

BREAKING THE CHAINS OF OBJECTIFICATION: THE WOMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP IN ANGELA CARTER'S *NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*

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Anthropocentrism is the thought that humans are the primary or most significant species in the cosmos. The premise behind anthropocentrism is that everything on Earth is valuable only if it supports human survival and well-being. Based on this view, anthropocentrism is considered an ideology of human exceptionalism that seeks to “maintain the centrality and priority of human existence through marginalizing and subordinating nonhuman perspectives, interests and beings” (Weitzenfeld and Joy, 2014: 4). This ideology, in which the main concern is always the interests of the human species, focuses solely on humans and shifts attention away from nonhuman beings. From this perspective, anthropocentrism, which views humans as the centre of all importance with a narcissistic privilege, “is not an innate disposition but a historical outcome of a distorted humanism in which human freedom is founded upon the unfreedom of human and animal others” (Weitzenfeld and Joy, 2014: 3). In other words, humanism is a belief system that highlights the worth and dignity of human beings and mostly attaches importance to human intellect and reason. Hence, humanism often endorses anthropocentrism, particularly when it results in the prioritisation of human interests above all else, including the well-being of other species.

In contrast to this outlook, posthumanism challenges traditional humanist perspectives by questioning the centrality and uniqueness of the

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human species. Posthumanism aims to weaken or cancel all the proud and arrogant humanistic characters of humanity. As Cary Wolfe suggests, the term “posthumanism” designates a historical moment when it becomes more and more difficult to ignore how the human being has become decentred due to its imbedding in technological, medical, informatic, and economic networks. This “historical development” indicates the need for “new theoretical paradigms, a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon” (Wolfe, 2010: xv–xvi). Hence, while humanism places humans at the very centre of the world, posthumanism radically decenters it. Humanism often reinforces anthropocentric perspectives, where humans are seen as the pinnacle of existence and their interests are prioritised above those of other beings. Posthumanism, on the other hand, challenges anthropocentrism by decentring the human and emphasising the interconnectedness of humans with other beings. It critiques human exceptionalism and explores alternative ways of conceptualising human identity and relationships.

As Rosi Braidotti argues, posthumanism is a critical response to humanism, which is limited by its emphasis on the individual, rationality, and human exceptionalism. She points out that the posthumanist viewpoint is based on the premise that humanism has historically declined; nevertheless, rather than “sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis” of humans, it attempts to develop “alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject” (Braidotti, 2013: 37). According to Braidotti, humanism’s focus on the autonomous, rational subject has been criticised for its narrowness and exclusivity. Posthumanism seeks to overcome these limitations by recognising “the agency” and subjectivity of “non-human entities” and the interconnectedness of all beings. It is a call to move beyond anthropocentrism and embrace a more inclusive understanding of existence (Braidotti, 2013: 49–50). In short, posthumanism questions traditional dualisms such as human/machine, human/nature, and human/animal, highlighting the ways in which these categories are fluid and interconnected. It explores the concept of hybridity, where boundaries between different categories are blurred or dissolved, leading to new forms of existence and identity.

In *Animal Rites* (2003), Cary Wolfe suggests that a significant part of what is referred to as “cultural studies” places itself directly—if not implicitly—on what appears to be a fundamental repression that forms the basis of the majority of political and ethical discourse: “repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking it for granted that the subject

is always already human” (Wolfe, 2003: 1). Drawing attention to animals with this work, Wolfe explores the relationship between posthumanism and animals by examining how posthumanist theory challenges traditional anthropocentric views on animals and advocates for a re-evaluation of human-animal relationships. He suggests that “the question of the animal is embedded within the larger context of posthumanist theory” (Wolfe, 2003: 6). As Wolfe emphasises, the question of posthumanism is therefore inseparable from the question of animality. That is, it situates itself within the contemporary “animal turn.” Wolfe suggests that a posthumanist perspective offers a framework for reconsidering our assumptions about animals. By questioning the distinctions between humans and animals and recognising the agency and subjectivity of nonhuman beings, posthumanism opens up new possibilities for ethical engagement and coexistence.

