

## **FREAKS AND ANGELS: WINGED PLEASURES IN ANGELA CARTER, SALMAN RUSHDIE AND GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ**

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### **RESUMO**

Fazendo uso de uma abordagem combinatória do grotesco bakhtiniano, do objecto e do *freak*, pretende-se neste artigo sobrevoar os mundos ficcionais de Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie e Gabriel García Márquez. Centrando-me especialmente em personagens aladas, discutirei construções e desconstruções de género, raça e, sobretudo, de humanidade. Presente em obras de teor pós-colonial, feminista e mágico-realista, a criatura alada foi veículo metafórico para Breughel e até Nabokov, evidenciando assim o seu potencial semiótico em qualquer modo artístico empenhado em discutir as fronteiras do seu corpo/político.

### **ABSTRACT**

Combining the Bakhtinian grotesque with abject theorisation and freakery, in this paper I aim to hover the fictional universes of Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez. My attention goes primarily to winged characters in order to discuss de/constructions of gender, race and, most importantly, of humanness. Though the winged creature makes its appearance in these texts of postcolonial, feminist and magical realist flavours, it had already been a metaphorical vehicle to Brueghel and even Nabokov thus proving its semiotic potential in any artistic mode concerned with interrogating the frontiers of the body/politics.

The scene takes place on an isolated tropical island. Around the dead body of an old man, individuals gather crying and moaning. Once their faces are revealed, one realises they are not fully human, their humanly felt sorrow notwithstanding. The tears shed are for the scientist Dr Moreau, their god and creator. Having been left behind all alone, their most dreadful fear is whether there will be Law without “Father”<sup>1</sup>. The scene is highly ambivalent: Law refers to observing

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<sup>1</sup> After the doctor’s savage killing, his grotesque creatures (the word “grotesque/ness” is used in the book to refer to them fifteen times) are uncertain about their future. Since with Moreau’s death the House of Pain is useless, they do not know which rules to follow if they are to follow any:

rules and to the patriarchal order according to a Lacanian logic, an order headed by the authoritative figure of the “Father”. With the doctor’s death, symbolic signification collapses and the obvious abjection of the anthropomorphised animals, so far masterfully disguised, is openly exhibited in shame: “each theorizes a human body both chaotic and entropic, both hybridized and prone to reversion”, denoting “indifferentiation and abomination rather than integrity and perfection” (Hurley, 1996: 103). The series of random killings that follow just go to prove that, in spite of “Father’s” rules being harsh and painful, they are, nevertheless, necessary for group functionality. H. G. Wells’s answer, as that of Julia Kristeva in her theory of abjection, is that there cannot possibly be Law without the “Father”.

Angela Carter points in a very different direction. The British author does not move the focus to the mother either, because Angela Carter, as defined by Nicole Ward-Jouve in “Mother is a Figure of Speech...”, “was that thing she said Sade failed to be: a moral pornographer. She refused to promote any vested power, patriarchal or other” (Ward-Jouve, 1994: 148). This does not mean, however, that Carter dismisses femininity; quite the opposite, for in fact she elevates it to dimensions above dichotomies. Succinctly, Jouve puts it as:

Not the way of the father - beyond both father and mother. Subverting both, combining both, demoting both. All that’s left is the act. The performance: conjuring or doing.

All about freedom. A form of feminist existentialism. (Ward-Jouve, 1994: 158)

So, if “mother” in *The Passion of New Eve* succumbs to madness, Eve, the “daughter”, finishes in the tone and attitude of glittering triumph. In *Nights at the Circus*, the realm suggested beyond the male conceptualised Symbolic and abjectified Semiotic, a sort of feminine Symbolic, is that of lesbian orientation. Other alternatives are posed by the mother figures Ma Nelson and Lizzie and further by the praise of the masculine bird-woman Fevvers. Ricarda Schmidt argues in “The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter’s Fiction” that *Nights* presents

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“Is there a Law now? asked the Monkey Man. ‘Is it still to be this and that? Is he dead indeed?’ ‘Is there a Law?’ repeated the man in white. ‘Is there a Law, thou Other with the Whip?’” (Wells, [1896] 1996: 101)

the full-grown daughter of Eve in *Passion* (Schmidt, 1989: 67). Sophie Fevvers embodies in her gigantism and vulgar manner the wisdom and potential of the archaeopteryx, similarly a creature of air and earth. Her grotesqueness is celebrated in all its excessiveness, particularly its being outside the Oedipal triangle, out of reach of the paternal Law, for not only has she multiple harlot mothers but also remains untouched by a father figure or system: Fevvers always maintains that she has been hatched from an egg. Though (or maybe because) she is feathered, she is not fathered. From the assumption that although directly linked to parenthood, particularly motherhood, grotesqueness can evolve in ways beyond those constraints towards more liberating alternatives, this paper will focus on the way/s the sons and daughters trace (or not) their own paths. I will concentrate on the fundamental element of ambiguity in matters of the Self when conventional concepts of humanity are shaken by the integration of animal features, particularly that of birds. As a theoretical framework, I will be supported by the carnivalesque-grotesque of Mikhail Bakhtin and I will be combining it with notions of the bodily and cultural freak and abjection.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque-grotesque is, in reality, a social theory aimed at making sense of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and, inherently, his own home country, Russia, during the trouble times of early twentieth century. Though ephemeral, carnival, through popular festive forms and images, exercised what might be called a therapeutic social function. In the medieval period and Renaissance, the people - the folk in opposition to an aristocratic or ecclesiastical elite - conglomerated in the marketplace where comic shows celebrated the culture of folk humour. These public events represented, or rather constructed, a world unchained from feudal stratification and constraints. Public laughter thus exorcised the accumulated disappointment with worldly affairs and, by creating an alternative classless society, real at least for a certain period of time, nevertheless contributed to perpetuating the existing one through temporary relief. Seasonal liberties sanctioned inner social renewal and avoided the anarchy resultant from such manifestations outside the permitted seasons. Usually associated with the agricultural cycles, carnival is the ritualistic representation of nature: after winter (death) always follows spring (rebirth) and only through the former can the

latter occur. Carnivalistic festivities allowed criticism but the upside-down alternative, suspending hierarchies and preventing innovation, proved to be no more than a utopian ephemeral solution so that the ultimate consequence was the legitimisation of authority. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance maintained part of the spirit of the Roman Saturnalias, festivities that both glorified and debased, for instance, a victorious warrior or a deceased person even during the funeral ritual. Other numerous carnival festivities were popularised, particularly those which parodied the Church's rituals (in adding a sensuous or humorous character): the feast of fools, the feast of the ass, Easter laughter, Christmas laughter, parish commemorations (accompanied by fairs and open-air comic spectacles) and agricultural feasts. Literature also included religious debasement (*parodia sacra*) which included parody of liturgies prayers, litanies, and sermons among others.

