأنظمة الثقافية قمعها، لكنها تعود بأشكال أخرى ويمكن تفسير تحول والسر على أنه عودة للذات المكبوتة التي كانت مخفية سابقًا تحت قناع الذكورة العقلانية.

توفر نظرية لاكان عن مرحلة المرأة إطارًا إضافيًا لفهم الهويات غير المستقرة في الرواية. تعمل فيفرز كصورة متخيلة تكشف الطبيعة المصطنعة للهوية وتتحدى استراتيجيتها في التمويه داخل المحاكاة إمكانية وجود ذات أصيلة مخفية وراء المظاهر. في الوقت نفسه، يكشف تدهور شخصية والسر من صحفي باحث عن الحقائق إلى مهرج سيرك، ودجاجة بشرية، وهارب فاقد للذاكرة، عن انهيار الصورة الذاتية المتماسكة المرتبطة بمفهوم "الأنا المثالية" عند لاكان. وأخيرًا، يُحلل مفهوم كريستيفا عن النبذ من خلال الأجساد المشوهة، والإفراط الجسدي، والهدر، والسيولة، والحالة الحدية في الرواية.

يُبين هذا البحث أن رواية "ليال في السيرك" تستخدم تمثيلات مشوهة ومربكة لتحدي الأفكار الجامدة عن الهوية والجنس، من خلال منظورات التحليل النفسي.

Abstract

This study undertakes a literary and psychoanalytic examination of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). It centers on the concept that the novel reflects unstable identities, psychological uncertainty and the collapse of stable rational and irrational, fact and fiction boundaries through the theoretical frameworks of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva.

Unlike earlier researches and scholarships which have mainly approached *Nights at the Circus* from feminist, carnivalesque, magical realist, and Gothic revival standpoints, this work adopts psychoanalytic study as its central critical approach. In doing so, it showcases a reading that interconnects the novel's concerns with identity and embodiment to wider psychoanalytic debates regarding subject formation, repression, and abjection.

Central to the analysis of this research is the main character Sophie Fevvers, whose winged body represents Freud's notion of the uncanny. Fevvers takes a position of radical ambiguity that resists stable classification. This dynamic is further explored through Freud's notion of intellectual uncertainty which unfolds when familiar system of



understanding can no longer illustrate stable meaning. As the inquiry continues, Walser's confidence in reason deteriorates gradually, leading to a deep crisis of subjectivity.

The study further argues that the grotesque bodies present in the novel function as representation of Freud's return of the repressed. Fevvers' hybrid body represents desires and anxieties that cultural systems attempt to suppress but return in other forms. Walser's transformation can be interpreted as a return of repressed of the self that had previously been concealed under the mask of rational masculinity.

Lacanian theory of mirror stage provides an additional framework in which the novel's unstable identities can be understood. Fevvers operates as an Imaginary image exposing the constructed nature of identity. Her strategy of dissimulation within simulation challenges the possibility of an authentic self-concealed beneath appearances. Simultaneously, Walser's degradation from a fact-seeking journalist to a circus clown, Human Chicken, and amnesia wanderer reveals the collapse of the coherent self-image linked with Lacan's Ideal-I. Finally, Kristeva's concept of abjection is analyzed through grotesque bodies, bodily excess, waste, fluidity, and liminality in the novel.

This research demonstrates that *Nights at the Circus* uses grotesque and uncanny representations to challenge fixed ideas of identity, gender, through psychoanalytic perspectives.

Introduction

Set at the turn of the twentieth century, *Nights at the Circus* follows the story of Sophie Fevvers, a celebrated circus aerialist and winged performer who claims to have been hatched, and Jack Walser, an American journalist who is obsessed with her ambiguous identity and joins the circus as a clown performer to investigate her true identity. Embarking on an extraordinary journey across Europe and Siberia, Walser is focused to reach whether her story is true or not. As his investigation progresses, both he and readers are confronted with experiences that resist clear explanation and categorization.

Throughout the novel, Carter presents characters who represent ambiguous positions and challenge established boundaries. Fevvers is positioned in a liminal space, a woman and a winged creature, fact and fiction. Moreover, many of the novel's circus performers, freaks, and animals blur the boundaries that conventionally define fixed identity. At the same time, Walser's commitment to rationality is challenged as he becomes drawn into a world shaped by carnivalesque, uncertainty, spectacle, and transformation. His later loss of certainty in the story raises essential questions regarding the nature of perception and identity.

These concerns are majorly explored through Freud's theories of the uncanny, intellectual uncertainty and the return of the repressed, Lacan's theories of the mirror stage and the gaze that provide a framework for understanding identity formation and Kristeva's concept of abjection, explaining the novel's focus on grotesque bodies, bodily excess, liminal figures and spaces that disrupt established binary of the self and the other.

Problem Statement

This study investigates how Angela Carter illustrates identity, femininity, and subjectivity in *Nights at the Circus* through psychoanalytic notions as the uncanny, the grotesque body, the gaze, and abjection. It also examines how such elements challenge stable and binary categories of selfhood and reveal the psychological uncertainties which mainly shape the identity of Fevvers, Walser, and then other characters.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to Carter's literary works by providing a psychoanalytic reading of *Nights at the Circus* by bringing together the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, offering a detailed understanding of the psychological processes underlying Carter's representations of subjectivity, embodiment, and transformation.

