



FEMALE VOICE RAISED AGAINST PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM IN ANGELA CARTER'S *WISE CHILDREN*

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This study aims to show how Angela Carter refuses patriarchal roles with her unconventional female characters in *Wise Children*. She presents alternative lifestyles with courageous, strong and independent women by criticizing traditional gender roles. By making a female narrator who has no privileged status in this male oriented world, she takes readers to the world of women, the world of others, whose voice has been silenced throughout history. She wants to prevent women from feeling obliged to obey certain rules that threaten their independence because of accepting sexual stereotypes. Patriarchy which she implies is just a construction of society in which people are expected to believe in the necessity of some rules in order to be happy is questioned.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender roles, Otherness.

Angela Carter, against the traditional roles thought to be appropriate for women by society, describes her female characters in an untraditional way. In *Wise Children* main characters, Dora and Nora, dancers, show girls who neither get married nor have children all their lives, are beyond conventional borders where they are expected to be mothers and wives. Carter mentions her refusal of traditional roles of women: "I must always have sensed that something was badly wrong with the versions of reality I was offered that took certain aspects of my being as a woman for granted".¹ Completely bothered with "the versions of reality she was offered", she offers new realities in her novel with unconventional lifestyles of her characters and to serve this purpose, she introduces a female narrator, Dora, from whose point of view readers learn about the history of her family. Dora is the main character who has the power to make readers believe in anything she wants with the authority given to her by the writer, which is certainly obvious in her own words. When she is about to tell us something, she cuts her sentence and thus reminds us of her power as a narrator: "This one is a real collector's item because – No wait I'll tell you all about it in my own good time" (*WC* 13).² Dora is given the right to speak which is strongly suggested by Helen Cixous, who thinks "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the

¹ Angela Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" (1983), *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, Penguin, New York 1997, p. 38.

² Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, Vintage, London 1991.

snare of silence.”³ The silence of women is destroyed in this novel by Carter, depicting females apparently not ashamed of talking about their illegitimacy, boyfriends, incestuous affairs in their family and their job experiences as dancers. These women are definitely far away from being shy, genteel, Victorian girls that have been appraised by males for years as their female experiences are revealed in details. Not thinking their illegitimacy is a reason for them to hide from people, they make use of every opportunity to enjoy their lives as Dora, even at the age of seventy five, declares “What a joy it is to dance and sing” (*WC* 232).

By killing the existence of the Angel in the House in this novel by means of unconventional female characters, Dora and Nora, obviously active outside the house instead of taking care of a husband and children, Carter harshly declines to meet the expectations of patriarchal system from women. Without giving attention to these expectations or possible negative reactions of society criticizing her courageous, completely independent, self-sufficient females with free spirit, Carter consequently fulfills the desire of Virginia Woolf for a woman writer who is able to write as a woman. She challenges gender stereotypes as Dora and Nora are neither in the pursuit of a family happiness, nor docile, submissive ladies, especially Nora, who continuously changes her boyfriends, and sometimes cheats on them. Carter's female characters are not trying to be the representatives of ideal women in society but to find their selves that may not be associated with feminine roles considered to be appropriate for women by patriarchal culture. Simone de Beauvoir criticizes these predetermined feminine roles: “One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as ‘feminine’.”⁴ Femininity is socially, historically, culturally constructed, created by “civilisation as a whole” denying the rights of women to look for their own identities and to define their own roles in the society. When compared to men, women are seen incomplete, deficient other with no privileged status in male oriented culture.

Carter depicts the division between two distinct cultures in Britain, bourgeois culture and non-bourgeois culture: “You've got this one class in Britain which pretends to be so proper and respectable, but all the time they're completely repressed. This other culture they're trying so hard to distance themselves from – the live sex shows, the louts, the hooligans – is their culture, too. They just don't know it yet”.⁵ The pretentious class is symbolized by Hazard family including long-term incestuous relationships between Tristram and his aunt Saskia, and masculine irresponsibilities such as Peregrine's denial to acknowledge his biological children and Tristram's refusal to be a father when Tiffany becomes pregnant. Therefore, Dora shows that they are not as respectable as they are known to be. While Melchior is a respected actor in Shakespeare's plays, the Chance sisters, who symbolize the other culture neglected by bourgeois culture, are chorus girls, dancers showing their bodies to people.