The festivities were invariably animated by live performances of trained animals, jugglers and clowns as well as public spectacles of various freaks and monsters. On abolishing class divisions the Low and High established relations in terms inadmissible outside carnival, i.e., based not on power and submission but on equality. Thus the religious meets the impious, the scholar the illiterate, the king the fool. A whole new concept of relativity springs into being through *mésalliance* (the combination of things previously set apart, detached from each other) and ambivalence, for the contact between opposed forces does not restrict itself to mere acquaintance but extends to the actual interchangeability of individual and social roles. The conditions are thus in place to give birth to a real *monde à l'envers*, a world where the inverted system stands alongside the official one. The language of the marketplace, with its disregard for formalities, added the necessary uninhibiting familiarity to the speech and gestures of carnival language.

The concepts of ambivalence and *mésalliance* necessarily define themselves against the classic notions of proportion and harmony. In the postulation of the grotesque body the carnivalistic substratum produces the image of a being exaggerated and dismembered, boastfully displaying the returns of the internal processes, particularly those causing shame and revulsion juxtaposed with "acceptable" rituals (funerals, banquets) in order to create the effect of burial and

revival. The word “grotesque” itself evolves from “grotto”, meaning cave. Furthermore, since the grotesque is closely connected to generation, then it is necessarily linked to femininity. However, at its core, grotesque realism - the concept borne from folk culture and sustained by the material bodily principle of food, drink, defecation and sex - is defined as genderless. In practice, however, the feminine and the grotesque walk side by side since the former has been commonly labelled as not only superficial and marginal but also bizarre and freakish<sup>2</sup> (hopefully, such erroneous preconception will be demystified throughout this work through the demonstration that such elements are just as present in the masculine universe). As presented by Bakhtin, the material aspect of the body establishes a close connection with the universe, so that it is not enclosed in its physical boundaries but liberates its communicative energy through bodily orifices. This body is not private, individualised or biological but rather collective or cosmic. In this perspective Low and High acquire a reformulated meaning - Low stands for earth and High for heaven - and, this being so, debasement and degradation cease to be negative processes:

Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). [...] Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (Bakhtin, 1984: 21)

Functioning as the means by which grotesque material interacts with the earth, degradation does not simply bring down immanent ideals but expands their spheres. Degrading becomes a synonym of

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<sup>2</sup> Consider Joanne M. Gass's comment in the article 'Panopticism in *Nights at the Circus*': "[it] is a novel about the way in which these dominant, frequently male-centered discourses of power marginalize those *whom society defines as freaks (madmen, clowns, the physically and mentally deformed, and, in particular, women)* so that they may be contained and controlled because they are all possible sources of the chaotic disruption of established power." Italics added (Gass, 1994: 71).

materialising, thus, of conceiving, decaying and expiring. From this quotation it is also made clear that transmutation is the typical grotesque image. Ambivalent, metamorphosed, in-between creatures are necessarily beings of grotesque signification which/who Bakhtin posits present newness to the world and interrogate humanness itself.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais was extremely influenced by “Indian Wonders”, a collection of tales that dated back to the fifth century before Christ and that in the Middle Ages incorporated travel stories. The wonders (a term which has been used in the past in relation to freaks) were generally human figures, extraordinary in their “wild anatomical fantasy” (Bakhtin, 1984: 345) revealed in the human *and* animal physical traits (see *Rabelais and his World*, 344-347). Apropos of the philosopher Pico della Mirandola, Bakhtin picks up the topic of animal humanness. The Renaissance thinker believed in human superiority over all other forms of existence because they, contrary to animals for instance, are always becoming: “man receives at his birth the seeds of every form of life. He may choose the seed that will develop and bear fruit. He grows it and forms it in himself. Man can become a plant or an animal, but he can also become an angel and a son of God” (Bakhtin, 1984: 364). Bakhtin’s comments on Mirandola clearly show the closeness of the postulations of the two scholars:

Such concepts as becoming, the existence of many seeds and of many possibilities, the freedom of choice, leads man toward the horizontal line of time and of historic becoming. Let us stress that the body of man reunites in itself all the elements and kingdoms of nature, both the plants and the animals. Man, properly speaking, is not something completed and finished, but open, uncompleted. (Bakhtin, 1984: 364)

Kelly Hurley, referring to Dr Moreau’s *constructed* abhumans (for in this case I believe we can talk about humanised animal cyborgs), argues that, through them, “[t]he human body, [...] reveals its morphic compatibility with, and thus lack of distinction from, the whole world of animal life, including those species occupying different lines of descent” (Hurley, 1996: 103).

The image and symbol of the bird launches the debate and I begin with Fevvers, the wonder woman who materialises “feminist existentialism”.

### **Feathered out for some special fate: aliform grotesqueness in the service of human existentialism**

Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species, manifestation of Arioriph, Venus, Achamatoth, Sophia.