Hypothesis

How does Angela Carter represent identity, femininity, and subjectivity through the uncanny, the grotesque body, the gaze, and abjection in *Nights at the Circus*?

1.The Uncanny, and the Return of the Repressed

In *The Uncanny* or *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Sigmund Freud explores the disturbing feelings raised when something familiar suddenly becomes strange or out of place. He argues that "The uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud, 2003, p. 128). In this sense, moments of beyond nature, repetition, dreams, or supernatural events could create such effect because they re-emerge hidden and deep fears, forgotten memories that people once held but rejected later in their lives. For Freud, the uncanny is not about experiencing unfamiliar objects or events, but it is about confronting something deeply known to us which comes back in an unexpected form. So, rather than originating from what is wholly alien alone, uncanny arises when something that appears known suddenly acquires an unfamiliar or disquieting quality.

"Is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter, 1984, p. 7), the heroine of the novel, Fevvers embodies this paradox throughout *Nights at the Circus*. On one hand, she is recognizably human and normal looking. She speaks, desires, performs, and participates in social interactions and relations in



ways that positions her as a woman living within the human world. However, this familiarity is complicated by her non-human and mythical wings and her insistence as a naturally winged being: "Now, wings without arms is one impossible thing; but wings with arms is the impossible made doubly unlikely." (p. 14). Neither Walser nor any reader is provided with definitive evidences regarding the authenticity of her physical difference. As a result, she occupies an ambiguous position that fails to be put in any clear categorization.

In *The Uncanny*, Freud suggests that the uncanny often rises when established system of knowledge fails to account for what confronts us (p. 133). Fevvers exceeds the explanatory frameworks available to those around her. In the very opening of the novel, Fevvers bypasses the human nature, because she is not born like normal beings, rather, she is hatched out: "I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched ... a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!" (Carter, 1984, p. 7). Hence, Fevvers remains blurred between the human and the nonhuman, destabilizing assumptions about the coherence and limits of human identity.

Peng (2004) claims that Fevvers is not placed within uncanny spaces but acts as an uncanny space in her own right because her body becomes a site which oppositions lose their clarity. Human and nonhuman, natural and supernatural, reality and myth all intersect within her figure (p. 104). In this matter, Fevvers can be described as a liminal subject whose existence exposes the fragility of boundaries of categories. Carter's representation of Fevvers extends beyond Freud's idea of the uncanny beyond isolated moments of psychological disturbance and into a wider investigation of identity itself. What Fevvers unsettles is not the difference between the familiar and the unfamiliar, but the conceptual frameworks through which these distinctions are maintained.

Although Fevvers seems human, Angela Carter repeatedly describes her through images associated with objects and animals. Walser firstly perceives her voice as the sound of "dustbin lids" then as the "clanging of contralto or even baritone dustbins" (Carter, 1984, p. 13). Similarly, her body is compared to a "dray mare," while her face is portrayed as "broad and oval as a meat dish" (12). Such type of descriptions denies the readers a stable perception of her as a coherent human. Instead, she is appeared to be suspended between human, animal, and an object.

This ambiguity reflects Freud's discussion of the uncanny as a blurification of the boundary between the inanimate and the animate. One of the most important sources of uncanny, Ernst Jentsch (1997) suggests,



is that it happens when lifeless objects appear alive: "Doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate" (p. 12). Fevvers represents this tension, because in spite of her intelligence and charismatic, she is represented through illustrations of objects that are being functional. As a result, the reader deals with a figure who is both alive and objectified at the same time. The familiar human body is transformed into something difficult to classify, producing the uncertainty that Freud identifies as central to the uncanny experience.

A further representation of the uncanny in *Nights at the Circus* emerges through Carter's continuous destabilization of the boundary between humans and animals. While Freud's conception of the uncanny is mostly associated with the uncertainty surrounding the animate and inanimate, it is also be applied to moments in which familiar classification begins to blur. In the novel, the very difference between human and animal becomes extremely difficult to maintain. As a result, the category of the human is rendered. In the circus, animals are represented as having forms of communication more intelligent than humans.

From a Freudian standpoint, this ambiguity produces an uncanny effect because it changes what seems to be familiar into something unfamiliar. Human identity is normally expected to be different from animals, however, Carter blurs this certainty. In an occasion where the chimpanzee "stared directly into Walser's eyes, producing afresh in Walser that dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (Carter, 1984, p. 110), captures this experience. The uncanny does not arise because the animal is different, it emerges because the animal appears unsettlingly familiar.

Ultimately, animals in *Nights at the Circus* act more like Fevvers herself. They both disrupt established systems of classification by occupying positions between familiar, or unfamiliar, normal or abnormal. The result is a distinctly uncanny uncertainty in which familiar definitions of the human can no longer be taken for granted. By that, Carter reveals the instability of the concept of humanity. What becomes uncanny is not the animal but the realization that the human may never have been as clearly distinguishable from the animal as traditionally claimed.

