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**Power and Transgression: Margins, Crossings and Monstrous Women in
Selected Works of Bharati Mukherjee and Angela Carter**

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on power and transgression in selected works of two disparate authors, Bharati Mukherjee and Angela Carter. Despite their differences of origins, cultures and styles, both writers articulate a vision of transgressive, unruly women, often situated at society's edges, who dare to challenge boundaries and who are capable of monstrous, larger-than-life acts. Setting these two authors side by side illuminates how the margins can unleash an energetic potency and reveals how transgression produces a liberatory effect that both unsettles power *and* provides a necessary advantage for those who wish to inhabit the space of power.

Three main areas of investigation are covered. The initial section addresses people at the 'Margins' in terms of Carter's use of the carnivalesque and Mukherjee's application of chaos theory; unexpected confluences emerge which paradoxically speak to the symbolic force of those cast to the side or consigned to the edges, suggesting that the margins themselves can become places of power. The section on 'Crossings' looks at transgression both literally, as a crossing over from one space to another, and metaphorically, as a violation of normative codes of behaviour. For both authors, crossings of one kind or another, whether metaphoric, literal, or textual, foreground a transgressive edge. An analysis of the texts reveals how, in very different ways, Mukherjee and Carter articulate transgression as contesting established authority and creating space for a divergent form of ascendancy. The final section on 'Monstrous Women' deals with how women and foreigners are framed as 'freaks' or monsters in order to devalue their significance within hegemonic patriarchal structures. Ironically, this framing can be recuperated so that it simultaneously subverts power through parody, excess and violence, and creates a gap for accessing it.

Borders, gaps and crossings underpin this entire study and drive the rationale for reading these two authors together, revealing the spaces between them, and how they criss-cross, meet, collide or fail to align. The journey of this thesis has travelled a counterpath: it has demanded openness to the encounter with the unexpected, resulting in the discovery of insights, and being surprised and enlightened by unsuspected alliances and evocative mismatches.

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DECLARATION

I, *Corinne Abel*, hereby declare that the work on which this thesis is based is my original work (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university.

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PREFACE

Towards the end of the nineties – my own fin de siècle – I was studying for an Honours degree in English at the University of South Africa, after a 20 year hiatus. The whole field of literary studies had changed dramatically since the early seventies – now the requirements involved not only close study of novels, but the ability to grapple with related fields of philosophy and psychology. Ideas, theories and iconic names were coming at me fast and furious: Lacan, the mirror image, Butler, gender construction, Lyotard, Baudrillard, postmodernism, Saussure, Barthes, poststructuralism, Fanon, Said, postcolonialism – all these literary ‘posts’ astounded and confused me! And South Africa too had entered its own post phase with the ending of Apartheid. I was reading and living a new age.

One of the set texts for this Honours course was *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. The novel was a blast. It talked of India, freedom and strong women who could change their worlds. It spoke of the capacity to transgress and violate boundaries, to refuse fixedness, to create new identities. It ignited my liberatory nerve. The daring and the violence that the eponymous heroine was capable of hooked my interest. The novel threw me a challenge, and so began my travels with Mukherjee.

The same course of study introduced me to Angela Carter and two rather different texts: *The Magic Toyshop* and *The Passion of New Eve*. The first gave me that similar thrill of discovering a novel that throws down the gauntlet to received assumptions; the second, while interesting, seemed rather more studied, more polemical, less exciting. But Carter had piqued my interest: here was a writer of serious depth and intellect who was grappling with political and intellectual issues and excavating controversial ground for engagement, and who could still write up a narrative storm.

So how did I subsequently come to yoke together these two writers who are so different in style, thematics, and cultural backgrounds into one thesis? Mukherjee is concerned with exiles and immigrants, with worlds of the past – whether Bengal or New Salem – and how they impact on and interact with present day realities. Her narrative style aims to reflect the chaos and non-linearity of life, but it is realist in form. Carter, on the other hand, creates

unreal worlds in her fiction, often fantastic or horrific, and her style can be overblown and outrageous; at times, excessive and funny, or sarcastic and polemical. Mukherjee is Indian-born, American-integrated; Carter was British (although from Irish stock), and their only point of intersection seems to be their year of birth. Carter was a committed socialist from a lower middle-class family; Mukherjee comes from an elite family and emphasises her upper-class Bengali Brahmin origins, while simultaneously appearing to disavow – or at least, complicate – the significance of her Indian heritage. Yet both writers, despite their differences, have been fascinated with power, gridlocked identity and the conditions that enable freedom and the debunking of restricting mores.

Academically, my previous work had been varied and non-literary, ranging from concerns with ethnic identity and affiliation to the perceptions of power amongst workers in organisations. This latter piece of research, completed for my M.A. degree in Psychology, investigated what makes some groups appear more effective than others, and the conditions necessary for the recognition and granting of power. If I had been familiar with the work of Michel Foucault at the time of writing my dissertation in the early eighties, perhaps my study would have been quite different. Nonetheless, while my investigation was framed within the context of psychological and organisational theories, my conclusions pointed to the slipperiness of power and how perceptions and attitudes interact with a network of relations and variables to affect the balance of power significantly.

The individual's ability to execute potency in a disempowered situation – either singly or in a group – has remained a driving focus of my work, and the opening epigraph of my Masters' dissertation still identifies a current, burning issue:

The lack of will is much more than merely an ethical problem: the modern individual so often has the conviction that even if he did exert his "will" – or whatever illusion passes for it – his actions wouldn't do any good anyway. It is this inner experience of impotence, this contradiction in will, which constitutes our critical problem. (Rollo May, *Love and Will* 184)

In the sixties, we saw the exertion of will demonstrated in student protests across Europe and America. In the eighties and nineties South Africa saw repeated mass actions to dismantle Apartheid. In recent years, collective will has asserted itself in riots across the

Arab world. And still, there are so many who are unable to assert any form of will at all, who experience impotence in their ability to obtain the most basic necessities for sustaining life.

Currently, I frequently come into contact with people who occupy border positions by virtue of their social and economic standing;¹ either they are literally stranded at border posts or metaphorically they occupy marginalised positions because of their illegal status and/or extreme poverty and/or gender. Their situations are complicated further by trauma – for refugees, it may be the distress experienced prior to escape or the ordeal of journeying from places of persecution. For South Africans who come from seriously under-resourced and impoverished communities, the trauma of loss seems inevitable – loss of a family member through ill health or violence, loss of home, or loss of dignity. Yet, somehow, amazingly, so many of these ‘bottom-of-the-pile’ people manage to mobilise a sense of worth and to garner some meaning for themselves and their families in the midst of the most dire circumstances.

It seems inevitable then that my current academic interest is centred on avowing and proclaiming potency. Indeed, this thesis tries to look for those corners of possibility where will has been asserted, those places and spaces where the most disempowered have caught hold of a thread of strength and have begun to weave a world of worth. It also contemplates how people who have been cast aside and marginalised not only have the capacity to destabilise power but also to procure it by using their peripheral positions. Perhaps it is the experience of being ‘bottom of the pile’ that gives them the weapons – emotional and psychological – not only to overcome hardship but also to take risks that jettison them into positions of ascendancy. For those who are situated at the margins, pulling at the strings of power is fraught. This is especially true of women who are still routinely marginalised in patriarchal societies. Thus, when they do break through, the result tends to be liberatory and exhilarating. Hence, the appeal of Mukherjee’s Jasmine who makes it ‘out’, despite ‘fate’, violence, rape, illegal crossings and illegitimate arrivals; she offers the vision, (romantic, maybe) of the possibilities of transformation; she represents the hope (idealistic, probably) that power for the dispossessed is possible.