*Nights at the Circus*, 81

Angela Carter's 1984 novel sets off in a London dressing room where *l'Ange Anglaise* removes her make-up whilst drinking champagne. She sits before a mirror and rejoices over her ambiguous nature: "[one] lash off, one lash on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror" (Carter, 1984: 8). The theme of observation is introduced and soon the reader learns that Fevvers is not the only one "scanning" her body. The winged giantess is also watched by Jack Walser whom she avoids addressing directly. Through the mirror, she puts the focus on the image as a determining element in her definition. As much as her own gaze, Walser and the audience's observation contribute to the aerialist's self-assertion. Walser has travelled from America and now interviews Fevvers to include her testimony in his series "Great Humbugs of the World". The slogan promoted by the trapeze acrobat, "Is she fact or is she fiction", controls the reporter's view of her (Carter, 1984: 7)<sup>3</sup>; his interest is not in her acrobatic ability but rather in her labelling within the parameters of reality, i.e., her objectification as freak or fraud. As often happens with women, Fevvers cannot escape categorisation nor being the repository of men's sexual urges and in this context her virginity becomes an issue of primary importance. To Joanne M. Gass, it is a part of a systematic dehumanisation by patriarchal culture:

She is defined by her body, by her outward appearance, just as the freaks and clowns are. As a freak, she has economic value; as a commodity, she is bought and sold by those who collect unique and exotic objects; she has no intrinsic value as a human being. (Gass, 1994: 73)

And the essayist continues to quote Lizzie, a prostitute:

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<sup>3</sup> To this resolution of fact and fiction, Carter denominates "magic realism". The author writes of the bear-worshippers who take Walser in: "there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead a sort of magic realism" (Carter, 1984: 260).

the baker can't make a loaf out of your privates, duckie, and that's all you'd have to offer him in exchange for a crust if nature hadn't made you the kind of spectacle people pay good money to see. All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure to the eye, or else you're good for nothing. For you, it's always a symbol exchange in the marketplace; you couldn't say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl? (Carter, 1984: 185)

Lizzie seems to be aware of the situation theorised in Mary Russo's discourse of woman making a spectacle out of herself. Due to the liminal socio-location of the female body and psyche, women dwell at the centre of the marketplace at all times, creating the figure of "the female transgressor as public spectacle" (Russo, 1986: 217). In Russo's view, the grotesque can be perilous to the construction of positive femininity.

In accordance with the above passage, Linda Ruth Williams argues that Fevvers decides to put "herself on show in order to mask her monstrosity" (Williams, 1995: 94):

In order to be one's commodity but her own, the winged woman must not opt to conceal her deformity. Rather she must make a show of it, demonstrating it as an undecidable thing, making a spectacle of herself as neither monster nor trickster but as something which might just be either. (Williams, 1995: 95)

Fevvers situation, though, is somehow different from that of other women since she is doubly confined to the centre of the marketplace due to her gender, on the one hand, and to her unnatural feathered members on the other. But the fact is that she stands for all women, as Eve's daughter, as the child of a new age about to begin (the twentieth century), and because her fight is symbolically every woman's; hence, being "feathered out for some special fate" is translated into a gendered and historical issue (Carter, 1984: 39). Her determination arises from the belief that if she has wings then she must fly (Carter, 1984: 27). Though she wishes all the women of the New Age to possess wings like her (Carter, 1984: 285), Lizzie, as she often does, brings her to reality. Fevvers cannot let herself be caught in the illusion of utopian dreams. For that reason, Sarah Gamble is persuasive when she dismisses Hélène Cixous's formulations in "The Laugh of the Medusa":



Flying is a woman's gesture - flying in language and making it fly [...]. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They [...] fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down<sup>4</sup>.

In this passage Cixous is close to feminist fundamentalism. To approach any issue only in a gendrifed perspective carries certain dangers. With this statement, Cixous denies men the possibility to free themselves, for instance, from the necessity to perpetuate a society typified in oppression, only to take on an identity their peers recognise and value.

But it is from the belief that she must fly that Fevvers manages to turn the table and take advantage from being classified valueless; she makes a profit out of the face value she is given on account of realising her worth can only be determined by herself. This step is summarised in the following statement by Michael Bell: "The novel is a fable of achieved female self confidence and the secret sources from which confidence comes. Belief in oneself has to be distinguished both from mere self-deception and from external questions of historical or factual truth" (Bell, 1997: 213). The balance is a fragile one, nevertheless, for it depends entirely on a "trick of confidence" (Carter, 1984: 18), the "is she fact or fiction?" issue. Her financial success and widespread popularity (from the duchess to the costermonger, everyone talks about her) are only achieved because no one knows if she is *real* (Carter, 1984: 9). Were the authenticity of her aliform extensions asserted, this Helen of Troy (also hatched and fathered by a bird, a swan) would be pushed into the realm of freakishness. In one of the novel's most significant passages, Walser reflects on the aerialist's embodiment of contradiction:

[H]e was enchanted by the paradox: if she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then - she was no longer a wonder.

She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the World but - a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood,

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Sarah Gamble (1997: 160).

always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged.

She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly none.

As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. But what would she become, if she continued to be a woman? (Carter, 1984: 161)

Using Rosemary's G. Thomson's terminology, Fevvers would turn from wonder to error<sup>5</sup>; actually, she would re-turn since earlier in life Fevvers had experienced the pains of substantiating the concept of *rara avis* (in the literal and idiomatic sense of the expression). As such, she dwelled in the various carnivalistic circuits, most of them all too well known by freakish creatures. Fevvers career in show-business, as precisely an object of the male gaze, begins in the whorehouse. There she masquerades and symbolises love in the graceful personification of the child-god Cupid. After the bodily enlargement typical of adolescence she moves to portray Winged Victory but although Ma Nelson, the brothel manager, was under the impression an armed virgin fitted perfectly as the brothel's guardian angel, it turned out that "a *large woman* with a *sword* [was] not the best advertisement for a brothel" (Carter, 1984: 38. Italics in the original). Surely the clients were only too fully aware of the symbolic signification of a woman's emasculating potential. Afraid of the vagina dentata's blade, they most likely retreat into the security of their wives' castrated sexuality. The place is eventually set on fire by the prostitutes themselves but sadly from the ashes of the renovating fire does not rise a phoenix; instead there follows a period at M. Schreck's freak show, where Fevvers played the "tombstone angel" (Carter, 1984: 70), the Angel of Death. Other "prodigies of nature" (Carter, 1984: 59) worked for the Lady of Terror (Carter, 1984: 55), also known as La Schreck (Carter, 1984: 61), Lady Macbeth (Carter, 1984: 62) and Virgin in Hell (Carter, 1984: 62). These included a Living Skeleton, a four-eyed woman, Sleeping Beauty, the Wiltshire Wonder (a dwarf), a hermaphrodite and a woman whose face was covered in cobwebs. As Azrael, Fevvers protected Sleeping Beauty's naked body resting in cold marble, but, unlike other

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<sup>5</sup> I refer to Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996), "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity", in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*.

monster women lurking in Aladdin's cave (Carter, 1984: 58) this pair did not come to interact with the male clients; as *tableaux vivants*, they were looked at but could not be touched. On the stage at the Alhambra, Fevvers's attitude is viewed similarly. She seemed to say:

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.