Dora and her twin sister Nora, who are rejected by their biological father Melchior, are a symbol of “low culture” in which the realities of “subjected peoples” have been repressed by imperialism, whereas Melchior is a symbol of “high culture” that is dominant, imperial masculine culture.⁶ The rights of Dora and Nora as daughters of Melchior are denied by him in the same way the rights of some peoples who have different culture, not the dominant, imperial one called “high culture”, and of women whose voice has always been limited in this masculine culture are suppressed. *Wise Children* starts with Dora Chance's statement that “Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks”, which means, Celestino Deleyto claims, “I would like to suggest, ‘welcome to the space of woman’, to the other side of history, to the place in which culture is being re-written, to a space in which (patriarchal) history has no relevance”.⁷ The

³ Helen Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), The University of Chicago Press, p. 881

⁴ Quoted by Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions RLE*, Routledge, 2012, p. 9.

⁵ Scott Bradfield, “Remembering Angela Carter”, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, July 28, 2005, p. 91.

⁶ Aidan Day, *The Rational Glass*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1998, p. 204.

⁷ Celestino Deleyto, “‘We Are No Angels’: Woman Versus History in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*”, (Ed. Susana Omega), *Telling Histories: Narrativizing History, Historicizing Literature*, (p. 167), Rodopi, Amsterdam; Atlanta 1995.

realm of women is depicted in a different way by the perspective of the female narrator, Dora, who has no privileged place in this dominant, masculine culture. This opening implies that this is not a male-oriented story and it is apparent that the presence of a man is rejected in the family of the Chance sisters who are firstly brought up by their Grandma and after her death, they live together with Lady Atalanta, the first wife of Melchior and called as Wheelchair by Dora and Nora, and their goddaughter, Tiffany. At the end of the novel, Tiffany leaves with her family and Dora and Nora decide to grow up Gareth's twins. After telling Grandma's inventing their family by herself, Dora expresses the lack of fathers in their lives: "There is a persistent history of absent fathers in our family" (*WC* 35). They never long for a traditional family; when they are children, Grandma is almost everything for the twins who always support and protect each other.

Being outside the patriarchal community which has certain rules to obey, "Carter's 'wise children' of this novel know that although marriage, domesticity, and motherhood exist as desirable ideals, being a wife, homemaker, and mother often leads to negation of self."⁸ At the age of seventy five, when Nora, who remembers her miscarriage, confesses that sometimes she feels a little lonely and a child might be a solution, she is soon counselled by Dora, who says "Look on the bright side, . . . I've got you and you've got me and we've both got Wheelchair and you could call her our geriatric little girl, seeing as we bathe her, feed her, change her nappies even" (*WC* 189). In the novel, it seems that having children and marriage might be damaging as Lady Atalanta, Wheelchair, is left by Melchior for another woman and all her money is taken by her own daughters Saskia and Imogen, who do not even care for their own mother after the accident. Though Dora and Nora have many relationships with men, especially Nora, they never get married and there is a bond between the twins which cannot be broken by any man. While Dora is looking for Nora during the fire, she blames herself for forgetting her sister when she is together with the boy she loves wholeheartedly: "I ran like one possessed from group to group of thwarted party-goers, searching for my lost limb, the best part of me, whom I'd so thoughtlessly forgotten – forgotten! – in the heat of passion. . . well, that's it for passion, because without Nora, life wasn't worth living" (*WC* 104). When Nora opens her eyes, she does not see her boyfriend who cries with happiness for her but asks for her sister, Dora, who decides not to see her lover again because she cannot let any man can make her forget her beloved sister. Cixous argues a woman needs to love the other woman hidden in her in order to complete her love for herself, her body: "It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her."⁹ Nora and Dora, reflections of each other's other hidden in their selves, love each other so much that the bond between them cannot be destructed by the interference of any men.

By means of different people that are against the restrictions of society, it is suggested in the novel that traditional family is not the only option for people but an expectation of society. It is not very necessary to have a father for a complete family which is implied just as a construction of society as Dora makes it clear that they do not feel the absence of a father in their family until their Grandma points them their father in a show when they are just seven:

'That man is your father!' Her
 revelation didn't have the force it might have had for us because, at that age, we still
 weren't sure just what it was that fathers did. Since we didn't know how to put one and
 one together to make two, we didn't know we were different, either...
 So when Grandma announced so dramatically, that's your father! We
 dutifully took a look because she told us to but then the curtain glowed, the overture
 began. (*WC* 56)

It seems that a father does not mean anything to the girls, Dora and Nora, who have lived with their grandmother until then and have not felt the absence of him, which leads Nora to ask: "Grandma, [t]ell us

⁸ Anna Katsavos, "Angela Carter", (Eds. Vicki K. Janik, Del Ivan Janik), *Modern British Women Writers: An A-to-Z Guide*, (p. 67), Greenwood Press, Westport 2002.

