International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2024: 7.101

The Metamorphosis of Truth: Mythmaking as Performative Identity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

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Abstract: ***This paper examines the relationship between mythmaking and identity construction in Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus (1984), and argues that the novel presents myth not as falsehood but as a performative act of self-creation. Through a comprehensive analysis of the protagonist Sophie Fevvers and the liminal space of the circus, this study demonstrates how Carter employs mythmaking as a radical tool for challenging patriarchal narratives, conventional truth claims, and fixed notions of identity. The paper makes use of contemporary theories of performativity, narratology, and feminist criticism, to explore how the novel's postmodern sensibilities transform mythmaking. Carter's work anticipates contemporary debates about constructed identity, authenticity, and the role of narrative in shaping reality. By examining the novel's tripartite structure, the dynamics of belief and skepticism, and the transformation of both performer and audience, this study contributes to understanding how late twentieth-century fiction reimagined the relationship between truth, fiction, and selfhood. Nights at the Circus presents mythmaking as a collaborative process wherein identity emerges through the dialectical relationship between storyteller and audience, performance and belief, truth and fabrication.***

Keywords: mythmaking, performative identity, feminist narrative, postmodern fiction

1. Introduction: The Architecture of Myth in Carter's Universe

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* stands as a monumental achievement in late twentieth-century fiction, a text that radically reimagines the relationship between myth, truth, and identity. Published in 1984, the novel presents a world where the boundaries between reality and fabrication dissolve, where characters construct themselves through elaborate narratives, and where the act of storytelling becomes a mechanism for both survival and transformation. At the centre of this narrative universe is Sophie Fevvers, a winged aerialist whose very existence challenges ontological certainties and whose self-fashioned myth serves as both shield and weapon in navigating a patriarchal society.

Carter's novel reconceptualizes mythmaking not as deception but as a vital form of identity construction, particularly for those marginalized by dominant social structures. Through detailed analysis of the text's narrative strategies, character construction, and thematic preoccupations, this study demonstrates how *Nights at the Circus* presents identity as fundamentally performative—an idea that anticipates and enriches contemporary theoretical discussions about the constructed nature of selfhood.

The significance of Carter's approach to mythmaking extends beyond literary innovation. Writing in the wake of second-wave feminism and amid postmodern challenges to grand narratives, Carter creates a work that simultaneously celebrates and interrogates the power of storytelling. Her novel suggests that in a world where "truth" often serves patriarchal interests, mythmaking becomes a subversive practice through which marginalized individuals can assert alternative realities and claim agency over their own narratives.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Myth, Performance, and Postmodern Identity

Carter's innovative approach to mythmaking must be situated within broader theoretical discussions about myth, performance, and identity in postmodern thought. Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural approach to myth, which views mythic narratives as attempts to resolve cultural contradictions, provides a foundation for understanding how Fevvers' personal myth negotiates between opposing forces: nature and culture, freedom and constraint, truth and fiction. However, Carter's approach more closely aligns with Roland Barthes's conception of myth as a second-order semiological system. In *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that myth transforms history into nature, making culturally specific meanings appear universal and inevitable. Carter inverts this process: her mythmaking reveals the constructed nature of supposedly "natural" categories, particularly gender and identity. Fevvers' myth doesn't naturalize culture but rather culturalizes nature, making her allegedly biological wings into symbols of performed identity.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, though published after Carter's novel, provides a crucial lens for understanding the performative dimensions of mythmaking in *Nights at the Circus*. Butler argues that gender identity is constituted through repeated performances rather than expressing some essential inner truth. Similarly, Fevvers' identity emerges through the repeated performance of her myth—each telling reinforces and modifies her constructed self. This performative understanding of identity aligns with postmodern challenges to essentialist notions of selfhood. Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra—copies without originals—illuminates how Fevvers' myth operates: there is no "real" Fevvers beneath the performance, only the performance itself. Her wings, whether biological or

prosthetic, become real through their narrative and spectacular function rather than their material origin.