Throughout *the novel*, Walser undertakes himself as an investigator who is determined to learn about the truth behind Fevvers' extraordinary identity. As a journalist who is committed to rationality, he approaches her with uncertainty. Walser is convinced that her wings and strange life story has to conceal a logical explanation. Here, Walser's investigative viewpoint acts as a psychological analyst who has the task to discover the



truth behind the appearances. However, his search for certainty leads not to revelation but to a spiral wave of confusion. Unable to confirm whether Fevvers is real or myth, human or something far beyond the human, he experiences what Freud's uncanny perspective describes as "*intellectual uncertainty*", which is "something one does not know one's way about in" (Freud, 2003, p. 221). As the boundaries between reality and illusion become extremely translucent, his rational confidence gives way to psychological confusion, representing how the uncanny appears when the desire for definitive knowledge faces non-resolved ambiguity.

Fevvers sustains intellectual uncertainty as a means of objectification resistance. Instead of presenting a fixed identity, she turns herself into a means of ambiguity. As Peng (2004) argues, she "manages to escape" the objectification of her "through a parodic strategy of dissimulation within simulation." (p. 117). This strategy misleads Walser's investigative gaze who seeks to uncover the truth behind her supernatural identity. The notion of intellectual uncertainty is uncovered more in the novel due to the contrast between Fevvers and Walser. While "Miss Fevvers is asking us to suspend disbelief" (Carter, 1984, p. 15), Walser is described as being in the "habit of suspending belief" (p. 10). This contrast between these two characters creates a fundamental tension between imagination and rationale that structures their relationship throughout the novel. Fevvers embraces ambiguity openly by inviting her audience to be in a space where truth and fantasy are intermixed. While Walser by contrast, approaches her as an investigator determined to discover what lies beneath the performance. Ozge Oz (2022) states that the more Walser attempts to rationalize Fevvers identity, the more mysterious she becomes (p. 52). For that matter, he encounters the type of confused interpretation that is associated with Freud's uncanny, a state that familiar systems of knowledge fail to provide reliable clarification and meaning.

Zizek's (1991) concept of "the uncanny nature of knowledge itself" (p. 143) helps explain the intellectual uncertainty experienced by Walser in *Nights at the Circus*. Walser's own transformation in the later parts of the novel is an absolute evidence of the existence of this concept. He himself becomes a circus performer who becomes a Human Chicken whose role consists of a repetitive call of a "cock-a-doodle-a-dooski" (Carter, 1984, p. 152). Walser once was a journalist who sought to decode Fevver's mysterious category has now lost his characteristics of epistemological authority that distinguished him from the circus performers he observed. Paolo Bartoloni (2011, p. 143) argues, "one of the characteristics typical of the thing is that it does not have language that is capable of symbolic and imaginative production". Walser's rooster-like speech both during his



circus performance and later during his amnesia signals his movement away from the category of rationalism towards a state that resists actual meaning. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, this transformation is the culmination of his uncanny encounter with Fevvers, the heroine of the novel.

O'Brien (2006, para 6) argues that the entire nature of Fevvers is an illusion, and that no one can ever definitively answer the question whether she is fact or fiction. This is because the novel operates in a way that draws readers into recognizing their own complicity in Walser's quest to discover the truth about her. The very opening of the novel is focalized through the objective journalist Walser, and Fevvers' narration of her life. The effect here creates doubt about the authenticity of Fevvers, framed as it is by Walser's skepticism and the event which Father Time stands still with Big Ben chiming midnight three times throughout the duration of the interview. Reference points of rationalism are dismantled here and narratives of rational and irrational slip away.

The grotesque in *Nights at the Circus* can be effectively understood through Freud's concept of the return of the repressed, in which it argues that ideas, desires, and impulses excluded from conscious awareness are not entirely wiped out but remain active within human unconscious seeking expression. As he himself explains "the repressed material strives to return" (Freud, 1966, p. 342). What has been deeply suppressed re-emerges in alternative distorted forms disrupting formed systems of identity (Soderberg et al, 2023). Carter's novel repeatedly raises such returns through grotesque bodies, hybrids, freaks, fragmented body parts, excessive performances, and figures that resist existing classifications. By blurring boundaries between human and animal, masculine and feminine, and reality and myth, the novel uncovers anxieties which dominates cultural discourses attempt to suppress.

Fevvers' body is the most prominent examples of the presence of female grotesque in *Nights at the Circus*. Her extraordinary wings, her enormous size and physical presence shatters conventional ideas of normal body and resists categorization. Russo (1994) defines grotesque body as an "open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. [it] is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek" (p. 62). Neither fully human nor entirely animal, Fevvers' body occupies a liminal position. Oliver (2010) asserts that she is "clearly grotesque, combining human and animal discourses, representing the body in its extremity and physicality rather than in its elevated or ideal state" (p. 239). Through Freud's concept of the return of the repressed, Fevvers' grotesque body can be described as



re-emergence of desires and forms of femininity that patriarchal milieu attempts to suppress. Her non-human non-animal physicality rejects the traditional ideal of the normal and controlled female body, bringing to the surface aspects of female power and sexuality.