¹ As CEO of a Foundation that funds education, environmental and advocacy projects for disadvantaged and marginalised communities, I am privileged to encounter people from all walks of life throughout South Africa.

There is a certain quality possessed by effective leaders that gives them a mystique, one which they seem to share with those on the outside or situated at the margins that enables them to face down a crisis or to do things differently. This idea is affirmed by Dov Frohman, founder of Intel Israel and a Holocaust survivor, who states that 'unless you are prepared to [...] go against the current, you are unlikely to accomplish anything truly important. And to go against the current, you have to be something of an outsider, living on the edge, a member of a small but vibrant counterculture' (22).²

Both Carter and Mukherjee have gone 'against the current', interrogating codes of feminine decorum through their work and pushing their unorthodox female characters to do or be something significant. Mukherjee's novels were instrumental in opening my eyes to the emancipatory capacity of transgression; Carter's work expanded on this effect by celebrating the power of her 'new' women, like Fevvers, the aerialiste in *Nights at the Circus*, or Dora and Nora, the high-kicking aging twins in *Wise Children*. Together with them I take this journey to uncover the potency and potential of the unfettered, unruly woman.

² However, being cast as an outsider is not equivalent to being in the abject position of the undocumented and stateless, and while it is tempting to valorise a marginalised position, we need to be wary of soft, even unethical romanticism. 'Marketing the margins', in Graham Huggan's terms, seems to me to commodify a place and space that in reality often has no purchase on power at all.

1. INTRODUCTION

Power and its relationship to transgression is the focus of this investigation into the work of two contemporary but disparate writers, Angela Carter and Bharati Mukherjee. Both highlight the power play implicit in societal and sexual relations, focusing in particular on unruly women who resist or disrupt hegemonic structures. Rita Felski asks what constitutes the moment of 'recognition' in reading (*Uses of Literature* 23); it is a critical question underpinning my choice of writers and subject matter. Although the idea of recognition is complex, both 'mundane and mysterious' (ibid.), it does evoke the emotional moment when one is compelled by a text, one's perspective shifts, and one feels delight at the fearless debunking of ideas and the potential for transformation. It is precisely this sense of being compelled that provides the impetus for bringing these two writers from very different cultural milieus together and engaging them in an unlikely dialogue. This study is the beginning of a journey where I anticipate that unforeseen confluences will generate excitement and moments of 'recognition', a voyage that will open up new paths of research and understanding, and that will, at times, drift off-course and travel the counterpath, providing the possibility of a surprise encounter with the unexpected.

I read power and transgression in the work of my two chosen authors through the lens of margins, crossings and the monstrous, postulating that transgression is constituted through crossings of one kind or another and that these 'crossings' are vital components of power. Both Mukherjee and Carter engage with crossings as a form of transgression, especially in relation to their female characters. Although very different kinds of transgressive females are articulated in their work, all share the distinction of rupturing expectations of social relations and not fitting into a normative mould of femininity, to the extent that they are frequently perceived as outrageous and monstrous. The figure of the 'monstrous female' as powerful and transgressive is thus apposite to their oeuvres.

My framework for this enquiry is situated in various theoretical models that inform the writing of the two authors, but principally it emerges from the fictional texts themselves which show their female protagonists engaging in unexpected, unpalatable or even shocking

acts. My overriding question is whether this transgressive behaviour, apart from producing a liberatory effect, also – and more fundamentally – provides possibilities of power for these female characters. In other words, I investigate the monstrous female as a trope of transgression in selected pertinent works of my two authors and I ask whether this trope can be revamped as a modality of power.

1.1 The Authors

I introduce biographical information about Carter and Mukherjee here (and at various other points throughout the Introduction) in order to parallel my ‘moment of recognition’ when the major points of reference of this study leapt out at me from the texts, revealing how the authors’ transgressive women come to undermine, overturn and inhabit positions of power. Both writers shared the conviction that literary texts can address issues of power and that the transgressive text can instigate change; while Carter agreed with Barthes’ position on the death of the author – ‘once the book is published it belongs to the fan, not to the writer’ (*Shaking* 33) – I assert the significance of authorial intention as integral to the avowed political agenda of both Mukherjee and Carter.¹ Although their biographies mostly mismatch in terms of birth countries, domiciles and cultural repertoires, there are startling similarities in their experiences of themselves as ‘aliens’, how they constructed themselves as ‘women writers’ and how their ‘outsider’ perspectives enabled a creative view of difference (see Sage *Angela* 1).

Both Mukherjee and Carter abandoned the ease of familiar worlds to launch themselves into places of ‘otherness’. In the late sixties, when Western youth appeared to be turning the world upside down,² Carter embarked on her own voyage of self-assertion. She had written three novels, won prizes for two of them (*A Magic Toyshop* and *Several Perceptions*), and she used the money to leave her husband and travel to Japan where she lived for two years, feeling totally alien, so ‘absolutely the mysterious other’ (*Fireworks* 8). Earlier in the decade – 1962 to be exact – Bharati Mukherjee had left Calcutta and

¹ Lorna Sage argued that Barthes’ proposition thumbed its nose at patriarchal authority: ‘If you renounced [...] the author’s traditional authority, you were symbolically defying too the patriarchal power that decreed *your* place in the book of the world’ (*Angela* 3, original italics).

² See Helen Stoddart on the ‘counter-culture’ of the sixties (10-11). Carter herself regarded the sixties in some ways as ‘Year One [...] when all that was holy was in the process of being profaned’ (*Shaking* 37).

embarked on a radical journey (predicted/fated?) across the Kala Pani or the 'Black Waters' of the ocean – a voyage that means abandoning family, caste and the Holy Ganges, the river of rebirth – to attend the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the USA. There she met and married her Canadian-born husband, and in 1966 they moved to Montreal, Canada.

Carter and Mukherjee were born in the same year, 1940, and consequently lived through similar world events. Despite their differences on almost every level, they were both concerned with the construction of norms through dominant mythologies (Hindu, Japanese and Western). They emphasised the ways that these myths produce normative conventions that curtail the freedom of designated groups, especially women, foreigners and those designated as 'other', and perpetuate a particular world view that elevates and entrenches the power of one group at the expense of another.

Politics, as a commitment to changing the structure of social relations through their literature, threads through the work of both writers. Carter's intentions were to stretch 'the limits of the sayable' and to shock her audience into an encounter with new ideas (Gamble, 'Something Sacred' 60). Mukherjee has written extensively about the politics of immigration as well as terrorism (for example, *The Sorrow and the Terror* which deals with the Air India Tragedy in 1987). Their work also draws on philosophical, linguistic, anthropological and scientific theories, as well as on art and socio-political movements so that my explications of their texts are in close dialogue with these paradigms. For example, Carter was influenced by the Surrealists and Georges Bataille, and French theorists such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. She was familiar with psychoanalytic theories – Freud through to Lacan – and was a committed socialist her whole life (see Dimovitz, *Surrealist* 153). Mukherjee's origins are steeped in Hindu traditions but she attended a convent school in Calcutta where her early exposure to canonical English literature (especially Shakespeare and Keats) provided an impetus for her writing (see Interview with Chen and Goudie 83-4). Hinduism has been an important frame for her work, and her own hybridity is evident in the way she marries her Hindu traditions with the new sciences of chaos theory and information technology. Thus, theorists as diverse as Georg Simmel, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Sara Ahmed on the stranger, Lawrence Venuti on translation, Jacques Derrida and Catherine Malabou on travel, and James Gleick and Katherine Hayles on chaos theory, have all added

significantly to my own discussion of the texts as well as to the way the two authors can be viewed in conversation with each other.