However, Wolfe is not the only person who has drawn attention to animals in recent years with his work. A growing number of humanities and social science scholars continue to explore questions about animals and human-animal duality. In what is referred to as “the animal turn,” as Harriet Ritvo maintains, the past several decades have seen a notable rise in intellectual interest across a variety of academic fields in nonhuman animals and their relationships to humans. In addition to broadening the scope of potential research subjects in various fields, “the animal turn has also suggested new relationships between scholars and their subjects, and new understandings of the role of animals in the past and at present” (Ritvo, 2007: 119). Thus, the study of nonhuman animals has expanded from the natural sciences into the humanities and social sciences, where it is now included in discussions of politics, culture, and ethics. In this way, the understanding of nonhuman animals has been examined with a challenging approach. Animal studies have offered a fundamentally different way of thinking about the question of humanity itself.

This is exactly what Angela Carter does in *Nights at the Circus*: the narrative focuses on animals and animality as a challenge to anthropocentrism and traditional humanist understanding. It does this on two levels. First, by reversing the roles between animals and humans, and secondly, by creating woman-animal characters and drawing parallels between animals and women. Published in 1984, the plot of *Nights at the Circus* revolves around Sophie Fevvers, a winged woman who performs as a trapeze artist in a travelling circus, and journalist Jack Walser, who investigates the mystery of Sophie Fevvers. In the novel, which is divided into three parts, the narratives take place in various settings, such as a

brothel, a museum of female monsters, a circus, a prison, and so forth. Although each of these places has an important place in the narrative, the circus is extremely important in terms of deconstructing the human-animal binary. Therefore, it would be appropriate to first talk about the circus that gives its name to the title of the novel and how the roles of animals in the circus are overturned.

Carter's choice of the circus as the location to overthrow the sharp distinction between humans and animals is so brilliant and important. It is because, in real life, the circus is a place wherein the trained animals are made to do unusual tasks for the amusement of the humans. It is where humans control animals to abuse, exploit, and objectify them. However, Carter's circus is an upside-down world where there is no hierarchy of orders and where traditional humanist understanding is disregarded. In the circus, the reader encounters many animals with human characteristics and abilities, such as a pig who points to letters on alphabet cards to spell words and use this to speak English, tigresses who are jealous of their mates from humans, and monkeys smart enough to educate themselves.

As Kenneth J. Shapiro remarks, humanism philosophy maintains that "reason and individuality are invested exclusively in human being." This view and Protagoras' old maxim, "Man is the measure of all things," confirm both the idea that reason is the only standard and the idea that humans are the sole creatures capable of embodying and upholding that standard. According to this notion, "animals simply are not individuals." Animals are used as a "categorical foil" to stand for the characteristics of individuality—namely, "the absence of reason and relative autonomy" (Shapiro, 1990). Yet, the humanist view that humans are more reasonable and civilized than animals is impressively refuted by the following scene in the novel.

In Part 2, Chapter 2, the monkeys that Monsieur Lamarck educated and retained for his circus performance are occupied working diligently in front of a blackboard at the circus ring. Even though Lamarck's wife, Mignon, is present with the apes today, she is uninterested in them. The lead monkey, the Professor, writes something on the blackboard and appears to be instructing the other apes. Walser is astounded to see the lead ape; however, as soon as the other apes become aware of him, they quickly stop. The professor gathers a collection of dunce caps and places one on each ape's head. Then, they begin "recapitulating their entire routine," performing stunts on monocycles and other circus-related apparatus. As the Professor puts a dunce cap on Walser's head, Walser feels a strange sense

of comprehension and connection as he stands within inches from the Professor's face. The Professor drags Walser to the blackboard and forces him to undress, while the Strong Man, Samson, enters the arena, where he engages in sexual activity with Lamarck's wife. While the two engage in sexual activity, the professor teaches class about anatomy through Walser (Carter, 1993: 107–10).

This juxtaposition causes Walser to question the definition of humanity. In this scene, the bestiality of animals is subverted, and it is ascribed to humans instead. While the apes learn an anatomy lesson from the lead monkey, Mignon and Samson copulate like “animals” in the background. Although the apes are treated like dumb beasts, the irony in this scene is that they are the ones who are acting civilized. Humans are dehumanised not just because they act bestial but also because they lack the most human characteristic, which is reason. The contrast between the refinement and control of the apes and the animality of humans' raises the question of what it is to be human. When the Professor instructs Walser to speak, his exclamation of “Oh, what a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How great in faculty!” (Carter, 1993: 111) reinforces this: if this is what it means to be human, then the apes are human too, having demonstrated great intelligence and faculty.