Oliver (2010) claims that Fevvers' wings and status are used by Carter as "grotesquely hyperfeminine trait" (239). By presenting her as equivocally human and animal, and masculine and feminine all at the same time, Angela Carter intermingles the standard binaries that separate the hegemonic class from the marginalized one to degrade the usual recognition given to the first one to raise the factor of the returned of the repressed. Through Fevvers, the grotesque female body becomes the position where what has been excluded returns in distorted form. Bakhtin (1984, p. 9) argues that the grotesque body is not separated from the world it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits, a formula that represents the fact that Fevvers' body resists closure and stable classification.

Fevver's hybridity whether she is human or beast, whether she is real or not, can be understood through the concept of the return of the repressed. Rather than disappearing, what culture tries to suppress continue to emerge beneath the surface of psyche and re-emerges eventually in different versions. Freud (1966) argues that the repressed material persists in the unconscious and strives for expression, it is "pushed back, therefore, into the system *Ucs.*" (p. 386). Fevvers' body gives form to those elements that rationality seeks to control. The repeated question in the novel "is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter, 1984, p. 7) reflect this failure of repression since Fevers resists categorization of whether she is human and animal, or subject and object.

Walser's transformation in *Nights at the Circus* is perhaps one of the most powerful illustrations of how grotesque operates through a mechanism that upholds the notion of Freud's the return of the repressed. At the beginning of the novel, Walser enters the world of Fevvers as a representation of reason, objectivity and common knowledge. However, the carnivalesque environment and the blurred environment of what is real and what is not in the circus dismantles Walser's rational position. For instance, in the second part of the novel "Petersburg", when Walser decides to join the circus to uncover the truth about Fevvers, he ends up accepting a job in the Clown Alley to perform as one of Colonel Kearney's clowns. This comic picture of Walser, as Sona Snirkova (2012) points out "completes the process of his uncrowning since the one who at the beginning enters the circus as the king of reason disguised by a clown's mask is now turned into the foolish, comic clown" (p. 57). In

psychoanalytic terms, this uncrowning enables the return of those dimensions of experience in which rational consciousness has sought to repress. Through Walser's performance as a clown, his dependence on logic and reason is exposed as another form of limitation, his irrational unconscious aspects unfolded to challenge his supremacy of reason.

Another occasion of *Nights at the Circus* suggests the reading of Walser's memory as something that would return in a non-rational fragmentation rather than complete, and his insanity as a displaced form of reasoning. After the Siberian train derailment in part two "Petersburg", Walser's amnesia is lost, but not erased. His rational identity does not collapse into insanity, but it is repressed and becomes inaccessible to his ego and comes back only in fragmented forms. These shattered memories resurface as incoherent images resist immediate interpretations. Freud in *The Ego and the Id* (1961) elaborates that "all that is repressed is Ucs, but not all that is Ucs is repressed" (p. 18). In this order, Walser's blankness is not considered the absence of his consciousness, but a transitional state in which repressed memories begin to resurface without external meditation.

Ultimately, Walser's transformation throughout the novel reflects the return of the repressed. In the beginning, he approaches Fevvers as a reasonable journalist who is determined to discover the truth behind her appearance and performance. Later, his amnesia and Siberian transformation dismantle this position of certitude and the openness to transformation that his earlier rational identity had suppressed return within his own experience. Through Walser and Fevvers, Angela Carter points to the idea that what is attempted to repress cannot be completely eradicated, they will be resurfaced eventually challenging a stable self.

The idea that the protagonists in *Nights at the Circus* are associated with the notion of repressed is not surprising at all. With Fevvers' irrationality, bodily excess, fluid identity, and resistance to fix her human-animal boundaries throughout the novel, the repressed concepts leap to the readers rather than suggesting themselves through its narrative structure. In fact, the entire idea of Fevvers "facilitates a celebratory reading of the amorphous, leaking and engulfing body as a means by which the boundaries of the body are rendered permeable and slippery. This permeability amounts to a destabilization of normative subject/object ideology." (O'Brien, 2006, para. 27). However, if studied through Bakhtinian carnivalesque and grotesque notion as a form of destabilization, Fevvers' reality still recenters as human and feminine subjectivity. this concept suggests that what is repressed in dominant categorizations does not disappear, but returns in alerted forms within



representation. Recalling Bakhtin's formula, O'Brien suggests that an open body "is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects." (para. 28). Reading through the concept of repression, these moments do not indicate liberation from structure, but they illustrate how what is culturally suppressed, return through performance and bodily excess.

2.Mirror Stage and The Gaze

Jacques Lacan coins the Ideal-I or *Ideal-Ich*, in which it is an idealized illustration of wholeness which compensates for the subject's lived experience of one's fragmentation and dependency. He explains that the mirror stage "symbolizes the I's mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination." (Lacan, 2006, p. 76). Therefore, the establishment of the ego is founded upon misrecognition, because the unity connected to the self develops from an external image rather than an internal one. Although the notion of "Ideal-I" provides a perception of self-control and stability, it remains inherently unstable because it hides the subject's underlying fragmentation. This concept is relevant to Walser in *Nights at the Circus*, whose first identity is known by confidence, rationality and journalistic objectiveness. His encounter with Fevvers gradually destabilizes the categories in which he views reality, thus, his coherent self-image and unstable identity starts to unravel.