Carter's mythmaking also engages with narratological concepts, particularly the relationship between story and discourse. Gérard Genette's distinction between histoire (story), récit (narrative), and narration (the act of narrating) helps illuminate how Fevvers controls not just what story is told but how it is told. Her Cockney accent, theatrical gestures, and strategic revelations all constitute what Mikhail Bakhtin would term "heteroglossia"—the novel's multiple voices and languages that resist monologic authority. The metafictional aspects of Carter's novel—its self-conscious attention to its own status as fiction—align with Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction." This mode simultaneously installs and subverts historical narrative, neither denying the existence of the past nor accepting uncritically the ways it has been represented. Fevvers' myth operates similarly, neither wholly true nor wholly false, but rather occupying a liminal space that challenges binary thinking.

3. The Performance of Self: Fevvers' Mythic Construction

Fevvers' claim to have been "hatched from an egg" immediately establishes her narrative within mythic traditions. This origin story serves multiple functions: it aligns her with divine or supernatural beings in classical mythology, disrupts biological determinism, and asserts her exceptional status. This extraordinary beginning performs what Mircea Eliade calls the function of origin myths—explaining how something came to be while establishing its sacred or special status. Yet Carter subverts traditional origin myths by making Fevvers' story consciously constructed and performatively maintained. Unlike classical myths that present themselves as truth, Fevvers' myth revels in its own artificiality while paradoxically asserting its emotional and symbolic truth.

The ambiguity surrounding Fevvers' wings becomes central to understanding how her myth functions. This uncertainty is never resolved, suggesting that the "truth" of her wings matters less than their narrative and symbolic function. They enable her to transcend ordinary human limitations, both literally in her circus performances and figuratively in her social mobility.

Carter pays careful attention to how Fevvers constructs her myth through language. Her distinctive Cockney dialect, peppered with theatrical exclamations and knowing winks, creates a linguistic persona that both authenticates and ironizes her story. Consider her declaration: "I am not a symbol, I am a woman" (Carter 144). This statement paradoxically reinforces her symbolic status while asserting her humanity—a dual function characteristic of her mythmaking throughout the novel. The novel's narrative structure reinforces this linguistic mythmaking. The first section, "London," presents Fevvers' story primarily through her own voice as she narrates to Walser. This extended monologue, punctuated by her foster mother Lizzie's interruptions and corrections, demonstrates how myths are collaboratively constructed. Lizzie's role as both supporter and editor of Fevvers' narrative suggests that mythmaking is never a solitary act but always involves an audience that shapes the telling.

Carter astutely connects Fevvers' mythmaking to economic survival. In a capitalist society where women's options are limited, Fevvers commodifies her difference, transforming potential marginalization into profitable spectacle. Her declaration—"I am the only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world" (Carter 294)—explicitly links her mythic status to her market value. This commodification of myth reflects what Marxist critics might term the "fetishization" of the extraordinary, where use-value is superseded by exchange-value. Yet Fevvers' economic exploitation of her own myth also represents a form of agency. Unlike the exploited "freaks" in traditional sideshows, she controls her narrative and profits from it. This economic dimension of mythmaking suggests that in modern capitalist societies, identity itself becomes a commodity—a prescient observation given contemporary discussions about personal branding and self-commodification in the digital age.

Carter's novel systematically revises classical mythological tropes, particularly those concerning hybrid female figures. Fevvers evokes various mythological precedents—harpies, sirens, angels—but refuses their traditional meanings. Where classical myths often present winged women as either divine messengers or destructive monsters, Fevvers is neither saviour nor destroyer but an individual navigating her own path. This revisionist mythmaking aligns with the broader feminist project of reclaiming and transforming patriarchal narratives. Fevvers explicitly identifies herself with the figure of the "New Woman," a late-Victorian concept representing female independence and challenge to traditional gender roles. Her declaration—"I am the New Woman, and I am the Future" (Carter 25)—positions her myth within specific historical debates about gender and modernity. Yet Carter complicates this identification by showing how the "New Woman" herself becomes a kind of myth—a constructed identity that both enables and constrains. Fevvers' performance of New Womanhood reveals how even progressive gender identities can become reified into limiting categories.