Moreover, apes are smarter than their keepers; they can take care of themselves fairly well. In another scene, when the Professor brings in an unconscious, drunk Monsieur Lamarck, their keeper, he gives the Colonel a written note stating that Lamarck is an incompetent drunk and requests that management of the act be transferred to him, the Professor, and that he be paid. So, Colonel Kearney is compelled to sign a new, more lucrative contract with the apes that was drafted by the apes, who can easily get rid of their keepers (Carter, 1993: 182-3). Another example that destroys the humanist view that prioritises the human mind is circus owner Colonel Kearney's trust in his pig to make decisions on his behalf. Kearney consults his pig on any important decision; for example, he asks her advice on whether he ought to hire Walser or make a new contract with Professor Ape. It is clear that the novel adopts a posthumanist stance and subverts the existing hierarchical orders between species. In this way, the circus transforms into a setting where established hierarchies are overturned and where pigs and apes govern while humans are outclassed in intelligence.

Anthropocentric humanism, which creates the human-animal duality and hierarchy, defines humans with “a capacity assumed to be exclusive

to humans, such as speech, reason, or consciousness itself” (Weitzenfeld and Joy, 2014: 6). In *Nights at the Circus*, the circus serves as a place where this anthropocentric view is questioned and humanist understanding is overturned. Animals are given ‘human’ traits and liberated from their usual confines. By portraying animals as more intelligent and humans as more beastly, Carter not only challenges species hierarchies but also questions traditional humanist norms. Carter’s portrayals of animals in the novel serve to examine the blurred borders between human and animal nature by reversing their roles. By this means, it challenges conventional notions of human superiority over animals.

Moreover, while the narrative focuses on animals and animality as a challenge to anthropocentric humanism, it clearly draws parallels between animals and women. Although posthumanism and feminist theory “have different genealogies and orientations to overthrowing anthropocentric norms that divide and conquer,” they occasionally overlap in “ecofeminist theory, which exposes the material, conceptual, and historical interconnections between the exploitation and degradation of women and nonhuman others” (Weitzenfeld and Joy, 2014: 14). In this context, *Nights at the Circus* is a successful example of demonstrating this interconnectedness. It tells the stories of hybrid women monsters who cross the boundaries of humanity and animality, fighting for self-definition in the face of dominating discourses that view both women and animals as exploitable objects. The novel examines the prevalent patriarchal assumptions that associate women with animals, highlighting the connections between gender and species-based objectification.

The term “objectification,” which is crucial for many second-wave feminism theorists and activists, refers to the prevalent tendency in patriarchal culture to deprive women of agency and define them solely with regard to their various roles serving males. One of the main claims of ecofeminist theory is that women’s comparatively lower social standing is justified by the idea that they are less developed and intelligent than males and that their only role in life is reproduction, which essentially dehumanises them. As a result, women are assigned a lesser moral value and seen as consumable objects, just like animals are objectified when they are reduced to serving as meat for human consumption. (Adams, 2015: 27). It is a moral evil because objectification violates the humanity of the objectified; “the object is severed from its ontological meaning” (Adams, 2015: 27). Thus, it is plausible to claim that sexism and speciesism are two forms of oppression that are linked to one another. Women are viewed as

animals in order to defend their inferior standing in society compared to men.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter investigates the possibility of a woman existing as a nonhuman other, that is, an animal-like being. The novel's main character, Sophie Fevvers, personifies the fantastic display of femininity combined with animality. Fevvers is a well-known trapeze artist, and her fame has reached the point where she is considered an international celebrity. However, Fevvers differs from other artists in an important anatomical way, in that she has enormous wings on her back. In her interview with Jack Walser, Fevvers claims that she was abandoned in her childhood at the door of a brothel managed by a lady named Ma Admiral Nelson, and that she was not actually born but hatched from an egg. When she was about seven years old, Ma Nelson had the bright idea to use Fevvers as a type of living decoration for the brothel. Fevvers played the role of Cupid in the brothel's doorway until she reached adolescence. The second place she worked was the brothel run by Madame Schreck. She served a similar function at this brothel, where she posed in a guardian angel pose next to the Sleeping Beauty. Thus, her strange hybridity and bestiality have been used to create a profitable and appealing object.