1.2 Rationale of the Thesis

In the ensuing discussions, I take up some of the ideas of Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (who base their work on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque within a Marxist framework), to explore how Mukherjee and Carter engage with aspects of the abject and borders in relation to transgression, especially in terms of how the margins are reconfigured as places of transformation, and how the stranger or freak, cast aside and construed as 'other', and therefore monstrous, can become a figure of power. Both writers create a cast of female characters who are in some way 'other' – either foreigner or freak, non-conformist or alien, hyper-sexualised or violent. These characters are flamboyant and courageous, dangerous and transgressive in the way that they rupture boundaries of propriety, introduce disorder into the status quo and sometimes unleash chaos into the world around them. By reworking their marginalised status to establish alternative modes of influence, I argue that they invoke the potential of the 'triumphant underdog' in relation to 'masculine modalities of power' (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 4), thereby installing the periphery as a celebration of power and as a triumph over adversity.

Mary Russo contends that, within a patriarchal system, women 'who go too far' – who make a 'spectacle' of themselves – are viewed as 'dirty' and uncontrollable and are consequently labelled as 'monstrous' or grotesque.³ In *The Female Grotesque*, she maintains that 'The positioning of the grotesque – as superficial and to the margins – is suggestive of a certain construction of the feminine' (5); thus, the grotesque is intimately allied with the feminine. This construction, and the various ways that it plays out in the fiction of Mukherjee and Carter, particularly through their disruptive, transgressive and 'monstrous' women, is one of the key considerations of this study.

Like the characters they create, the texts of Carter and Mukherjee themselves 'go too far': they are unruly, multi-layered, multi storied, travelling in different directions or using ornate

³ The term 'dirt' is not value free, its meaning mediated by culture; Mary Douglas notes that it represents 'all the rejected elements of ordered systems' (44). For Julia Kristeva, it comes to be identified with the abject: that 'which disturbs identity, system, order', that which is liminal and ambiguous (*Powers of Horror* 4).

artifice. They trouble the limits of genre, celebrating excess in both style and content, spilling over the edges, forcing their way into newly created gaps, so that traditions are upended, disrespected, and transformed. In this way they transgress orthodox notions of the good, proper and ordered text. The authors toss aside politically correct assumptions and they take risks using humour, parody and irony. They play the fool with small issues, thereby destabilising the larger ones, and they pummel or tease the centers of power so that these begin to shift. In short, they spill the 'dirt' on the seemingly smug self-centeredness of received wisdom and dominant ideology.

While many critics have focused on the way that Carter uses language and reformulates fairy tales in disruptive ways,⁴ I argue that her use of the transgressive (in her characters and style) also provides the possibility of admittance to ascendancy through her re-coding of femininity. With regard to Mukherjee, some criticism has been levelled at her for casting off her origins and simultaneously drawing on them opportunistically; she has also been accused her of practising self-exoticism while avowing hybridity.⁵ However, my focus is rather on her contribution to the depiction of the female transgressor who defies conventional codes of femininity and reappropriates her marginality through multiple transformations to invest herself with power. By reading two such different writers alongside each other, I pay attention to the centrality of their mutual concern with female power and its determination to push and rework the limits, a concern that transcends narrative form and style, geographical differences and postcolonial rhetoric but that gains unexpected purchase through the analysis of their similarities as well as differences.

I look at the notion of margins for instance and examine how the carnivalesque and chaos theory – two apparently dissimilar theoretical models – both engage with the transgressive, converging through the tropes of the 'low-other', the foreign and the fair. Furthermore, I examine the forms of crossings that their narratives and characters travel – both literal and symbolic – and unpick how these crossings intersect, suggesting synergistic ways of understanding the meaning of translation and transformation. And finally, I investigate

⁴ See for example, Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blond, Double Drag' 258; Roemer and Bacchilega, *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*; Sarah Gamble, *The Fiction of Angela Carter*; Patricia Brooke's 'Lyons and Tigers and Wolves' and Lorna Sage's *Angela Carter*, and Bristow and Broughton, to name but very few.

⁵ See, for example, critical reviews such as John Hoppe, 'The Technological Hybrid' and ; W.M. Verhoeven, 'How Hyphenated Can You Get?'; for favourable reviews, see Judie Newman, *The Ballistic Bard and Fictions of America*; Ubaraj Katawal, 'Becoming a "British Hindoo"'; Megan Obourn, *Reconstituting Americanness*.

whether the framing of unruly women as monstrous can be appropriated as an occasion for women to gain ascendancy and power, and in particular, whether such power is augmented by the edginess of the transgressive.

1.3 Theoretical Background

1.3.1 Power

Power – its construction, consequences and destabilisation through transgression – is a central consideration for both Carter and Mukherjee. The notion of power has been at the centre of extensive philosophical and sociological debate, in particular in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, at the end of the nineteenth century, and Michel Foucault, towards the end of the twentieth, who developed Nietzsche's ideas but was also influenced by the writing of the Marquis de Sade and Bataille.

Foucault emphasised that history is concerned with relations of power rather than with relations of meaning and he put forward two schemas of power: one pits the legitimate against the illegitimate, the other, struggle against submission (*Society must be Defended* 14-17). One of the most persistent features of Foucault's work on power is described by Giorgio Agamben as 'its decisive abandonment of the traditional approach to the problem of power [...] in favor of an unprejudiced analysis of the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects' very bodies and forms of life' (*Homo Sacer* 5). In his earlier writing, Foucault focused on 'decentred power relations' and the way that mechanisms of power produce the 'docile body' (Lewandowski 233).⁶ In later works he attempted to extend his ideas on how power interacts with subjectivity, acknowledging that man is compelled 'to face the task of producing himself' ('What is Enlightenment?' 42), a recurrent theme taken up by both Carter and Mukherjee in relation to women's power. But Foucault has been criticised for failing to reconcile this kind of agency with his description of power structures that are totalising, strategic and anonymous (see Lewandowski 240-1).

While Foucault discussed the genesis of the subject through subjection, Judith Butler notes that subjection as a function of power is inherently ambivalent because it is both an effect

⁶ According to Lewandowski, In his later work Foucault takes up Nietzsche's focus on Zarathustra's 'supposedly liberating philosophical laughter' to articulate 'more positive notions of subjectivity' (233).

and producer of the subject; in other words, taking her cue from Foucault, power both subordinates and produces the subject. Butler argues that while Foucault perceived this ambivalence, he did not explicate it. She seeks to tease it out, grappling with how Foucault's social subject sits alongside Freud's psychical subject, suggesting that a theory of power needs to be thought together with a theory of the psyche (*Psychic Life of Power* 3). The idea of a subject who can produce and remake herself through and despite subjection is a key area of analysis regarding the female characters drawn by Mukherjee and Carter.