⁹ Cixous, p. 881.

some more about fathers" (WC 57). After their Grandma's explanation of how they come into this world, they find it incredibly difficult to believe in what she says. Dora states that they are happy with the fact that their Grandma loves them and Peregrine is the best uncle in the world. However, they start to be curious about their father, Melchior, and long for his affection once they have become conscious of the existence of a father. Through these girls, Carter deconstructs the concept of traditional happy family that needs to include a mother and a father, which, she refers, is just constructed by society.

Carter clearly exposes the weak side of men by showing how women are mature when they are compared to men who cannot take the responsibility of their actions. When Tristram, the son of Melchior Hazard and My Lady Margarine, learns that Tiffany is pregnant, he says he cannot be a father:

‘I’m not ready to be a father,’ said Tristram. I can’t take the responsibility. I’m not mature enough.’
 ‘No man ever is,’ announced Wheelchair, in her grande dame voice. We all three glowered at him. He cowered. ‘Aunties,’ he said. ‘Forgive me.’ (WC 44)

The writer destroys the idea that men are heroes by raising the question that how they can be heroes when they are too immature to be a father. How can they accept themselves ready to rule the world and when they do not have the maturity to take care of their own children? The announcement of old, experience Wheelchair about the immaturity of men who consider themselves to be the center of the universe makes the reader question the right of them to define social roles. Melchior also does not accept Dora and Nora, known to be the daughters of Peregrine, whose biological daughters, Saskia and Imogen, are claimed by Melchior. Through these complicated family relations, Carter dissolves “conventional means of identity – the name and identity of the father,” which destroys “patriarchal privilege” because the existence of patriarchy cannot be mentioned “if the very patriarchs/fathers themselves are not known”.¹⁰ The existence of patriarchy is questioned by Nora, at the age of seventy five, after her father's birthday party:

“D’you know, I sometimes wonder if we haven’t been making him up all along,” she said. “If he isn’t just a collection of our hopes and dreams and wishful thinking in the afternoons. Something to set our lives by, like the old clock in the hall, which is real enough, in itself, but which we’ve got to wind up to make it go.” (WC 230)¹¹

Nora realizes that patriarchy is just “a fiction serving the interests of the masculine but which comes to be constructed by both sexes” and “the wisdom explored in *Wise Children* is the capacity to know and to see through patriarchal definitions of fatherhood”.¹² People who are wise enough can see that patriarchy just a construction of both men and women does work as long as they let it happen.

The issue of patriarchy or patriarchal capitalism whose rules are criteria for people's expectations during their lives is dealt with through the novel. Nora, who decides to bring up Gareth's twin babies with Dora, implies that the babies will have subjective opinions about their past in the future: “Think about it,” she said. “We can tell these little darlings here whatever we like about their mum and dad if Perry doesn't find them but whatever we tell them, they'll make up their own romance out of it” (WC 230). She means the babies are exposed to the information given by them who can tell whatever they want about the history of the babies' parents, but they nevertheless would have the opportunity to choose to believe in what they want. Just like these babies, women born into a world full of patriarchal rules without their consent have the chance of creating their own worlds, their version of reality no matter what they are told to believe in. “For writers like Alther and Jong, the self is seen in relation to a concept of internalizing something situated outside it, ‘the social’ and is shaped out of sex roles and sex stereotypes which distort

¹⁰ Michael Hardin, “The Other Other: Self-Definition Outside Patriarchal Institutions in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*”, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14:3, 1994, p. 78.

¹¹ Day, p. 214.

¹² Day, p. 214.

its true nature. Becoming a person involves, simply, throwing off these roles and struggling to discover the ‘inner essence’.”¹³ To become an individual, it is highly vital to go outside the socially shaped “sex roles and sex stereotypes” and ultimately explore the inner self. Being against these sex stereotypes, Dora and Nora try to find their own identities.