Fevvers' use as a living work of art in brothels reveals the objectification she experiences. At the two brothels, she is expressly abstracted into art that is based on observation, furthering her objectification. In these places where she works, Fevvers is reduced to nothing more than an object. In addition to Fevvers, the novel describes the misfortunes of many other monster women. The museum run by Madame Schreck is actually a brothel, where women are effectively imprisoned as slaves in a dungeon and cannot escape. The Madame Schreck Museum has different female monsters, such as Fanny Four-Eyes, a Yorkshire woman with eyes for nipples; the Sleeping Beauty, who is only awake a few minutes of the day and asleep the rest of the time; the Wiltshire Wonder, the half-human, half-fairy daughter of a fairy king; Albert/Albertina, a bipartite hermaphrodite; and Cobwebs, a melancholy girl with spiderweb-like skin. To maintain the public's perception that the women in the brothel are "prodigies of nature" (Carter, 1993: 59), Madame Schreck makes them stand in a cave-like arena while the male customers stare at them. Unlike the other girls who are forced to engage in whatever nasty sexual intercourse the clients want, Fevvers and Sleeping Beauty are special in that the men are only allowed to look at their bodies. Fevvers is used as decoration in a show held at Madame Schreck's, along with other women who have various physical anomalies.

Fevvers's wings make her unique but also cause her to be objectified and leave her open to manipulation by other people in order to control and possess her. As S. B. Magnone suggests, Fevvers fights a number of opponents in the novel who are drawn to her distinctive wings. She is surrounded by "magicians, wizards, [and] impresarios" who attempt to keep her as an object (Carter, 1993: 289). In the first part of the novel, she is bought by a wealthy occultist who views her as a "dark angel," and her death will provide him with immortality. In the second part, a Grand Duke who intends to trap her into one of his ornately jewelled eggs nearly captures her. In the last part, she loses herself in the surreal world of a native Siberian shaman and is close to becoming an apparition. The purpose of all three situations is to get control over Fevvers and preserve her crucial distinction in order to accomplish the expected outcome. Fevvers is in danger of being changed into something the three men want her to be. The occultist views her as an angel with holy blood. For the Duke, she is an amazing artefact that he can add to his egg collection. The shaman visualises her as an apparition to exert magical power over her. The meaning the men ascribe to Fevvers renders her an object in each of the three cases: a material good for the duke and a spiritual gain for the shaman and occultist (Magnone, 2016: 172).

In this sense, Fevvers stands for all the women and animals who experience this type of oppression. These instances of subjugation are intimately linked to gender and species. In order to examine the connections between the two groups, the novel focuses on specific examples of violence against women and animals. Just as animals are controlled and caged in circuses, many powerful men try to buy Fevvers and put her in a cage. At this point, animals and women, who are disadvantaged groups in traditional humanist understanding, face the threat of exploitation and objectification. The recurrent depictions of domination and exploitation against Fevvers are demonstrated to be unfair for more reasons than just the fact that she is the protagonist of the novel. Her being ill-used in the same way that animals are abused by humankind is independent of her being 'a human,' as is the case with this injustice. Instead, Fevvers has a connection with her animal relatives because of the specific way in which she is vulnerable to objectification. Fevvers's most animalistic feature, her wings, are what make her who she is. Like her bird relatives, she appreciates the freedom of flying but is vulnerable to being caged. Her battles against being captured serve as an example of the injustice of treating all species as objects.

Fevvers's account seems to highlight the ambiguous position of a woman who is obviously on the border of being both human and something other than human. However, she stands as one of the hybrid characters in the novel who is forced to violate cultural norms about what constitutes an acceptable gender, species, and human being. Fevvers and other female characters come into contact with numerous threats over the course of their peculiar lives. In a patriarchal, anthropocentric society, their hybrid condition combines femininity with animality, two extremely vulnerable states of being. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol J. Adams argues that there is a strong connection between the oppressions of animals and women (Adams, 2015: 24). Each is exposed to a variety of overlapping kinds of objectification, a force that poses a threat to transform them from being alive beings into inanimate objects (Adams, 2015: 27). The things Fevvers and other women are threatened with becoming (such as statues or other instances) are fairly concrete, proving the extent of objectification. Thus, Carter associates objectification with reification, that is, the transformation of a person into a thing.