As a journalist, Walser's position at the beginning of the narrative is an epistemic stability. He views the world through categorization, rationality and objectivity. This orientation represents the existence of a coherent and self-controlling reality within him. However, upon meeting Fevvers and her grotesque world, Walser's commitment to rationality is disrupted "Walser is here, ostensibly, to 'puff' her; and, if it is humanly possible, to explode her, either as well as, or instead of. Though do not think the revelation she is a hoax will finish her on the halls; far from it. If she isn't suspect, where's the controversy? What's the news?" (Carter, 1984, p. 4). Her ambiguity and strangeness reflected in the question whether she is fact or she is fiction. From a Lacanian point of view, she operates as an imaginary illustration in which desires and fantasies are projected, just like the specular image that builds the subject's identity in the mirror stage. In this matter, Walser has not only invested in Fevvers herself, but in the image of coherence that he searches to uncover through her identity. Yet, because Fevvers' image is fundamentally blurred and elusive, any attempt to establish her "truth" makes more instability and uncertainty. As a result, Fevvers unravels the instability of the Ideal-I

uncovering how identity is contained through acts of misrecognition and confusion rather than authentic rationality.

This dynamic is further reinforced by Peng (2022, p. 117) who argues that the gaze in Carter's novel does not operate as a single-direction mechanism of domination but as a complex exchange in which female identity participates in directly. Fevvers' winged body works as a site in which multiple interpretations of monstrous, grotesque and fantasy are projected. As a circus performer, Fevvers deliberately transforms herself into a living spectacle while controlling the terms of how she is viewed. She exploits the uncertainty of her identity and occupies an active position within the gaze by sustaining the question whether she is real or not and preventing her spectators from reaching a definitive answer. In this regard, her performance represents the Lacanian logic of misrecognition mentioned before. If Walser wants to reach a coherent truth behind the image Fevvers presents, she continually frustrates that attempt through what Peng describes as "dissimulation within simulation" by treating identity as a type of "confidence trick" (Peng, 2022, p. 117), she exposes the blurred image of fixed identities and turns the gaze back upon those who attempt to define her. Her statement "To think I really fooled you! ... It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence." (Carter, 1984, p. 181) signals more than a victory over Walser, it uncovers her ability to disrupt the gaze which tries to stabilize and clarify her ambiguity.

This conflict has an essential implication for gender and subjectivity. As Patricia Waugh (1984) argues, of the key points of combining feminism and postmodernism is their critique of enlightenment in a rational viewpoint, particularly the assumption that the universal rational issue is masculine, while femininity is associated with "mysterious, irrational and unrepresented otherness" (Waugh, 1984, p. 351). *Nights at the Circus* dramatizes this opposite sides through the relationship between Walser and Fevvers. First, Walser embodies the masculine rationality values approaching Fevvers as an object of exploration and investigation whose mystery can be studied through reason and rationality. Fevvers on the other side, occupies the position of feminine other who resists definitive and rational interpretation. Walser's continuous failure to analyze and understand Fevvers exposes the limitation of rationality, while Fevvers' ambiguity becomes a source of agency.

From Lacanian viewpoint, Walser's series of degradations could be analyzed as a continuous collapse of coherent self image in which he initially holds for himself. First, he occupies a rational and objective position. This identity represents Lacan's Ideal-I, the image of a control



in which Walser is identified in the mirror stage. However, after he encounters Fevvers, he is transformed from a “stern rationalizer” (Cavallaro, 2002, p. 55), to a foolish clown, then to a Human Chicken, and lastly, to a brainless apprentice of a shaman in Siberia. Carter uses this degradation of Walser both as a challenge to masculine rationality and a revelation of the alien nature of subjective identity. She intends to implicate that if the Ideal-I promises coherence and wholeness, Walser’s transformation shows how fragile that promise is.

Looked at her with the avidity of a man who believes that, if he looks hard enough, he will see the truth of her (Carter, 1984, p. 9), Walser expects to find the truth within Fevvers, instead, he encounters a void that begins to threaten the security of his identity. In Lacanian terms, this can be analyzed through the figure of the abyss that haunts the illusions of unity, as he refers “This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety” (Lacan, 1953, p. 15). From this standpoint, Walser’s gaze no longer acts as a rational trial to access truth, but becomes an exposure to the fragility of his self. The novel stages this crisis of subjectivity in many occasions through imagery of bodily excess and instability including open mouths, leakage and imagery of genitalia all of which break the boundaries of coherent identity.