Carter’s demolishing patriarchal roles is obvious in the agreement the twins make for a night. The fact that Nora lends her boyfriend to Dora for a night as a birthday present subverts the roles of gender because in this case a man seems to be a toy for the pleasure of girls. Being completely different from the other men in the novel like Tristram, who cheats on Tiffany, and Melchior, Nora’s boyfriend is described as a loyal and gentle young man by Dora, who loves him so much so that she wants him from her sister: “Give me your fella for a birthday present.” “He’s really stuck on you, Nora, he’s crazy about you and he’s never given me a second look . . . he is as innocent as asparagus, his heart as pure as Epps’ cocoa, poor lamb” (*WC* 83). Normally, a woman is seen as an object of desire by men but now two sisters exploit the innocence and purity of this young man for their own sake. Furthermore, Dora feels no guilt for what they have done to the boy who is not aware of their deception:

. . . he never would have done it if he’d known I wasn’t Nora. He was the faithful type. Did we betray the innocence of the boy with our deception? Of course we did. Does it matter? Let the one without sin cast the first stone. He really thought I was the one he loved so he was not deceived. And I got the birthday present that I wanted and then I gave him back to Nora. (*WC* 86)

This example makes it completely clear that Carter does not aim to show that all men are unreliable, selfish and coward while women are angels without wings, but presents them just the way they are without exaggerating their qualities as in historical books and criticizes certain roles defined for people even before they are born. The wrong assumptions about sex roles are revealed: Men are not very strong, heroic at the centre of the universe whereas women are not angels or too weak and delicate creatures to be protected, guarded by men who, as this novel suggests, may be coward when it comes to take responsibilities. When Peregrine arrives at Melchior’s birthday party, he brings with him Tiffany, who is thought to have committed suicide because of Tristram’s rejecting to be a father for her unborn baby. However, now Tiffany looks so confident that she refuses Tristram’s proposal this time:

I’ll say this for Tristram’s reflexes, he was down on his knees in front of her in a flash, laughing and crying at the same time or doing a fair simulacrum thereof. ‘

I love you, Tiffany’ he said. ‘Forgive me.’

She stared down at him as if sunk deep in thought . . .

‘Fat chance,’ she announced at last.

Tristram was stunned. He sat back on his heels.

Tiffany, I’ll marry you!’

‘But, ‘Not on your life, you bastard,’ she said, right out in front of all those people. God, I was proud of her at that moment! (*WC* 210-211)

Dora is happy with the fact that Tiffany, completely free of her weak personality resulted from her love for Tristram, has no need for his affection and love anymore. Masculine and feminine roles are subverted as now it is not a woman but a man that desperately tries to get married by propounding that they have a baby: “‘My baby! Think of my baby!’ He tore his hair, he gnashed his teeth” (*WC* 211). However, she clearly expresses that she has no intention of raising her child with a man like Tristram: “‘You’ve not got what it takes to be a father” (*WC* 211). Tiffany rejects traditional gender roles by willingly choosing to grow up her baby on her own without its biological father who does not have enough qualities to be a father.

¹³ Waugh, p. 25.

Grandma, another woman who does not believe in the necessity of having a husband in order to look after the twins, Dora and Nora, whom she has adopted, associates the reason of war with the masculine obsession with being stronger than others:

Every twenty years, it's bound to happen. It's to do with generations. The old men get so they can't stand the competition and they kill off all the young men they can lay their hands on. They daren't be seen to do it themselves, that would give the game away, the mothers wouldn't stand for it, so all the men all over the world get together and make a deal: you kill off our boys and we'll kill off yours. So that's that. Soon done. Then the old men can sleep easy in their beds again. (WC 28-29)

Old men cannot face the reality that they are weaker than young men who can undermine their authority, so they can get rid of them via war without being suspected. By saying "the mothers wouldn't stand for it", she implies that there would not be wars if women were allowed to speak for the sake of their children. However, women have always been expected to obey rules made by these old men without being taken into consideration as individuals. To include women in the past, "...both (women) writers and historians have engaged in the project of recovering the lost female voice of the past; 'herstory' can be characterised as an attempt to "recover women submerged or unrealized past".¹⁴ "The female voice of the past" is raised by Dora, who tells 'herstory' and her family's story, to show readers the place of women in dominant male history that is symbolized by Hazard family. Though Dora and Nora are not accepted by this family until they are seventy-five, they do not let this fact deeply affect their lives, which becomes clear when they get old together as independent, happy individuals after long years of experience in show business.

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¹⁴ Susanne Gruss, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter*, Rodopi, New York 2009, p. 245.