While Foucault theorised on the broader meaning of power and its relations, Bataille wrote about sovereignty as a more circumscribed aspect of power which deals with the rights of a ruler to govern. However, in his schema sovereignty seems to have had two distinct meanings: firstly, one which is in line with philosophical and political traditions and which may be called 'imperative sovereignty', meaning the conventional use of state power by the sovereign who exercises his command over his people and is accountable to those over whom he has dominion. A second form is 'subversive or revolutionary sovereignty' which derives its power from expenditure and arises when limits are transgressed: it is the power 'invoked by the tragedy of self-loss, powerlessness, and abjection [...] and it tolerates no form of authority' (Goldhammer 21). According to Bataille, this type of sovereignty constituted the true anarchic moment of power: 'Living sovereignly is to escape, if not death, at least the anguish of death. Not that dying is hateful – but living servilely is hateful' (*Accursed Share* 219). The notion of a sovereignty that baulks at authority, that transgresses limits and that refuses servility persists as an underlying assumption of this study.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben wrestles with a slightly different 'paradox of sovereignty' which 'consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order' (150). He bases this idea on the work of Carl Schmitt who showed that the status of the sovereign derived from his being 'the exception to the rule he safeguards' (ibid.). This exclusion or otherness does not detract from sovereignty; rather it defines it, even bolsters it. Thus, I hypothesise that to some extent power legitimates itself through transgression and through appropriating aspects of the dissident; in other words, I argue that power requires both outsider and insider status, marginal and central attributes, to be perceived as truly commanding. I examine the female characters in the works of Mukherjee and Carter to uncover whether this premise finds purchase in their constructions of sovereign subjectivity.

1.3.2 Transgression

In pursuing my hypothesis on power, I elaborate a theory of transgression that is derived from Bataille's notion of power as expenditure and a transgression of limits, but is also based on the works of Bakhtin, Douglas and Kristeva who respectively foreground the significance of overflowing 'low' bodies (the physical body a metaphor for the body politic), dirt and danger, and the abject. Stallybrass and White coalesce some of these theoretical ideas to discuss how the 'low-Other' comes to be symbolically significant despite being socially marginalised.

The ideas of Bataille are critical in understanding the significance of transgression in contemporary cultural discourse, not only because of his seminal contribution to the field, but also because of Carter's engagement with his work.⁷ According to Jonathan Dollimore, Bataille's ideas are influential today because they 'offer the same advocacy of flux and change as in Nietzsche, but in a much more extreme form' (*Death* 250). In an early essay on pornography, Susan Rubin Suleiman observed that Bataille and the Surrealists valorised 'an aesthetics of transgression' which placed eroticism at its centre, but Bataille significantly also opened up the possibility of 'metaphoric equivalence' between sexual and textual transgression ('Pornography' 119), an equivalence which Carter takes up repeatedly in her work.

Transgression does not imply unbounded freedom, as Bataille notes; in his schema, both taboo and transgression are subject to governing rules and operate in a dialectical relation: 'Organised transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is. The frequency – and the regularity – of transgressions do not affect the intangible stability of the prohibition since they are its expected complement' (*Erotism* 65). For Bataille, taboo and its transgression are part of the social order. Thus, in part, he debunks the idea that transgression forms part of a radical project, but he also cautions that unlimited transgression may find its outlet in violence. Foucault extended Bataille's ideas in 'Preface to Transgression', which he dedicated to the latter, by emphasising the significance of limits

⁷ Ashley Tauchert notes in her monograph *Against Transgression* that: 'It is impossible to consider seriously the place of transgression in contemporary academic thought without considering seriously the work of Georges Bataille' (16).

and the importance of transgressing boundaries in order to make space for a different kind of subjectivity that is found beyond the limits, a new form of sovereignty discoverable in the death of God. He suggested that transgression is the only way of 'discovering the sacred [...] and recomposing its empty form' (30); it 'carries the limit right to the limit of its being' (34) so that the relationship between transgression and the limit 'takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust' (35), and which is constrained neither by ethics nor morality, but offers a continual contestation and release of energy.

1.3.3 Thresholds, Danger and the Object: the Monstrous Woman

A major aspect of Mukherjee and Carter's work is their focus on the way that women in patriarchal systems are represented as dangerous and threatening to maleness. As Russo has pointed out, the construction of the feminine is often aligned with an 'outsider' status, a notion that woman is irreconcilably different from – and less than – man. I argue that the writers appropriate this insidious inscription and juggle it around to reinscribe woman's difference positively as a source of power and capacity.

Freud explained the anxiety around difference in terms of the danger and dread inherent in threshold situations. In the 'Taboo of Virginity', Freud postulated various reasons for 'the generalised dread of women' which is expressed by rules of avoidance. He explained the taboo in a number of ways, one of which concerned the 'horror of blood', and the other which referred to the 'lurking apprehensiveness' involved in being on the threshold of a new, unfamiliar situation, and in particular one perceived as dangerous, such as the 'first act of intercourse' (269-270). His explanation went on to say that 'Perhaps the dread is based on the fact that woman is different from man, for ever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile' (271). Thus Freud moves from a situational explanation of the danger to one that projects the danger on to the person of the woman. Mary Jacobus argues that, 'For Freud [...], having distinguished between a danger that really exists and "psychical" danger, he proposes the startling idea that women actually do pose a threat to men after sexual intercourse' (*Reading* 116). She quotes Karen Horney who, in her essay titled 'The Dread of Woman', explains that rather than the man saying 'I dread her; it is that she herself is malignant, capable of any crime, a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires. She is the very personification of what is sinister' (qtd. in Jacobus

116). Both Freud and psychoanalysis, it seems, come to view woman as the harbinger of danger: in this schema she moves from being mysterious (enigmatic) to strange (peculiar), and finally, to menacing and malevolent.

In her seminal work, *Purity and Danger*, Douglas expanded Freud's idea about the apprehension attendant on threshold situations to suggest that these also present opportunities for power precisely because of the danger that inheres in them. Her explanation of the anxiety centres on the dis-order which is generated by threshold states. She explains that the person who moves out of organised social life, 'beyond the confines of society' (a person undergoing initiation rites or a woman in childbirth, for example), comes into contact with 'dirt' or matter that is 'out of place' (50), but brings back 'a power not available to those who have stayed in the control of themselves and of society' (118). The biblical story of Judith (a story I take up later) is a case in point.⁸ Judith lives alone as a widow on the periphery of society. She assumes the right to defend her people by acting outside of the norms governing women and by an astounding act of courage which takes her beyond the confines of her society and into the enemy camp where she vanquishes the opponent and return victorious. Her subsequent power is beyond measure and certainly unattainable and inconceivable had she not ventured forth. I quote this story in particular because it speaks to Hannah, the voyager and ingressor, in Mukherjee's novel, *Holder of the World* and, in a different way, to Fevvers in Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, both of whom venture into the outside world, beyond the confines of organised and ordered social life. But the story also addresses how the margins paradoxically hold the potential for power, a point affirmed by Douglas: 'To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power' (120).