She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!

LOOK AT ME! (Carter, 1984: 15)

Freak exhibitionism is part of the allure proved in Walser's infatuation and that Leslie Fiedler expresses thus: "All freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic. Indeed, abnormality arouses in some 'normal' beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to *knowing* in the full carnal sense the ultimate other. The desire is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a longing for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation" (Fiedler, 1981: 137. Italics in the text). Later on, Fevvers joins Captain Kearney's Grand Imperial Circus, where Walser himself tries his luck as a feathered creature but his career as a chicken-clown is never brilliant. The sexual attraction Walser feels towards Fevvers, drawn essentially from gazing at her (scopophilia), is thus justified because he wishes, like her, to be a flying creature, a free being, though at that time he does not succeed. This view corroborates Shirley Peterson's comment in "Freaking Feminism": "Putting on femininity with a vengeance is exactly what [...] Sophie do[es], and in so doing [she] spotlight[s] the performative function of both freaks and females within patriarchy" (Peterson, 1996: 299).

Fevvers learns to move around on "the other side"; these places, as much as herself, represent the acquired power of carnivalistic topsy-turvydom that Fevvers conceives primarily as monetary potentiality drawn from being gazed at. It is defined by Joanne M. Gass as follows:

Fevvers inhabits those marginal institutions of society - the whorehouse, the freak show, and the circus - that safely contain those elements that threaten to disrupt the orderly and legitimate exercise of power. In each of those institutions the inhabitants are on display, objects to be bought or seen for the pleasure of the viewing and consuming public, safely ensconced behind walls or bars within the carefully prescribed circle of the circus ring. She and her

fellow inmates are, as Foucault describes the inmates of the panopticon, like actors on a stage, enclosed in “small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” and which have the effect of inducing “in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures automatic functioning of power”. (Gass, 1994: 73)

Despite Bakhtin’s optimism as far as the degradation ability goes, in the world of freakery it becomes difficult to hear the regenerating laughter of carnival due to its being debilitated by the irresistible allure of capitalism. In reality, carnival intimidates the socially established order as much as the other way around.

The issue of exploitation of human oddities had already been addressed by Gabriel García Márquez back in 1968 when the South American writer created “Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes”, included in the short story collection *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada*. As Angela Carter, Gabriel García Márquez converged high and low cultures in the literalisation of an angel, a process which is carried out with exceptional beauty and efficiency resulting from the naturality with which magical realism deals with an elderly angel trapped in the mud puddle of a backyard. On seeing such a creature, Pelayo and Elisenda, a couple with very limited economic resources, “tanto lo observaron, y con tanta atención, que Pelayo y Elisenda se sobrepusieron muy pronto del asombro y acabaron por encontrarlo familiar” (García Márquez, 1968: 8). They consider beating him to death but eventually decide to lock him up in the chicken yard. Overnight, the couple sees their premises invaded by curious onlookers who, like themselves, find the union of the real and the fantastic quite plausible, a fact that justifies their less than reverent behaviour towards the angel:

Pero cuando salieron al patio con las primeras luces, encontraron a todo el vecindario frente al gallinero, retozando con el ángel sin la menor devoción y echándole cosas de comer por los huecos de las alambradas, como si no fuera una criatura sobrenatural sino un animal de circo. (García Márquez, 1968: 9)

Disrespectful neighbours are only the first of many spectators because the news spread so rapidly that the backyard was invaded by “un alboroto de mercado, y tuvieron que llevar la tropa con bayonetas para espantar el tumulto que ya estaba a punto de tumbar la casa” (García Márquez, 1968: 10). It is Elisenda who, already suffering with

backache from sweeping the fair garbage, remembers to charge for the privilege of gazing at this celestial sight. From then on, the freakery business sets on. Drawn in by the angel, other related money making enterprises come to town:

Vinieron curiosos hasta de la Martinica. Vino una feria ambulante con un acróbata volador, que pasó zumbando varias veces por encima de la muchedumbre, pero nadie le hizo caso porque sus alas no eran de ángel sino de murciélago sideral. Vinieron en busca de salud los enfermos más desdichados del Caribe: una pobre mujer que desde niña estaba contando los latidos de su corazón y ya no le alcanzaban los números, un jamaicano que no podía dormir porque lo atormentaba el ruido de las estrellas, un sonámbulo que se levantaba de noche a deshacer dormindo las cosas que había hecho despierto, y muchos otros de menor gravedad. En medio de aquel desorden de naufragio que hacía temblar la tierra, Pelayo y Elisenda estaban felices de cansancio, porque en menos de una semana atiborraron de plata los dormitorios, y todavía la fila de peregrinos que esperaban turno para entrar llegaba hasta el otro lado del horizonte. (García Márquez, 1968: 10-11)

This passage alone converges numerous elements associated with the carnival world and freakery. The latter's insertion in carnivalistic spectacles (the fair, the circus), the togetherness of monsters and entertainers, the affiliation of the sacred and the profane (angel wings, bat wings), the pilgrimage of snoopers and believers, the ruling of disorder and commotion, the profit made by managers and exploiters. Two aspects need to be highlighted here: the first is that Gabriel García Márquez uses the grotesque as viewed by Mikhail Bakhtin, that is, with a focus on the material bodily processes and physiology while clearly moving away from Kayserian propositions of an estranged, nightmarish and hostile world<sup>6</sup>. Not only do not Pelayo and Elisenda find their lives disturbed by the event, they dislocate its shocking impact and maintain its fantastic and grotesque elements to include the angel in the family's routine. Their world does not become uncanny. The second aspect concerns the unresisting attitude of freaks. As with Fevvers-Azrael, García Márquez's angel was the only one not participating in the event in which he himself occupied the leading role. Thus, both authors emphasise the passive status of the freak. Fevvers's case obviously carries additional significance because she is

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<sup>6</sup> See Wolfgang Kayser (1963).

also a woman so that at some point it is said that the bird-woman “existed only as an object in men’s eyes” (Carter, 1984: 39)<sup>7</sup>.