In her approach to objectification, however, Carter does not imply that women are humans and therefore do not deserve to be objectified. Rather, she seems to propose that not conforming to traditional definitions of humans (such as women and animals) cannot justify being used as a tool of exploitation. In that sense, Carter advocates the ecofeminist understanding that “the struggle for women’s liberation is inextricably linked to abolition of all oppression” (Gruen, 1993: 82). According to the ecofeminist understanding, there should be a rebellion against control, power, and oppression in all their manifestations. Establishing links between the subjects of oppression and the mechanisms of oppression is crucial (Gruen, 1993: 84). As a reflection of this understanding, what this novel emphasises through hybrid women is the liberation of all species and genders.

The dire situation of woman-animal hybridity in the novel suggests escaping from the restrictions placed on women in their own cultural environment. Animality is undoubtedly a difficult path to freedom since the woman-animal is constantly in danger of being objectified and exploited. However, the state that makes a woman clearly outside of socially acceptable definitions of humanity also enables her to challenge the sexist and speciesist stereotypes that frequently define that category by articulating innovative ideas about what a ‘female human being’ might be. As Huey-li Li emphasises, culturally and historically, the label woman or femininity has been associated with a lack of freedom and,

more significantly, with “passivity, irrationality, and dependence” (Li, 1993: 274). Since women are judged to be irrational just like animals and that they are reduced to “the position of passive object” (Gruen, 1993: 67), this strengthens their inhumanity and objectification. There are two ways to confront this injustice: either by declaring that women are perfect humans and attempting to recover the definition of human for them, or by abandoning the classification of humankind and associating them with the species it despises.

Fevvers’s wings, on the other hand, symbolise a time when women will no longer experience established oppression. A winged woman unbound by the limitations of human anatomy symbolises the long-awaited future in which women can finally be liberated from all the oppressive restraints of an androcentric society. In this sense, Sophie Fevvers is the symbolic promise of “the New Age in which no woman will be bound to the ground” (Carter, 1993: 25). Based on this, *Nights at the Circus* offers a more creative and ethically conscious narrative by addressing alternative forms of existence with a posthumanist understanding. Carter goes beyond merely restating the stereotype that women are like animals. Feminism and animal liberation go beyond analogy in her story, as they both seek to fight the same pernicious idea of how the relationship between women and animals, and more generally between gender and species, is enacted: the hegemony of the strong over the weak.

As Lori Gruen remarks, in patriarchal societies, the terms “woman” and “animal” have similar symbolic meanings. Whether stated directly or indirectly, their “construction as dominated, submissive ‘other’ in theoretical discourse” has “sustained human male dominance.” The connection between women and animals is evident in both theory and practice, regardless of whether they are ensnared as slaves to care for and comfort humans or produced as ideological symbols to defend and uphold the supremacy of men (Gruen, 1993: 61). However, what Carter wants to convey in the novel is that, despite the humanist and patriarchal logics that govern them, animals and women are not objects but beings and agents who deserve to live freely. Furthermore, woman-animals are not less valuable because they retain their femininity, animality, or strange deformities. Nor do they need to fit into the category of ‘the normal’. By subverting the imposed unfreedom, Fevvers shows the possibility of different forms of existence for posthumanist beings who are neither women nor animals.

Consequently, emphasising the interconnection between animals and women, Angela Carter criticises the exploitative practices that govern the interactions between humans and animals and between men and women by changing the roles of animals and humans and creating female-animal hybrid characters. Through the portrayal of half-animal, half-human female characters, the novel shifts femininity away from humanity towards animality. This depiction serves as both an ethical warning and a posthuman understanding. The novel narrates the stories of hybrid women who, although easily objectified, are able to achieve a certain degree of liberty. Their animality strips them of the rights associated with being a typical human woman, but it also releases them from its constraints. Braidotti argues that the posthuman represents a new mode of being, one that transcends traditional dualisms such as nature/culture and human/animal (Braidotti, 2013: 3). The novel offers an unconventional perspective on what it means to be human since it portrays animality as a successful deviation from the prejudiced human category rather than as a failure to meet it. In this way, Carter suggests the possibility of freedom for all beings from the barriers that oppressive traditional humanist norms have built around gender and species categories.

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