The idea of the liminal – the one who is neither here nor there, 'betwixt and between' – was also expounded by Victor Turner who, like Douglas, asserted that a threshold is potentially both polluting and powerful, a state of being on the edge with the possibility of returning differently (see Galvin 11-12; La Shure). In particular, being on the edge denotes acts of risk-taking which posit a latent outcome of increased power (Galvin 14). The capacity for

⁸ In a personal interview with Mukherjee I suggested that women alone, without husbands, like Judith and Tara Lata in *The Tree Bride* can become very powerful; she agreed, although she acknowledged that she had not made the connection before.

negotiating the boundary or edge is what gives the female characters in Mukherjee and Carter's texts their 'edginess', suggesting their potential for ascendancy.

Boundaries are neither rigid nor fixed; rather they are porous and permeable. Douglas comments that, in most cultures, society attempts to maintain the order of its own social structures by guarding itself against external pressures of pollutants and the possibility of disorder perforating its margins (4-5). Despite its appeal, 'Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise', so that breaching the boundary produces great danger to order and purity but, in consequence, also represents the possibility of great power (Douglas 140). In her work on the *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva develops the theory of the abject based on Douglas' notion of purity and danger and her understanding that 'filth is not a quality in itself [...] but represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (69). When a border is perforated – as all borders ultimately are – and the abject is expelled as excess, a kind of vacuum is created internally that enables an intermingling of inside and out; the inside becomes contaminated, the centre is thrown off-balance and change is generated. The abject has the capacity to confront the subject with the permeability of its own borders; it is a simultaneous holding on and letting go that continuously threatens the subject with ambiguity (Kristeva, *Powers* 9). Conceptually, the abject is that which exists between subject and object, but which always retains something of the subject, leaching out from its containment, yet never quite separating. Most often the abject is associated with bodily fluids which represent the seepages from the subject in their most manifest form (as is the case with the monstrous or grotesque body). Where boundaries are ruptured, broken and disturbed, place is made for the abject and the superfluous. Hence, that which is ejected into margins or which occupies liminal spaces is also associated with the abject, as is the linguistic disruption of the symbolic realm.⁹

The transgressor, like the abject, confirms and affirms the boundaries which contain the inside; indeed, she strengthens those boundaries by virtue of rendering them breachable. According to Kristeva, 'abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger' (*Powers* 9). The abject, hovering on the border of

⁹ The symbolic realm is the concept developed by Jacques Lacan to represent the breakaway from the maternal and the entry into the world via language and culture (see Kristeva, *Powers* 13).

inside/outside, tenuous and ambiguous, is significant in the symbolism of the native/stranger relationship; like the 'stranger' or 'other', it is that which is expelled but continues to hold what Sara Ahmed calls 'an uncanny fascination for the subject, demanding its attention and desire' (51). So the transgressor, like the abject, propagates a sense of vulnerability and 'perpetual danger'; however, unlike the abject, the transgressor is the one who manages to trespass, releasing a sense of liberatory power because the threshold has been violated and potentially destabilised. Now it becomes understood that the border is neither sacrosanct nor inviolable; indeed, the border reveals itself as permeable, and what is inside the border, at the centre, may become contaminated. Margins protect the place of power, but they also invite transgression since boundaries are always vulnerable and represent those places where central power may be placed under threat or even attack. The individual who emerges from the border is also the one who may be invested with magical powers precisely because she comes from the unknown and the inaccessible: she represents mystery and mastery. While this holds true for the theoretical models put forward by Douglas and Kristeva, I examine its relevance to the texts of Carter and Mukherjee, particularly in relation to those female characters who appear mysterious, strange and at times malevolent but who hold the power to transgress and the capacity to incorporate transgression into a facet of power.¹⁰

1.3.4 The Low-Other: Turning the Margin into an Edge

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White extend Douglas' ideas on dirt and thresholds and also draw on Bakhtin's work on carnival and the grotesque to describe the concept of the 'low-Other'. They maintain that the 'low' is a necessary corollary to the authority of the 'high'. In looking at who or what is classified as low, they find a paradoxical pattern: there is 'a nexus of power and desire which regularly appears in the ideological construction of the low-Other. [...] a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for

¹⁰ Many critics have debated the measure of Carter's success in opening new territory for women's ascendancy: Helen Stoddart claims that by 'showing how fictions are put together and how they might also be blasted apart' Carter opens the possibility of making things 'anew' (xii). Marina Warner, although a great admirer of Carter, wonders whether pejorative images associated with a masculine mythology – such as the female monstrous – can be reinscribed as forms of female power (*Managing Monsters* 11). My intervention focuses on the meaning of 'crossings' and aims to show how these indeed can provide avenues for the reconstruction of gender and power relations.

this reason that what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central...' (5). The implication is that the construction of the low-Other is essential to the maintenance of the empowered Self (and also desired by the Self), a principle based on Hegel's master/slave dialectic which recognises that the master comes to depend on the slave for recognition, that he is held in thrall to the slave and that 'bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is' (Hegel 110).

This notion of interdependence between the top and bottom – the insider and outsider, the self and the other – and the sometimes paradoxical and ambivalent position of the periphery to the centre provides one of the major theoretical bases of this thesis. While the 'top' attempts to reject the 'bottom', it is nonetheless dependent upon it and seduced by it; it is both bolstered by the bottom as well as endangered by its encroachment. For Carter and Mukherjee, 'woman' is frequently framed as the low-Other or represented as the seductive 'monster', constantly pushed away, forever returning and showing itself. I argue that Carter and Mukherjee complicate the notion of the 'low-Other', using both their texts and characters to subvert social marginality and transform it into symbolic power.

1.4 Power and Transgression in the Oeuvres of Carter and Mukherjee

1.4.1 Power and Sovereignty

In the following analysis, I am concerned with different kinds of power. In the first instance, I engage with the idea of personal sovereignty. While power may refer to the domination (often coercive) over others, I take it to mean, in the words of Marina Warner, 'Sovereignty over self' and the 'right to govern one's own person' (*Managing Monsters* 16).¹¹ This meaning is directly linked to Bataille's notion of sovereignty as 'belonging to oneself and no one else' (*Absence of Myth* 170) and as the refusal to 'live servilely', a view that is fundamental to the articulation of power in the texts of both Mukherjee and Carter.¹² Secondly, I conceive of power as a form of potency that emerges from social and economic networks and relations in the Foucauldian sense and that is socially acknowledged.¹³ And,

¹¹ In regard to sovereignty, Mary Wollstonecraft stated: 'I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.' (qtd in Tauchert 4).

¹² For Foucault, a refusal to submit is an attempt to limit the effect of power (*Society Must be Defended* 14-17).

¹³ Both Bataille and Foucault were important influences on Carter.

thirdly, I define power as the capacity for agency which has an impact on an event (or process) sufficient to influence it directly or in the way that it is perceived.

Mukherjee has stated that all her writing life has been concerned with 'the ways people acquire power, exercise power, and [...] relinquish power' (Interview with Connell, Grearson, Grimes 49). The central focus of her work therefore revolves around the structures and effects of power. For Carter, 'language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation', so that it is language itself, the way the text is revealed and how it dramatises situations and people, that has the capacity to protect or unseat hegemony; hence, writing is her foremost weapon in deposing authority (*Shaking a Leg* 43).

For both writers, power is primarily articulated through their female characters who, in different ways, undermine domination by others and appropriate control for themselves. Mukherjee's affirmation of strong women emerges from her grandmother's 'courageous encouragement' for daughters to be educated and her mother's transgressive assertion in a Hindu family that women are entitled to express their voice and can exert influence despite religious and cultural prohibitions (*Days and Nights* 226). Mukherjee declares: 'I was born into a religion that placed me, a Brahmin, at the top of its hierarchy while condemning me, as a woman, to a role of subservience' (qtd. in Edwards xii), an echo of Bataille's sense of 'living servile'; this paradox drove her to create female characters who often flaunt their power in the face of attempts to delimit it.