The close relation of womanhood and freakery has been frequently sustained and asserted as a culturally malleable phenomenon. Ricarda Schmidt, for instance, maintains:

The fact that Fevvers can function as a freak or as a wonder confirms the non-essentialist character of femininity. Femininity is a social construction, its value is not inherent but determined in social exchange, on the market. (Schmidt, 1989: 68)

A further similarity between the magical realist text and the feminist one (in the sense Angela Carter elaborates on women’s issues, and particularly on their liberation) is the juxtaposition of freakery and grotesqueness. Fevvers, besides the fact of being the possessor of a pair of wings, is an unusual girl in her own merit. She dresses and undresses before Walser’s amazed eyes and welcomes him, a perfect stranger, to the room where intimate objects and references lay around unconcealed. Furthermore, she becomes intimidating due to her large size (which contributed to her “physical ungainliness” during her artistic performance) and ability to consume great quantities of alcohol (Carter, 1984: 16). These characteristics would be regarded by some as un-feminine. For instance, there is a clear intention on the part of the author to associate Fevvers with masculinity when she describes the opening of a bottle thus: “She invitingly shook the bottle until it ejaculated afresh. ‘Put hairs on your chest!’” (Carter, 1984: 12). And further ahead, Walser compares Fevvers’s face to those of carnival ladies. At that moment “[i]t flickered through his mind: Is she really a man?”, a thought no doubt supported by the fact the aerialist was six-foot-two (Carter, 1984: 35). In Shirley Peterson’s point of view, elements such as these concur with the construction of a freakish unsexed image, a strategy used to challenge patriarchy which is shared by Fay Weldon’s character Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Ricarda Schmidt misquotes this sentence retracting its full meaning; the essayist replaces “men’s eyes” for “one’s eyes”.

<sup>8</sup> See Shirley Peterson, “Freaking Feminism: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Nights at the Circus* as Narrative Freak Shows”, in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.), *Freakery*, pp. 291-301. In relation to the ungendered freak see pages 292 and 293.

The impression caused by her angel wings combines strangely with the feminine body that does not even restrain itself from farting publicly. In fact, she assumes an utterly material existence:

It was impossible to imagine any gesture of hers that did not have that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about; there was enough of her to go round, and some to spare. You did not think of calculation when you saw her, so finely judged was her performance. You'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers. (Carter, 1984: 12)

The emphasis on her body, particularly on bodily processes does not restrict itself to drinking and farting. Her eating habits are quite Rabelaisian, even to the extent of likening her to the sixteenth century writer's character Gargantua and which justify the description "a wonderful amalgam of the transcendence and the earthy" (Gamble, 1997: 158-159):

[S]he was soon mollified by the spread that arrived in a covered basket ten minutes later - hot meat with a glutinous ladleful of eel gravy on each; a Fujiyama of mashed potatoes; a swamp of dried peas cooked up again and served in greenish liquor [...].

[H]er mouth was too full for a ripost as she tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies' fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety. Impressed, Walser waited with the stubborn docility of his profession until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched. She gave him another queer look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of her gluttony would drive him away, but since he remained, notebook on knee, pencil in hand, sitting on her sofa, she sighed [and] belched again. (Carter, 1984: 22)

Bakhtin devotes a chapter of *Rabelais and his World* to the relation between food and the grotesque, "Banquet Imagery in Rabelais". The Russian scholar draws attention to the fact that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance popular feasts present images of abundance and merriment through nourishment. Thus, certain carnival processions displayed buns and sausages of extraordinary size. Metaphoric universalism was present in dance, music, food and drink, that is, in collective feast; Rabelais's two main characters, Gargantua and Pantagruel, were systematically located in such joyous feasts:

Pantagruel's mother gave birth to wagons of salted food (establishing the birth-nourishment connection), Gargantua participated in a cattle-slaughtering feast, stuffed himself during the Picrochole war, he participated in the war of sausages as well as in the episodes of Gastrolaters, the giant Bringenarilles, the Windy Island and throughout the chapter "Why Monks Love Kitchens" (these are merely a few of the dozens of examples Bakhtin analyses exhaustively). Bakhtin even dares to be categorical when he maintains that the Fourth Book of *Gargantua* includes the longest list of foods of all world literature. The act of swallowing represents to him the way through which the body meets the world and regenerates itself because, as one body devours, others are devoured so that death feeds life:

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself [...]. Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage. (Bakhtin, 1984: 281)

Fevvers's appetite is representative of her power, her specific *incorporative vaginal* power, deadly to males as this example shows: "Fevvers brusquely chose a fat choc with a lump of crystallised ginger pressed on top of it into the pale pink mouth that opened like a sea-anemone to engulf it" (Carter, 1984: 128).

Furthermore, Fevvers makes frequent use of vulgar speech as on the instance she addresses Walser in these terms: "'Can't have the ladies pissed on their lonesome, can we? What kind of gent are you?'" (Carter, 1984: 13). The value of *billingsgate* or marketplace language, as already stressed, lies in its ambivalence. Curses, profanities, oaths but also eulogies and simple vulgar language refer to the lower parts of the body exuberantly invoking death, illness, dismemberment and scatological substances, and thus refusing to conform to official conventions and respectability.



Moreover, even the divine value of her wings is firmly erased in favour of a much less transcendental interpretation, that of freakishness. Fevvers's grotesqueness springs both from being in-between worlds (fact/fiction, marvellous/mundane) and from *actually embodying the difference animal/human*, that is, the wings relate Fevvers to angelhood, an idealised and cleansed form of humanity, as well as to the animal kingdom. Right on the opening page, there is a reference to Fevvers's father, suggesting he could be a swan, and throughout the novel she is related to a Brazilian cockatoo, an eagle, a condor, an albatross, a flamingo, a duck, and even to pigeons.