The novel's treatment of sexuality and virginity particularly demonstrates Carter's revisionist approach to gendered myths. Fevvers' claim to be "intacta" despite her worldly experience creates a paradox that explodes traditional virgin/whore dichotomies. Her virginity becomes another aspect of her myth—neither simply true nor false but performatively maintained for its symbolic and economic value. This treatment of virginity as performance rather than biological fact anticipates contemporary discussions about the social construction of virginity. Carter suggests that like Fevvers' wings, virginity is less a physical reality than a cultural myth with real social effects. This demythologization of female sexuality while simultaneously recognizing its mythic power exemplifies Carter's dialectical approach to feminist revision.

4. Liminal Spaces: The Circus as Site of Mythic Transformation

The circus in Carter's novel functions as what anthropologist Victor Turner terms a "liminal space"—a threshold environment where normal social rules are suspended and transformation becomes possible. Within the circus ring, the impossible becomes credible, the marginal becomes central, and identity becomes fluid. For Fevvers, the circus provides the ideal environment for her mythmaking, a space where audiences expect and desire the extraordinary. Carter's circus, however, is not merely a space of wonder but also one of exploitation and violence. Colonel Kearney's American circus represents capitalist commodification of difference, while Buffo's Grand Imperial Circus embodies European traditions of spectacle. These different circus environments allow Carter to explore how myths function differently in various cultural contexts. In London, Fevvers' myth is exotic and erotic; in Russia, it becomes political; in Siberia, it faces existential crisis.

The circus as spectacle raises questions about power, gaze, and representation that are central to Carter's feminist project. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" in cinema finds parallels in the circus ring, where female performers are traditionally objects of visual consumption. Fevvers, however, complicates this dynamic. Her enormous size, powerful wings, and commanding presence make her difficult to contain within traditional scopophilic structures. Moreover, Fevvers' aerial act literalizes her transcendence of earthbound limitations. As she observes: "I am the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no woman will be bound down to the ground" (Carter 25). This vertical escape from horizontal oppression transforms the circus ring into a space of feminist possibility, where traditional gender hierarchies can be literally overturned.

Carter uses the circus as a microcosm of society, complete with its own hierarchies, economies, and power structures. The novel's tripartite structure—London, Petersburg, Siberia—traces the circus's journey from metropolitan center to colonial periphery, revealing how myths function differently in various geographical and cultural contexts. The destruction of the circus train in Siberia marks a crucial turning point, stripping away the artificial structures that support the performers' constructed identities. In this wilderness setting, characters must reconstruct themselves without the scaffolding of spectacle. That Fevvers' myth survives this destruction suggests its fundamental importance to her identity—it is not merely a performance but constitutive of her being.

The novel's three-part structure creates what Joseph Campbell might recognize as a mythic journey, though one that subverts traditional heroic patterns. Instead of the male hero's journey of departure, initiation, and return, Fevvers' journey involves establishment, challenge, and transformation of her founding myth. Each section presents different challenges to mythmaking. London allows for the myth's elaboration in a familiar context; Petersburg introduces political and cultural complications; Siberia strips away civilizational supports, testing the myth's essential core. This structure demonstrates how myths must continuously adapt to survive changing circumstances.

Carter's treatment of time reinforces the novel's mythic dimensions. The narrative moves between different temporal registers: clock time (the precise dating of events), mythic time (Fevvers' timeless story), and narrative time (the time of telling). These multiple temporalities create what Bakhtin called a "chronotope"—a specific configuration of time and space that shapes narrative meaning. The novel's conclusion, where time literally stops as the old century becomes the new, crystallizes this temporal complexity. This moment of temporal suspension—midnight held in abeyance—creates a liminal instant where transformation becomes possible. Fevvers' laughter at this moment suggests the triumph of mythic time over mechanical time, of human narrative over historical determinism.