A maternal grandmother is momentous too in Carter's early experience of female power. She describes her grandmother as possessing an unusual degree of 'physical and spiritual heaviness' and who 'effortlessly imparted a sense of my sex's ascendancy in the scheme of things' (*Shaking* 6). This sense of women's ascendancy was matched by her abhorrence of servility; writing about her grandmother's work as a young girl, Carter said: 'She would have made a bloody awful chambermaid, unnaturally servile until something inside her snapped' (*Shaking* 7). Carter's transgressive spirit initially found an intellectual home amongst the Surrealists; in a review of Bataille's erotic novella, *Story of an Eye*, Carter remarked that his 'theory of active sexuality' was 'the assertion of human freedom against the laws of church and state' (*Shaking* 68).

1.4.2 Crossings and Breaking Boundaries

A major assumption of this study is that transgression in the form of outrageous contraventions and crossed boundaries unsettles and destabilises hegemonic structures thereby producing a liberatory effect for characters and readers. I interrogate whether the trope of 'crossings' in the works of both authors broadens the scope of transgression to enable a route to female ascendancy. For Mukherjee, the idea that small and inconsequential events or characters can become powerful forces derives from chaos theory and is also aligned with Hindu cosmology, which she brings together (ancient wisdom twinned with modern science) to create her own ideological framework.¹⁴ As avenging females, her female characters sometimes embody the traits of Hindu goddesses, triggering cosmic havoc by their individual (small) transgressive actions. Carter breaks boundaries stylistically as well as in the creation of characters who are disruptive (whether in terms of speech, body or social class). Her choice of themes declares the right of women (especially the most marginalised like the aged and the freaks) to assert power in all areas, even those traditionally regarded as taboos such as the primacy of eroticism and women's right to 'free sexuality' (*Sadeian Woman* 41). Like Bataille and the Surrealists, Carter engages with the supremely transgressive work of Sade in *The Sadeian Woman*, reworking his ideas to offer a 'moral' form of pornography that erodes what she saw as the British 'culture of repression' and to highlight Bataille's notion that 'ecstasy' produces 'enlightenment' (*Shaking* 590). Mukherjee's conversation with transgression is not so much in terms of discourse as through an engagement with the *activity* of crossing: crossing the Kala Pani and traversing borders of language, culture and tradition. In an interview with Ameena Meer, she said that crossing the Black Waters as a Hindu was the 'biggest journey out of a psychological-social ghetto'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Bouchard notes that Foucault investigated history as 'the surface disorder of things', as 'the work of historical accidents, abrupt interruptions, and the play of surfaces' (17). Foucault's analysis of history seems to me to align with chaos theory's focus on randomness and the apparent disorder of events.

¹⁵ When she was 8 years old, Mukherjee moved with her family to Britain and Switzerland because of her father's work. Her mother was criticised for sending her children to English-medium schools.

While critics have commented on Carter's work as a critique of social hierarchies through her use of the carnivalesque,¹⁶ I focus more specifically on how Carter's female characters use their low status to unsettle and transgress the centres of power and to remake themselves (in the Foucauldian sense of continually constructing and deconstructing subjectivity) into figures of ascendancy. Similarly, I contend that Mukherjee's characters reformulate themselves, paradoxically using the margins *and* liberating themselves from them in their journey to self-empowerment. Moreover, I read Carter's peripheral places and figures alongside those depicted by Mukherjee with the intention of teasing out how the marginalised – fictive and real – can be transgressively potent.

1.4.3 Violence, Sexuality and Resistance

Their engagement with violence and their resistance to being pigeon-holed constitute two critical intersections between Mukherjee and Carter. Violence as a strategy for disrupting expectations of femininity is construed as especially transgressive.¹⁷ It represents an edgy taboo for women which still strikes at the heart of what is prescribed as appropriate female activity. Writing about vampires and horror magazines, Carter recorded that the 'sexually liberated' Lilith (featured in *Vampire Tales*, a horror-comics magazine of the seventies) 'sinks her teeth exclusively in the necks of wrongdoers, muggers, rapists' but then reverts to an amnesia which 'blots out her vengeance. It is as if the notion of woman-as-aggressor can't quite be tolerated yet' (*Shaking* 450). Mukherjee's heroines use violence unconsciously to achieve their aims: they commit murder and mayhem as they wreak vengeance on those who have betrayed them or who try to harm them. For Mukherjee, though, violence inheres in the notion of crossing – leaving behind one's roots means killing off a part of the self; but crossing also releases an energy that is empowering and transformative. In an interview with Bradley Edwards, she affirmed that 'Migration inflicted a kind of psychic violence. In fiction I want to use that violence [...] as a way of talking about the violence that even the act of reading, in a positive way, should put the reader through' (168). For many of

¹⁶ Linden Peach sees places at the periphery, especially the theatre, as 'sites of illegitimate power' and in this he compares Carter to Brecht: both are concerned with 'troublesome outsiders' who stake a claim on centre-stage (141). Pauline Palmer also emphasises Carter's feminist interpretation of the carnivalesque ('Coded Mannequin').

¹⁷ The ethics of representing violence is in itself a critical issue but beyond the scope of this study. Armstrong and Tennenhouse address this in *The Violence of Representation*. For a more recent study, see *Violence and the Limits of Representation* (Matthews and Goodman).

Mukherjee's characters, violence is a way for them to transform their victimhood into power, to become 'women of action' (ibid. 53).

Carter's focus on pornography, which she saw as an art form only possible in 'a world of absolute sexual licence for all genders', and her uncovering of Sade as a 'moral pornographer' who exposes the power relations inherent in society (*Sadeian Woman* 21-23) can be read as a form of violence against patriarchy as well as resistance to a particular moment in Feminism.¹⁸ Andrea Dworkin, for example, the anti-pornographic feminist in the seventies, dismissed *The Sadeian Woman* as 'a pseudofeminist literary essay' (see Gilbert 218; Power).¹⁹ Dworkin attacked Carter's polemical stance on Sade as 'a moral pornographer' who claimed 'rights of free sexuality for women' and installed 'women as beings of power in his imaginary worlds' (*Sadeian* 41).²⁰ My view aligns with arguments that Carter neither demonised nor idealised Sade but rather used his work to make 'a serious feminist investigation of his contribution as a theorist of sexuality and power' (Munford *Decadent Daughters* 29). Munford claims that although Carter appeared a champion of feminism, 'transgressing the male-dominated territories of decadence, surrealism and pornography, the trouble with [her] is that she often writes against the *feminist grain*' (4). What Munford means by 'trouble', and echoing Sage in her obituary piece on Carter ('Death of the Author'), is that Carter refused to be constrained either by her politics (despite her deep commitment to Marxism) or by orthodox feminist positions on pornography.²¹

Like Carter, Mukherjee too has refused a particular kind of prescriptive feminism that tries to constrain her work and impose a white upper middle-class rhetoric: 'I think resistance does run through my work. For some non-white, Asian women, our ways of negotiating power are different.' (Interview with Connell, Gearson and Grimes 49). Moreover, she has resisted being co-opted by postcolonial feminists; Cristina Dascalu observes that Mukherjee intervenes in 'the stability and singularity of all deterministic discourses, including the

¹⁸ It was a moment that Mukherjee highlighted: '1975 was a very dogmatic, prescriptive year in American feminism' (Interview with Connell, Gearson and Grimes 49).