The exact same associations are made in relation to Gabriel García Márquez's winged old man. The creature is from the start humanised/de-sanctified because he appears helplessly caught in a puddle of mud, polluted by earthiness:

Estaba vestido como un trapero. Le quedaban apenas unas hilachas descoloridas en el cráneo pelado y muy pocos dientes en la boca, y su lastimosa condición de bisabuelo ensopado lo había desprovisto de toda grandeza. Sus alas de gallinazo grande, sucias y medio desplumadas, estaban encalladas para siempre en el lodazal. (García Márquez, 1968: 7-8)

And also:

[A]quel varón de lástima [...] más [...] parecía una enorme gallina decrepita entre las gallinas abortas. Estaba echado en un rincón, secándose al sol las alas extendidas, entre las cáscaras de frutas y las sobras de desayunos que le habían tirado los madrugadores [...]. [El padre Gonzaga] observó que visto de cerca resultaba demasiado humano: tenía un insoportable olor de intemperie, el revés de las alas sembrado de algas parasitarias y las plumas mayores maltratadas por vientos terrestres, y nada de su naturaleza miserable estaba de acuerdo con la egregia dignidad de los ángeles (García Márquez, 1968: 9-10).

The angel is among "his kind" as a freak, as was observed earlier, but also as an animal, for he shares the same confined space with vulgar gallinaceans. The grotesque picture is complete with his association with food; in spite of the popular belief that angels are only capable of ingesting crystals, this flying being has ordinary tastes. His relation with food also contributes to further accentuate grotesque aspects because he ends up surrounded by leftovers which, with time, decay and exude an excruciating smell.

Before he finally recovers and flies away, he is impatiently tolerated, shoved off with the broom while his feathers fall off until there were only pinions left and, at night, unprotected inside the open tile-covered shed from the invasion of crabs and intensive rain, he is tormented with shivering fevers.

In “Wingstroke”, a short story from 1924 by Vladimir Nabokov, most of these elements are also present. In brief, the narrative evolves around a girl, Isabel, who is literally haunted by a gruesome angel and around Kern, a man divided between saving the girl or killing himself. The following passage is deeply representative of some of the aspects I have already discussed in relation to this topic and it captures the moment Kern sees the angel for the first and last time.

Outside the window, swelling, flying, a joyous barking sound approached by agitated jolts. In a wink, the square of black night in the window opening filled and came aboil with solid, boisterous fur. In one brood and noisy sleep this rouguish fur obscured the night sky from one window frame to the other. Another instant and it swelled tensely, obliquely burst in, and unfolded. Amid the whistling spread of agitated fur flashed a white face. Kern grabbed the guitar by its fingerboard and, with all his strength, struck the white face flying at him. Like some fluffy tempest, the giant wing’s rib knocked him off his feet. He was overwhelmed by an animal smell. Kern rose with a lurch.

In the center of the room lay an enormous angel.

He occupied the entire room, the entire hotel, the entire world [...]. The brown fur of the wings steamed, iridescent with frost. Deafened by the blow, the angel propped itself on its palms like a sphinx. Blue veins swelled on its white hand and hollows of shadow showed on its shoulders next to the clavicle. Its elongated, myopic-looking eyes, pale-green like predawn air, gazed at Kern without blinking from beneath straight, joined brows. (Nabokov, 1995: 38)

This character presents several similarities to Fevvers. Like her, he is of an extraordinary size even to the extent of giving the impression of being of an overwhelming immensity (compare with Fevvers’s laughter to be considered shortly). There is also an insistence on the part of the author on the angel’s animalistic features, particularly on the brown, filthy fur covering his body (the fur substitutes the customary feathers in order to emphasise his animality). The overall animalising process is complemented with diverse references to his repulsive odour which definitely breaks with conventional notions of angelhood. Again as Fevvers, there is a clear intention to identify this utterly material angel, dispossessed of any

sort of dignity, with the Black Angel of Death. This is achieved by stripping the angel of the traditional whiteness (symbolising purity) and dressing him in brownish fur and intense blackness. As a carrier of death, his mission is to take Isabel, though they come finally to be united in a painful but inevitable togetherness. Once again, grotesqueness, particularly bird-like freakery, will corporealise in the feminine body. That night Kern smashes one of the angel's wings and, on the following morning, Isabel inexplicably dies in a skiing accident, with a single rib broken. This process of identification has been used by Angela Carter herself in her short story "The Werewolf", included in *The Bloody Chamber* collection; in this case it is a wolf's paw that is chopped off, only to be in due time transformed into a wrinkled hand, the hand of someone's grandmother. Another identification between bird and woman is found in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers is the Ugly Duckling but in *The Infernal Desire Machines*, Albertina is already the swan whose surrealistic description and dream-like, insubstantial existence stresses the unconventional features of darkness and loathsomeness.

The symbolism of wings obviously relates to liberation, thus to carnival transgression (in this case through bodily grotesqueness) of order and officialdom. But having some time back referred to how the grotesque gains a distinct meaning in relation to the female body, it becomes necessary to include in our interpretation of wings the fact that they are gendered. Going back to the issue of alternative life styles for women and in support of the theory that Fevvers embodies the New Woman foretold in *The Passion of New Eve*, her wings help to construct her *not* as masculine but actually as a new and powerful female. In accordance with Angela Carter's demythologising purposes, Fevvers frees herself from cultural postulations which dictate, for instance, that women's central function is to be seduced. *Nights* opens with Walser's impudent seduction by Fevvers and develops along the same lines until the actual sexual consummation that takes place right at the end. The act in itself represents a reversal of tradition for, due to her wings, Fevvers cannot lie on her back and assumes, instead, the position of the dominator.