The relationship between memory and myth proves crucial throughout the novel. Fevvers' narrative relies on selective memory, strategic forgetting, and creative reconstruction. Lizzie's role as memory-keeper and story-editor highlights how personal myths depend on collective memory while transforming it. Walser's amnesia in Siberia provides a counterpoint to Fevvers' mythmaking through memory. His loss of identity through memory loss demonstrates memory's crucial role in maintaining selfhood. His reconstruction of identity parallels Fevvers' initial construction, suggesting that all identity involves mythmaking through memory's selective processes.

5. Truth, Belief, and Audience: The Collaborative Nature of Mythmaking

Jack Walser's character arc provides a crucial counterpoint to Fevvers' mythmaking. As a journalist committed to empirical truth, Walser initially approaches Fevvers' story with professional skepticism. His transformation from detached observer to invested participant traces the power of myth to overwhelm rational resistance. Walser's journalistic quest to "expose" Fevvers reflects patriarchal desires to control female narrative. His assumption that there must be a "truth" behind her performance reveals his investment in binary thinking—real/fake, truth/lie—that Fevvers' myth continuously destabilizes. His gradual abandonment of this binary logic represents not defeat but enlightenment, a recognition that truth and myth are not opposites but interrelated modes of meaning-making.

Carter presents mythmaking as fundamentally collaborative, requiring both teller and audience. Fevvers' myth gains power not through her assertions alone but through others' willingness to believe—or at least to suspend disbelief. This collaborative dimension reflects what reader-response theorists like Wolfgang Iser call the "implied reader"—the audience position constructed by the text itself. The novel's metafictional elements extend this collaboration to include Carter's readers. By leaving fundamental questions unresolved—are Fevvers' wings real?—Carter forces readers to participate in the mythmaking process. We become complicit in Fevvers' myth, our readerly desire for resolution frustrated by the text's refusal to provide definitive answers.

The novel's treatment of truth versus fiction ultimately suggests that this binary is itself a myth. When Fevvers declares to Walser, "I fooled you!" (Carter 295), the statement's meaning remains gloriously ambiguous. Has she fooled him into believing a false story, or fooled him into doubting a true one? Carter suggests that truth itself is performative—not a static fact but an ongoing negotiation between teller and audience. This performative understanding of truth anticipates postmodern and post-truth debates about the nature of reality in mediatized societies. Carter's novel suggests that in a world where reality is always already mediated through narrative, the distinction between truth and myth becomes less important than understanding how both function to create meaning and identity.

Carter's novel complicates simple moral judgments about truth and deception. If Fevvers' wings are false, is her entire identity fraudulent? If they are real, does this validate her myth? The novel suggests these questions miss the point: identity exists in the performative space between truth and falsehood. This ethical complexity reflects broader philosophical debates about authenticity. Existentialist philosophy's emphasis on authentic self-creation finds an echo in Fevvers' mythmaking, yet Carter avoids essentialist notions of a "true self" beneath performance. Instead, she suggests authenticity might lie in acknowledging performance as constitutive of identity.

The novel also explores deception's political dimensions. In a society that systematically deceives women about their capabilities and possibilities, Fevvers' mythmaking becomes a form of counter-deception. Her "lies" expose larger social lies about gender, class, and human possibility. This political reading of deception aligns with what Gayatri Spivak calls "strategic essentialism"—the tactical use of essentialist categories for political purposes while recognizing their constructed nature. Fevvers' myth operates similarly, using fixed identity categories (the "natural" woman with wings) to challenge those very categories' limitations.