Jacques Lacan was interested in the study of the gaze and its eminent role in the formation of human identity. His theory of psychosexuality draws attention to the notion of the gaze. Lacan elaborates that a psychological model for the human being’s access to social order provides an imaginary interpretation of the self. He divides psychosexual formation into Imaginary and the Symbolic Order. Our identification with the image in the mirror is a part of any of us, whilst the child misidentifies it as representation of its identity. Bertens (2008) argues that “misrecognition is the basis for what we see as our identity. Our subjectivity is constructed in interaction with others. We become subjects under the gaze of the other” (p. 126). Even though the image reflecting within the mirror would not totally represent the infant’s identity, he still calls for this image for its sense of the self. Upon that, the necessity of the gaze appears for the sense of self identity Even if it is only an illusion. Janne Seppanen (2006) claims “In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at ... I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me in the visible is the gaze



that is outside.” (p. 76). Hence, the gaze has an aspect necessary for understanding oneself.

The gaze is not merely a way of seeing but a means of control and power. “*Nights at the Circus* is unique in its depiction of relationships between women as spectacle, and women as producers of spectacle” (Gamble, 2001, p. 149). Fevvers is the embodiment of a human-animal dimension due to her bird-like body and wings. Mary Russo (2000) writes “A woman with wings, she is no ordinary angel ... but rather an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque” (p. 137). Every aspect about Fevvers is connected to her visual qualities and she is regarded as an objectifying visual material to spectators, mainly Walser.

The gaze is essential for Fevvers’ search of identity as well. Lacan pins out the importance of the gaze on human psyche and the search of identity even if it is an illusion. He illustrates that the sense of identity of an infant is blurred ahead of the gaze, however, in the mirror stage, an infant identifies himself. Fevvers uses the gaze to create her imaginary self-identity. As a circus performer, she requires the gaze of her spectators. Even when she does not perform, she depends on the gaze of others to settle her identity.

Furthermore, following the incident of the train derailment, Fevver’s inability to perform due to her broken wing assures the novel’s concern with the gaze as the search for identity. Lizzie’s warning “You’re fading away, as if it was only always nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim. You’re hardly even a blonde any more” (Carter, 1984, p. 332) elaborates that Fevvers’ completeness as a subject is sustained through the gaze by others. Her identity here is not self-contained, but dependent on being seen by others. Without this external validation, she risks her identity to be dissolved and faded. According to Lacan, this dependency on the gaze underlines that identity is never autonomous, but is produced from external recognition. Thus, the loss of the gaze exposes the fragility of the subject’s coherence and reactivates the anxiety of incompleteness already central to Walser’s own crisis of perception. Through this scope, it is recognized that Walser’s gaze and other spectator’s gaze are essential for Fevvers’ search for coherent identity and self-perception. With reference to the end part of *Nights at the Circus*, Sceats (2007, p. 93) states:

[Fevvers] is restored and, as she had imagined, the admiration in Walser’s gaze is what makes her feel whole... it causes her to expand physically, so that she seems about to burst the roof of the hut. All the elements of



her identity are here: Performance, singularity, the relation to a beloved and triumphant material.

Without Walser's gaze, Fevvers loses the sense of her identity and her selfhood becomes uncomplete in its absence. When she is gazed at by others, she spawns confidence and sense of wholeness. This suggests that the gaze plays a crucial role in sustaining her identity. Walser is regarded a mirror for her because once this reflective structure is withdrawn, her identity begins to feel faded and fragmented revealing how dependent it is on external gaze and recognition.

In describing Fevvers, Patricia Waugh (1995) comments that she is a "grotesque and beyond the bounds of possibility, a character who is forever staring at reflections in mirrors or reflecting back the gaze of others in the bottomless abyss of eyes that open up universes." (p. 194). This recurring image of the gaze is approached by Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. In accordance to Lacan, the subject initially needs a sense of self through an external image which appears unified and complete, although this image is a misrecognition of the fragmented nature of the self. Identity would never be completely generated, however, it emerges through facing the image outside of oneself.

Lorna Sage (2001, p. 238) elaborates that the "quickness and lightness" in the narrative detail offers the readers a "performative sense of cultural history as travelling clothes." In many occasions *Nights at the Circus* perpetually imagines the details of culture and identity in the form of stories and fairytales to be told and retold, objects that can be lost and found and identities as Fevvers which "can be undressed, and newly acted out but never as figures permanently lodged inside the self" (Carter, 1984, p. 93). This understanding of identity parallels with Jaque Lacan's notion of the subject being divided rather than unified.

The crisis of identity reaches its peak articulation near the end of the novel when Fevvers begins to investigate the basis of her subjectivity "She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?'" (Carter, 1984, p. 220). This quotation draws Lacan's argument that the self is constituted through the gaze of the "Other" and stays dependent upon external recognition. Fevvers uncertainty about her own identity is negotiated through desire and misrecognition.