At the end of the novel, Fevvers laughs uncontrollably because, to top it all off, she managed to carry on the myth of her virginity until the very end:

The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. Or so it seemed to the deceived husband, who found himself laughing too, even if he was not quite sure whether or not he might be the butt of the joke. (Carter, 1984: 295)

*Nights at the Circus* exists in fact as an exceptional example of how the theories of carnival elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin, although never referring directly to women's issues, can have a feminist application. Fevvers's grotesqueness, symbolised in her gendered and sexualised wings, and the unrestrained, un-mastered laughter, do contain the regenerative principle for a brand new world and (de-gendrified) time. In the creation of Fevvers's character, Carter tries to contradict Western Culture's view of a "free woman in an unfree society [as] a monster" (Carter, 1979: 27), as once she commented apropos of de Sade's Juliette and referring to the feminine condition on the whole. Appropriating the myth of Icarus, it can be said that Fevvers is victorious where her male homologue is defeated. Unlike him, she can fly as high as she desires because her grotesqueness is authentic, at least as authentic as the masquerade she orchestrates.

There are, however, besides the already mentioned Walser degrading himself as a chicken-clown (a non-flying bird), other instances of birded males in the *oeuvres* of the British novelist. In *The Infernal Desire Machines*, it is not only Albertina that assumes a bird-like form. Her companion, Desiderio, in the short period he lives with the River Indians, abandons his name and accepts willingly the one now offered to him, Kiku, Foundling Bird (Carter, 1972: 77). Its appropriateness results from the fragility it suggests, for he is helpless as a baby-bird fallen from its nest (remember Desiderio was taken in in a state of extreme physical debilitation). In addition, his home has become *umheimlich* to him and he leaves the Law of his "Father", the Minister of Determination, to pursue a quest that divides him between realities and fathers.

But it is in the work of Salman Rushdie that angelic or birded males appear with a certain frequency. In *Shame*, Omar Shakil's brother, Babar, decides to free himself from the oppression, though *in absentia*, of his brother. To achieve it, he celebrates his twentieth birthday with a carnivalistic fire that consumes Omar's remains in

Nishapur, their home. That day, not only does he reject his father figure (Rushdie, 1983: 129) but also his three mothers. The brink of a new existence, lived outside the institutions of family and social grouping is announced by an earthquake. But to young Babar, dwelling beyond the Law (of the mother/s, the “father” and the legal system) offers an alternative order. “‘That earthquake’, Babar Shakil wrote in his note book, ‘shook something loose inside me. A minor tremor but maybe it also shook something into place’” (Rushdie, 1983: 130). Appropriately, “[c]omedy enters his bloodstream, effects a permanent *mutation*” and the combination of these two aspects, humour and transformation, define the grotesque (Rushdie, 1983: 130. My italics). History repeats itself in *Shame* since Babar, like the Mughal emperor after whom he is named, joins the guerrillas in the Impossible Mountains. It is after this liberatory process that Babar starts to see golden-glowing angels. During the isolation period in the mountains, time is spent discussing copulation with caprines (another form of animal/human grotesque intersection with emphasis on the low bodily apertures and phallic protuberances), poetic efforts and the observance of “golden-breasted and with golden wings” angels (Rushdie, 1983: 132). Reversing more orthodox myths, these strange companions are said to have emerged from below, to have been set free from Paradise through earthquakes. Anticipating *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, the narrator comments, in an exquisite union of the sacred and the sacrilegious, that “perhaps Jibreel himself had hovered benignly over him [Babar] like a golden helicopter while he violated a sheep” (Rushdie, 1983: 132). Eventually, Babar achieves such a level of proximity with the glowing creatures that he transmutes and absorbs their qualities. At first, he only glows (the reason why he was such an easy target) but, at the time of his death, he “was said to be insubstantial and feathery as an abandoned snakeskin, such as cobras and playboys leave behind when they change” (Rushdie, 1983: 132). Of all the instances considered in this study, this is the only case in which being winged is part of an “angeling” process, of consecration, carried out through martyrdom and mothers’ impassioned love (Rushdie, 1983: 132).

Going back to 1975 and on looking back at *Grimus*, it is clear that the book serves the author as an experiment on the issues of history and identity that he later masters brilliantly. With respect to the nature

of identity, Rushdie develops certain characters who can be said to be in-between and outside at the same time. The couple Dolores O' Toole and Virgil Jones are united in their deformity, but their love-making is not dissimilar to that of others: "they were one beast, four-handed, four-legged, two-headed and wreathed in a smile" (Rushdie, 1975: 49). For the present purposes, I shall concentrate on Flapping Eagle and his sister, a pair of foundling birds themselves (their mother died at child-birth and their father soon followed). The theme of Otherness evolves in the narrative through images of grotesqueness, particularly in the characters of Dolores and Virgil, of racial and social difference (a typical postcolonial concern) and sexual/political differentiation. Before the tragic deaths of their parents, Bird-Dog assumes responsibility for the family as well as the control of power it implies. This is evident in the fact that Bird-Dog names herself and, in accordance with her rebellious nature, chooses the denomination of a creature feared, "clever" and "fiendish" (Rushdie, 1975: 19). Moreover, she is the first of her tribe, the Axona, to face the Demons which isolate them from the town. Unfortunately, female bravery is not appreciated by the Axona (nor, in fact, the author seems to suggest, by most cultures):

Bird-Dog had always been a free spirit. I [Flapping Eagle] say this with some envy for I never was, nor am. Conventions did not touch her, artifice never seized her. As a child she was drawn to the bow and arrow and loathed the stove and cauldron, much to the dismay of the Old [...]. It meant she was as good in the fields as most young men. Bird-Dog was a born provider. With breasts. Breasted providers were anathema to the Axona. (Rushdie, 1975: 17)

In a way identical to Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie understands women's liberation as an action of rupture with social (masculine) premises. The result is, however, less than satisfactory since both Fevvers and Bird-Dog undergo a process of masculinisation that eventually evolves into a reformation of femininity in Fevvers but not in Bird-Dog. Eventually, Freedom-Aggressiveness cannot be tolerated any longer within social norms so Bird-Dog and her brother are exiled.