Central to the novel's ethical exploration is the question of agency. Does Fevvers' mythmaking represent genuine self-determination or merely another form of constraint? Carter suggests this binary itself is false: agency emerges through creative negotiation with constraints rather than absolute freedom from them. This nuanced view of agency anticipates contemporary debates about structure and agency in social theory. Rather than viewing individuals as either free agents or structural dupes, Carter presents identity as emerging through creative engagement with limiting conditions.

6. Myth in the Modern Age: Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance

Carter's choice to set her novel at the end of the nineteenth century is significant for understanding her approach to mythmaking. The fin de siècle was a period of profound transformation—industrial modernization, imperial expansion, emerging feminism, and challenges to traditional certainties. In this context, Fevvers' mythmaking represents both a response to and product of modernity's destabilization of fixed categories. The novel's geographical journey from London to Petersburg to Siberia traces the reach of European modernity while revealing its limitations. Each location presents different challenges to Fevvers' myth, forcing her to adapt her performance to new cultural contexts. This geographical scope suggests that myths are not universal but culturally specific, requiring constant translation and transformation.

Carter subtly explores how modern technology transforms mythmaking. The railroad that carries the circus across continents represents modernity's compression of time and space, enabling myths to travel faster and farther than ever before. Yet the train's crash in Siberia suggests technology's limits—mechanical progress cannot prevent mythic narratives' fundamental human dimensions. Similarly, Walser's journalistic profession represents modern media's role in mythmaking. His initial skepticism embodies journalism's claim to objective truth, while his eventual transformation suggests media's actual function in creating and circulating myths. This prescient observation anticipates contemporary discussions about "fake news" and media's role in constructing reality.

Despite—or perhaps because of—modernity's rationalizing tendencies, Carter suggests that mythmaking remains essential to human identity. Fevvers' success in maintaining her myth even in an age of scientific skepticism demonstrates myth's persistence in secular societies. Her story satisfies deep human needs for wonder, meaning, and transcendence that rational discourse cannot fulfill. This persistence of myth in modernity reflects what Max Weber called the "re-enchantment" of the world—the return of magical thinking within rational societies. Carter's novel suggests that rather than opposing reason and myth, we should understand how they interrelate in creating human meaning. Fevvers' myth succeeds not despite modern skepticism but through creative engagement with it.

7. Conclusion: The Transformative Power of Myth

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* ultimately presents mythmaking not as deception but as a fundamental human activity through which we create meaning, forge identities, and navigate social constraints. Through Fevvers' spectacular self-construction, Carter demonstrates how myths can serve liberatory purposes, particularly for those marginalized by dominant narratives.

The novel's enduring relevance lies in its anticipation of contemporary concerns about identity construction, authenticity, and narrative truth. In an era of social media self-presentation, "fake news," and contested realities, Carter's exploration of mythmaking as identity performance seems remarkably prescient. Her work suggests that rather than pursuing impossible authentic truth, we should attend to how truths are constructed, performed, and transformed.

Fevvers' final laughter—ambiguous, triumphant, and slightly mocking—encapsulates the novel's complex attitude toward mythmaking. Neither wholly endorsing nor condemning the practice, Carter presents it as an inescapable aspect of human existence. In a world where all identities are performed and

all truths are partial, mythmaking becomes not deception but survival strategy, not falsehood but alternative truth-telling.

The novel's formal innovations—its metafictional play, unreliable narration, and refusal of closure—reinforce this thematic exploration. By making readers complicit in the mythmaking process, Carter demonstrates how literary fiction itself participates in the construction of myths about identity, gender, and human possibility. In this light, *Nights at the Circus* stands not merely as a novel about mythmaking but as itself a myth—a transformative narrative that reshapes our understanding of truth, identity, and the power of stories to create reality. The novel transcends simple categories of truth and fiction to explore the complex ways narratives shape human identity. In Fevvers' spectacular flights—both literal and metaphorical—we find a vision of human possibility that remains as relevant today as when Carter first imagined it. Her laughter echoes still, inviting us to question our own myths while celebrating the transformative power of storytelling itself.

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