¹⁹ Rubin Suleiman points out that Dworkin's reading of Bataille's *Story of an Eye* flattens the text and focuses entirely on the sexual, while ignoring the centrality of its language which Dworkin regards as a 'dangerous ornament' contributing to the stylisation of violence against women ('Pornography' 127).

²⁰ See Segal and McIntosh for further elaborations of this debate. For a particularly insightful and detailed history of feminist discourse on pornography and its relation to Carter's *Sadeian Woman*, see Robin Ann Sheets.

²¹ See in particular MacKinnon and Dworkin's critique of pornography and Harriet Gilbert's rebuttal.

discourses of post-colonialism' (273). Mukherjee's early work risked exposing areas that were hitherto unexplored in the work of Indian women writers. Using Hindu mythology and chaos theory, she explored the capacity of violent behaviour to reveal women's desires and power and to rewrite the scripts handed out to women by a patriarchal custodian.

Carter was determinedly anti-realist and concerned with unpicking what she called 'the social fiction' of femininity that was 'palmed off on me as the real thing' (*Shaking* 38). Pre-empting Kristeva who regarded otherness as a position of marginality which shored up the authority of the patriarchal order (*Powers* 58), Carter declared that femininity was not about gender but about a political position in patriarchy. In discussing *Sade*, she acknowledged that 'the whip hand is always the hand with the real political power and the victim is a person who has little or no power at all' (*Sadeian* 24). In this paradigm, male and female are positions of power regardless of gender.

Both Carter and Mukherjee use sexuality as a way of bursting open the social fiction of femininity and exercising power: in the words of Warner, they acknowledge that their characters 'produce themselves as "women", and this is often the result of *force majeure*, of using what you have to get by' (*Beast* 195). This may mean seducing the employer (as in Mukherjee's short story 'Jasmine')²² or being irreverent, obscene and openly sexual (as Dora and Nora are in Carter's *Wise Children*). Despite their thematic intersections, Mukherjee and Carter deal very differently with parallel concepts; for example, Mukherjee's violence of immigration is translated into Carter's violence of textual crossings, so that a comparative study of their work simultaneously illuminates different orders of these concepts without being reductive or settling into binary positions.

1.5 Edgy Writers/ Writers at the Edge

Both Mukherjee and Carter had a sense of being marginalised, finding themselves in places where they felt like outsiders (Carter in Japan, Mukherjee in Montreal) or in a literary world where they did not quite fit.²³ Susannah Clapp notes that during her lifetime, Carter was

²² Mukherjee comments that Jasmine 'knows the power [...] of her sexuality' (Interview with Connell, Grearson and Grimes 50).

²³ John Bayley (absurdly) accused Carter of 'political correctness' (LRB 22). Robert Clark had a problem with Carter's 'literariness' and believed it undermined her 'critique of patriarchal ideology' (qtd. in Tonkin 8).

'sidelined, regarded as a feminist exotic' ('Greatest Swinger'), the attribute presenting a tidy intersection with Mukherjee's sense of being cast aside as an 'exotic' in Canada (see *Days and Nights in Calcutta* 169). Carter has been attacked by feminists for betraying the feminist cause and for being elitist,²⁴ Mukherjee accused by some postcolonialists for undermining or exoticising her origins or being unfaithful to 'her kind'.²⁵ But this seems to have made both more determined to nudge and trouble the seat of power. Notwithstanding the attempts to sideline them, neither author ever claimed a marginal status for herself²⁶ although they shared a sense of what it felt like to not belong, to be not-quite good enough – a trope that Mukherjee grapples with in her short stories and that Carter turns into a platform for parody and the subsequent construction of the powerful feminine in her tales and novels. Being an outsider is not quite the same as being marginalised and Carter was adamant to refuse any label that produced her – or women in general – as victims; for her, victimhood was part of the myth that keeps women disempowered and under the control of others.

But she was an edgy writer and personality: Sage talks about 'her genius for estrangement' so that she projected an image of non-conformity; she also lived on the edge, as a kind of 'vagrant', and wrote from the margins (*Good as her Word* 66). Hermione Lee asserts that she was 'a writer who spent so much of her life out of fashion, who failed or declined to fit into any orthodoxies of feminism' (316). This is not an easy position to inhabit, as Warner commented about her: 'It is uncomfortable to list to the iambic distych, to know that you are identifying yourself as an outsider by what you say' (*Beast* 197), especially when trying to avoid the position of the victim. The discomfort, however, seemed to entrench the determination of Carter and Mukherjee to disrupt prescriptive notions of how women writers 'should' write and how women should behave. Carter's early short stories – *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* – indicated her willingness to play with the irreverent and to contest 'sacred cows' (Warner, *Beast* 195).

²⁴ See Tonkin on Carter's use of irony which she regards as misunderstood and which she believes partially accounts for negative reactions to Carter's work (16); and Sage's view that Carter gave offense to the 'modest' female writer ('Death of the Author' 248).

²⁵ Sushma Tandon, for example, continues a line of critique that comments on how Mukherjee packages Jasmine as a 'third world exile' for a western audience (153). Mukherjee has been severely criticised by Aijaz Ahmed as a 'right-wing' immigrant writer who wants to be part of the centre (208) and by John Hoppe who accuses her of colluding with the western gaze (155).

²⁶ In my personal interview with Mukherjee, she vehemently refuted any notion of her as a 'marginal writer'.

Carter's edginess saw her embracing the transgressive iconography of Dadaism and surrealism, commenting that 'Dada is the real twentieth-century thing – utopian anti-art.' (Interview with Sage, *New Writing* 191). She collapsed boundaries between popular and high art – obvious in her earliest novel, *Shadow Dance*, in which the two protagonists collect junk and recycle it as collectibles – and she mocked highbrow ideas, despite her keen intellectualism and familiarity with the classics and the canon. She liked to shock her readers too, 'creeping up [...] from behind and sandbagging them with an idea that maybe they haven't thought of for themselves' (qtd. in Gamble 'Something Sacred' 60). Her non-normative stance made her seem slightly dangerous, with the potential to spill over: she acknowledged, for example, her tendency to overwrite and her excessive use of artifice. At times she admitted to feeling appalled by 'the violence of my imagination' (Barker). She was carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense, both in her persona and her work, although she only became familiar with Bakhtin after completing *Nights at the Circus* (Sage, *Angela* 54).

Carter has been criticised for attempting to be, simultaneously, a 'scavenging' aesthete and a political materialist. According to Christina Britzolakis, she is a 'deeply embarrassing figure' for Marxism, 'adopting as she does a postmodern aesthetic which [...] privileges style over substance' (44). Aidan Day asserts that Carter's commitment to political engagement made her uneasy with the postmodern idea that the author had no 'unmediated access to a reality outside of language': this raised the 'vexed question of the relation between postmodern thought and political activism' (*Rational Glass* 11). Maggie Tonkin rebuts feminist critiques of Carter that are based on this opposition (between aesthetics and politics) suggesting that while the nature of the relationship is complex it does not discount either Carter's aesthetic or her politics which she sees as finding some resolution in Carter's use of irony (17). I argue that Carter's capacity to delight in the glittering use of language and pastiche as well as her ability to be politically engaged sustained her capacity for ambiguity,²⁷ and that ambiguity keeps her text 'holey', with spaces for the reader to insert herself. For Carter, writing itself was not 'precious' and could, like Shakespeare's oeuvre, be part of both high and low culture; this makes her work mischievous,²⁸ intellectually rich and often politically incorrect (as opposed to Bayley's assertion that she came down hard on the side of 'political

²⁷ Jacqueline Pearson (x-xi) makes a similar point.