Flapping Eagle represents Otherness in freakishness. He embodies the incompatible life-death dichotomy because, although eternally alive (he becomes immortal at some stage), he brings death with him. His first victim was his mother and he himself involuntarily reinforces

the notion of being the carrier of death on choosing the name Flapping Eagle to substitute the former, Joe-Sue. Flapping Eagle intended to adopt a name with a bold resonance to it, not realising at first that the eagle, in Amerindian mythology, symbolises the Destroyer (Rushdie, 1975: 22 and 46). Naming is crucial in terms of signification and relations of power. Instead of Flapping Eagle's controlling his own destiny he realises that he did not choose his name; actually, it is as if the name chose him (Rushdie, 1975: 46). Flapping Eagle's naming is undoubtedly part of his enfreakment process for the author, through Virgil, makes the reader aware that:

[t]he bird-kingdom is remarkably suitable for myth-makers. It occupies a different medium, yet it is in many ways an excellent parallel-having languages, courtship, family ties and so forth. Distant enough in appearance to be a safely abstract analogue, birds are near enough to be interesting. Consider the lark. Or the hawk. Or the nightingale. Or the vulture. The names are more than descriptions; they have become symbols. Consider too, the profusion of bird - gods in Antiquity. The Phoenix. The Roc. The Homa. The Garuda. The Bennu. The Bar Kerkes. The Gryphon. The Norka. The Sacred Dragma. The Pheng. The Kirmi. The Orosch. The Saena. The Anga. And of course, the master of them all, Simurg himself. (Rushdie, 1975: 46)

The answer is, evidently, that the distance is not so great. Flapping Eagle's problems do not at all restrict themselves to this. He comes to realise that his and his sister's ostracism spring from three reasons:

first, my confused sex; second, the circumstances of my birth; and third my pigmentation. To take them in order. To be a hermaphrodite among the Axona is to be very bad medicine. A monster. To mutate from that state into a 'normal' male is akin to black magic. They didn't like that. To be what I was, born from dead, was a dire omen; if I could bring death at the moment of my birth, it would sit upon my shoulder like a vulture wherever I went. As for my colouring: the Axona are a dark-skinned race and shortish. As I grew, it became apparent that I was, inexplicably, to be fair-skinned and tallish. This further genetic aberration - *whiteness* - meant they were frightened of me and shied away from contact.

Because they were frightened, they gave us a measure of respect. Because I was a freak, they gave us a measure of scorn. (Rushdie, 1975: 18. Italics in the text)

Flapping Eagle combines a series of opposites that make him an exquisite example of freakish aberration: between animal and human, between life and death, in-between genders. The latter problem he

comes to solve only in covering himself in abjection on his twenty-first birthday: Flapping Eagle's manliness is definitely asserted at the expense of an incestuous copulation, to be repeated thereafter, with Bird-Dog. The final abjectifying element is immortality (that he acquires through a magic yellow liquid); on not dying, not only does he nullify any possibility of carnivalistic regeneration but neither does he accept the world's concepts of time. Reversal, which results in questioning reality (i.e., cultural restraints, definitions of time and space, order and hierarchy), has clearly always been of vital importance to Salman Rushdie.

The Indian writer's political interest in postcolonial matters is patent right from his first novel. Like India's own class organisation arising out of notions of purity and defilement, translated into un/touchability categories, the Axona are deeply concerned with cleanliness. To them, "all that is Unaxona is Unclean" (Rushdie, 1975: 24), and thus, exile is the result, ultimately, not of the Flapping Eagle's various forms of freakishness but of difference itself. The Axona scorn is nothing more than a symptom of their fear of "contamination" and "disease", in this case brilliantly transferred to the postcolonial context by an intelligent reversal of colour, that deconstructs the white reader's perception of whiteness equalling immaculateness, and consequently, annuls any interpretation relating to superiority (Rushdie, 1975: 24).

In Salman Rushdie's first novel, the incarnation of the eagle spirit and of its fellow animal companion, the dog, only initiates what he comes to elaborate to a much greater extent in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* where freakishness, grotesqueness and abjection are some of the translations of Indian multiplicity.



To Marcus Vetruvius Pollio, the first century Roman architect, some artists of his time sinned against pure art on creating figures of imagination distant from what nature gave humans to observe. To display the interweaving of animal, vegetal and human elements was a sort of impious and futile art. In the fifteenth century, Hieronymous Bosch specialised in fantastic paintings animated by crossover beings. *The Tree-Man* became one of the most popular images of painting along with visions of Heaven and Hell contained in *The Final Judgement* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Hybridisation stands



as the trademark of the Flemish painter whose extremely diverse monsters frequently combine human and animal figures. Reptiles and birds “people” his darkest creations and their popularity is such that most of us are likely to be familiar with “Monster With Bird Head” (*The Garden of Earthly Delights*), or with the bird-man, funnel-hatted and red-dressed, included in “The Flight and Fall of St Anthony” (*The Temptation of St Anthony*). Bakhtin considers Bosch and Breughel the Elder as the material body artists *par excellence* (Bakhtin, 1984: 27) and Kayser emphasises the paradoxical quality that characterises Boschian painting when he describes the *Garden of Earthly Delights* as follows: “The strangest creatures hover about them [bushes pierced by crystal needles and glass globes]: unknown birds, flying fish, winged people who play with glass balls or try to catch fish. In brief, a frightful mixture of mechanical, vegetable animal, and human elements is represented as the image of our world, which is breaking apart” (Bakhtin, 1984: 33). Once artistic expression abandoned the limitations imposed by mimetic reproduction, the resort to the grotesque, particularly to hybrid monstrosity, rapidly conquered the imagination of more daring minds.

Birded humans play a specific part in this wider artistic and cultural context. Their significance is often particular to each case, depending on race, class, gender and (if one can really put it in such terms) of degree of freakishness. In spite of those differences, there is common ground: physical Otherness, be it materialised in monstrosity or angelhood, compensates the hardships resulting from their difference with a sense of liberty (though at times that is not positive either. Take Gibreel’s hallucinatory experiences in *The Satanic Verses*, for instance). To be One takes effort, to be Other might, just might, present potential for a diverse, perhaps more authentic, self-fulfilment. It is in this sense that animality unveils the most obscure and mysterious side of humanity; together Other and Self make the whole which remains metamorphosing because, if one (other?) has wings to fly, then one must do it. Picking up Nicole Ward-Jouve’s argument put forth at the beginning of this discussion, and in view of what has been discussed, then that same argument can be taken further. Feminist existentialism can be de-centred from gender. Grotesqueness has a particular meaning for women but so it does for men. This being the case, wouldn’t it be appropriate to speak of human existentialism?

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