3. Abjection and Grotesque Female Body



Carter's *Nights at the Circus* can be read through a Kristevan lens due to its obsessive interest about liminal bodies, waste, fluids, and unstable border between self and other, human and non-human, subject and object. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva investigates the notion of abjection. The term "abjection" stands for "the state of being cast off" and according to her, it is a feeling of humiliation, filth and disgust, the things we want to reject for being subjects (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1) which operates in the ambiguous space between "subject and object" and drags the subject towards a place where meaning shatters (p. 2). As Kristevan viewpoint is concerned, the abject is not merely an object of disgust, but a dynamic process in which confronting external abjection "unleashes the abject inside" (Bakhtvar et al., 2020, p. 6). This process is crucial for subjectivity in relation to the maternal body and the semiotic chora that "nourishes maternal space" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 6) and is associated with presymbolic motility. Later feminist works of abjection focused on the abjection as an in-between state of subjectivity in which the "distinction between subject and object is blurred," this blur is "necessary for the subject to complete the subjectification process" (Toprak Sakiz, 2024, p. 50). Female protagonists who live in an utter "sense of abjection" often experience both fragmentation and empowerment as they search for an "alternative way of coping with their subjugation" (p. 49) through an existence outside of social norms and expectations.

General studies on *Nights at the Circus* focus on the carnivalesque, grotesque and posthuman feminism, all of these resonate with Kristeva's notion to bodily borders and semiotic excess. O'Brien emphasizes that Fevvers and the carnival environment evoke "Rabelaisian carnivalesque" challenging "spatial, temporal, and linguistic fixities" and stages subjectivity for Fevvers and Walser, challenging "restrictive ideologies of demarcation and hierarchy" through an excess of somatic performance (O'Brien, 2006, para. 1). She positions the novel's grotesque in Bakhtin's sense of the unfinished body not classified by "defined boundaries" blended with animals and things that makes Fevvers somatic excess a destabilizing force for "hegemonic discourses" of rationalism, objectification, and sexual commodification (Oz, 2022, p. 44). This grotesque incomplete is close to Kristeva's abject body in which the binary of inside and outside is disrupted and the subject is forced to navigate its own limits.

Fevvers' body can be regarded as a site where human, animal and non-animate intersect. It is a perfect representation of a grotesque body. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois



individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world” (p. 62-63). Ozge Oz points out that Fevvers is “masculine, feminine, human, animal, and inanimate,” and her performances are an object reveal “posthuman possibilities for subjectivity.” Although the novel finally “dismisses such possibilities for a “corporeal feminism”” that remains tied to a human, feminine subject (Oz, 2022, p. 42). In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers’s grotesque hybrid body is in a state between human and nonhuman undermines humanist norms and “blurs the boundaries of what it means to be a woman,” and monstrous female body of Fevvers dramatizes Kristeva’s “most sickening of wastes”. (Dinc, 2025, p. 41). Fevvers is a “marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged” (Carter, 1984, p. 95). This example of her grotesque female body is deeply consonant with Kristevan abjection.

The circus itself is a heterotopic, carnivalesque milieu where grotesque female is unfolded in defiance of norma. Khabibullina (2020) depends on Foucault’s cultural studies, describes the environment of the circus in the novel as an expanding carnivalesque space that enables “realization of the feminine nature through unfolding female corporeality in space”, this marks the female body as deflection from the norm (p. 224). Male clowns such as Buffo are linked to the world of grotesque and mortality suggesting that abject imagery flows through the circus as threat and possibility both at one. Rifaat (2018) theorizes feminine carnivalesque resistance in *Nights at the Circus* through Michael Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia illustrating how Carter’s female characters use carnival bodies and voices to destabilize patriarchal authority and dominant discourse (p. 522). Taking together, these studies position the novel as a text in which abject and grotesque freak bodies are central to feminist resistance.

In part one of the novel, namely the museum of Madame Schreck, the women freaks are treated as “living corpses,” (Carter, 1984, p. 47). Madame Schreck “kept a collection of women who were not quite dead and not quite alive, who were displayed in little niches like curiosities.”, and the place was like “a museum of monstrous women, each one preserved in her own little alcove” (p. 48). Through Kristevan viewpoint, these freak women and Fevvers herself can be read as abject figures who neither belong to symbolic order of Victorian feminine norm, nor lie outside of it. They simply occupy the twilight zone where a subject and an object blur. They are displayed as objects for spectators to see, yet they insist on their subjectivity through performance and narrative. A best



example for this in the novel lies with describing Fevvers as a “marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged” (Carter, 1984, p. 95). In contemporary feminist re-appropriations, Kristevan abjection is studied as a representation of “abject, yet empowered female bodies” (Mandolini, 2023, p. 2), especially in narrative and visual mass-media entities. They warn the representation of feminine grotesque as an enforcement of hetero-patriarchal erasure, describing “theoretical violence of abject criticism” when abjection is used uncritically (p. 4). Against this idea, *Nights at the Circus* can be viewed as negotiating this tension, it indulges in grotesque, abject femininity, wings, fluids, and deathly imagery and reclaims these abject marks as sources of pleasure, and agency.

Food, excrement and appetite are abject motifs that are highlighted in many places in *Nights at the Circus*. Abdullah (2017) claims that the novel uses “food consumption and excrement” as both a grotesque means of feminine identity freedom and a challenge to patriarchal power and hierarchy. She turns the “act of eating into boisterous spectacle” and wields a bottle of champagne in a “disturbingly masculine manner” breaking the limit between masculinity and femininity to gain agency (p. 116). Denis in *The Spectacle of Her Gluttony* (2008) analyzes Fevvers as a Bakhtinian grotesque who refuses feminine self-imposed hunger to defy patriarchal injunctions and passivism claiming power through embracing appetite (p. 122). She further claims that “women’s eating has been the focus of social and cultural attention to a far greater degree than masculine eating habits, and the female appetite ... it has long functioned as a crucial signifier of adherence to a traditional ideology of femininity that contributes to women’s voluntary self-attenuation” (p. 120). Ingestion and appetite and excretion are abject domains in which Kristeva claims, are boundary processes which what was inside becomes outside provoking both fascination and revulsion.

It is fascinating to study eating habits of Fevvers. Indeed, the narrator asserts of Fevvers that “She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife” (Carter, 1993, p. 22). She essentially turns the very act of eating into boisterous spectacle, defying any expectation of so called ‘lady-like’ behaviour and not only resisting but breaking out of any sense of patriarchal containment concerning her eating habits.

Carter writes that Fevvers “stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife (1984, p. 22). Rather than conforming



to known expectations of feminine restraint of eating manners, she openly indulges her bodily appetites and exhibits them without any shame. That way of consumption habit foregrounds her body as a side of appetite and materiality to challenge patriarchal ideals that links femininity with self-sustain and containment. By denying to regulate her eating according to social expectations, she passes the symbolic social boundaries that shape acceptable women behavior. This disruption is applicable through Kristeva's theory of abjection that identifies the nature of that which unsettles the establishment of social categories and norms:

It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite ... It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4)

Fever's consuming habit is an example of disturbing this "identity, system, order", because her eating manner refuses the traditionally imposed boundaries on female body. Further, food is a significant topic within Kristeva's discussion of abjection because it is connected to the process of ingestion and excretion. By focusing on excessive eating and body's uncontrolled appetites, Fevvers draws attention to the boundary differentiating between food from bodily waste. Her habit evokes the abject not because it is not clean, but because it unfolds the bodily processes that social boundaries try to conceal.

Bodily fluids play an essential role within Kristevan framework because they are originated and produced from the body but are expelled from it, unsettling the borders upon which identity is positioned. In *Nights at the Circus*, this dynamic becomes important within the panopticon, between the guards and inmates:

Contact was effected, first, by illicit touch and glance, and then by illicit notes, or, if either guard or inmate turned out to be illiterate, by drawings made in and on all manner of substances, on rags of clothing if paper was not available, in blood, both menstrual and venous, even in excrement, for none of the juices of the bodies that had been so long denied were alien to them, in their extremity. (Carter, 1984, p. 217).

Using blood and excrement as a way of communication between inmates and guards foregrounds substances that are rejected as abject materials. However, rather than functioning as dirty or contaminated materials, these fluids became tools of communication, resistance and solidarity between women in that panopticon prison.

Kristeva argues that the abject rises from anything threatens established systems of order by breaking accepted norms. Menstrual blood and

excrement are regarded as examples because they blur the difference between what belongs to body and what should be expelled from it. The panopticon prison is regarded as a place to impose separation, imprisonment, discipline and control, but women transform abject materials into tools of communication that transgresses the surveillance system.

Dennis (2008) notes that "The grotesque is marked by bodily renewal, ingestion, excretion, reproduction, and openness of the orifices, linked to the physical feminine. The classical body is its opposite; closed, flawless, and static, with inner processes not revealed" (p. 124). Though Dennis focuses on the grotesque, this emphasis on excretion and bodily fluids also resonate with Kristeva's notion of abjection, which positions cultural anxiety in those bodily materials that illustrates symbolic and physical boundary. Women's use of blood and excrement hence claims what social and cultural norms reject and changes it into a course of a unified power.

Conclusion

This study has examined Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* through the psychoanalytic perspectives of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva. It demonstrated that the novel is concerned with the instability of subjectivity and identity. The analysis of this research unfolded that Fevvers is an uncanny figure who occupies an ambiguous and blurred position between fact and fiction, and the familiar and strange. Further, her uncertain status shatters attempt at categorization and challenges any fixed definition of identity.

The study also demonstrated how Freud's notion of intellectual uncertainty and the return of the repressed function throughout the novel. Walser's constant search to find truth gradually develop into a crisis of selfhood and perception. Further, the grotesque and hybrid bodies that fill the narrative represent elements that dominant culture seeks to suppress, but inevitably return in alternative forms.

Drawing on Lacan's concepts of mirror stage and the gaze, the research showcased that identity in *Nights at the Circus* is constructed through misrecognition, images and the gaze rather than any stable identity. Fevvers functions as an imaginary image which meanings and desires are based, while Walser's gradual degradation of identity reflects the collapse of coherent Ideal-I. Moreover, the investigative gaze pays an essential role in shaping personal identity, mainly in Fevvers' dependence on recognition from both Walser and spectators.

Finally, Kristeva's concept of abjection reflected the significance of grotesque bodies, bodily excesses, and liminal spaces to define identity



within the novel. Taken together, these psychoanalytic perspectives reveal that Carter constructs Fevvers and Walser as unstable subjects whose identities are formed through ambiguity, bodily excess, and the gaze rather than through any fixed or essential human truth.

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Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2026, Volume: 16, Issue: 8