²⁸ See Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangerous Edge'; and Munford's critique which engages with Jordan's arguments (*Re-visiting*).

correctness').²⁹ Elaine Jordan suggests that Carter 'worked a risky edge, political and literary. That is why it [her writing] continues to give pleasure and provocation' (201-2). Her risk-taking, I argue, gives her work the edge to negotiate power; it also meant that she could not be appropriated or fixed, either by genre or by a particular ideological paradigm. Her writing travels, jumping from the shore of one genre to another, one framework to another, sometimes straddling many simultaneously.

Carter wrote texts that 'desire' the reader; Roland Barthes' articulation of his pleasure in reading Sade applies to Carter's work where the pleasure 'clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions): antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial, for example) come into contact' (Barthes, *Pleasure* 6). She aimed for this antimony constantly, understanding that being at the border, writing at the seam, was what gave the text its liberatory impulse. Using the above scholarship as a launch pad, I argue that Carter's ability to inject the abject with carnival pleasure, to be fearlessly irreverent, vulgar and hard-nosed, and to maintain her own idiosyncratic position as outcast, keeps her work edgy and produces a liberatory effect, a sense of delighted recognition for the reader – precisely because, at times, it does go too far (much like her star 'aerialiste', Fevvers).³⁰ I examine how this stepping over the line enables her to claim a space to insert herself into power, albeit not always within the realm of fame and not always within her life-time. At the same time, her refusal to be a mainstream writer and her rebuttal of orthodoxy resulted in her becoming 'the literary equivalent of a displaced person' (*Shaking* 35), echoing the way Mukherjee felt in Canada.

As a writer, Mukherjee herself is a figure of controversy: an academic from India, who has long ago become American, she is still called upon to express the fears and longings of 'subalterns', to act in Gayatri Spivak's sense as a 'native informant' (6); or alternatively she is accused of not being Indian enough and misrepresenting the subaltern; or of appropriating American founding fictions to make herself belong. Her sense of dislocation is evident in her interview with Edwards in 2007: 'I moved from an India of traditions I knew too well to the Judeo-Christian New World I didn't know at all, and where I felt I was being patronised or

²⁹ See Lee (318-320); also Bristow and Broughton (8).

³⁰ In a delightful vignette of the kind Carter would have appreciated, Susanna Clapp notes that, 'The novelist and critic Francis Wyndham raised his head from one of Angela's extravaganzas to murmur: "There must be less to life than this."' (*Postcard* 59).

exoticised as a brown woman. For the first time, race problems affected me quite literally, physically. That was traumatic.’ (168). According to Judie Newman, Mukherjee transgresses ‘institutional and nationalist boundaries within which most literary critics still operate’ (*Spaces* 70). How is she to be classified: as American or postcolonial writer? Arguments about her opportunistic desire to secure a place in the American canon by rewriting Hawthorne’s canonical *The Scarlet Letter* (in *Holder of The World*), for example, are pitted against those which credit her with creating a space for immigrants in American literature (ibid. 71). Mukherjee, like Carter, has refused to be silenced or constrained by labels and has broken what Newman claims has ‘almost become a taboo – the rigid distinction between “American” and “post-colonial” literature’ (ibid.), an interesting instance of transgression mirroring her themes of transgressive crossings.

Mukherjee’s relationship to her newfound world is complex: on the one hand she wants to be treated as a mainstream American writer, an immigrant who is ‘not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate.’ (*A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman*’ 53). Yet, so much of her work is informed by her Bengali heritage and so many of her characters draw upon her Indian roots and Indian mythology. More significantly for this study, however, is her portrayal of transgressive, often violent women that sets her apart from orthodox authorship and gives her writing an edge. According to Newman, her conflation of categories and her ‘transgressing the institutional and nationalist boundaries within which most literary critics still operate’ raise questions about the ‘validity’ of her work (*Fictions* 15) – which is precisely the point that Mukherjee seems to want to make: her desire is to change America as much as America changes its immigrants, to challenge stereotypes, to contest legitimacy and ‘to overthrow the smothering tyranny of nostalgia’ (*Four Hundred*’ 54). Brinda Bose has argued that Mukherjee’s use of violence is itself a ‘signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over’ (54).³¹ Nonetheless, Mukherjee’s refusal of the hyphen and her no-nonsense approach to Indian nostalgia have provoked an attack both from writers in India and those closer to her American home.³² She has also been harshly criticised by feminist and Indian critics (who accuse her of ‘race treachery’) for appearing to

³¹ See also Pushpa Parekh who argues that Mukherjee’s violent women draw from Indian classical female tales where women move from silence to voice, but Mukherjee takes this a step further in terms of her characters’ ‘heady assurance’ and aggressive outrage (116).

³² For summaries of contradictory views see Ubaraj Katawal and erin Khue Ninh.

appropriate the American dream and the American ideal of frontiersman, while either turning her back on her heritage or misappropriating it.³³

While the notion of Carter and Mukherjee as writers on the 'edge' or outside mainstream discourse has been argued by some critics, I want to extend the discussion of the authors' transgressive themes by engaging with their focus on marginalisation, and on the riff-raff, as it were, that occupy interstitial spaces. This focus opens up and makes visible the spaces of seemingly diminished existence, reframing the 'not-quites', to use Mukherjee's phrase in 'The Lady of Lucknow', as being more than enough – strong enough to assert agency and power. It may be that some artists set out to create transgressive projects; but it seems that frequently it is also the exigency of the artistic project that demands a transgressive style or theme. Carter's novels are anti-realist and iconoclastic while Mukherjee attempts to write against the linear and to reflect the chaos of experience. Both writers use the metaphor of scrambling when talking about the way they write: Mukherjee states, 'I want to scramble the way one tells a story' (Interview with Rodriguez 60); and Carter talks about trying 'to scramble' her 'labels' in order to get into mainstream fiction (*Shaking* 35). Both celebrate a form of hybrid writing and 'monstrous' characterisation, intermingling genres and images, borrowing from different popular cultural fields, and crossing over time zones and continents, questioning the construction of the 'real' and disrupting conventions of what constitutes the authoritative text.

Increasingly, Carter and Mukherjee disturb novelistic conventions and become more courageous and outrageous in their depictions of unruly women. Carter bejewels her writing – a parallel of her conviction that gender like craft is produced through artifice – and reformulates many of the stock characters of fairy tales or modern legendary characters (such as Lizzie Borden or Jeanne Duval) to suggest how women who refuse a victim status can appropriate agency to remake their world so that it looks back at them differently, intimating possibilities of liberation and freedom. Nicole Ward Jouve remarks that while

³³ See, for example, essays by Roy, Knippling and Grewal (in Nelson) which argue respectively that Mukherjee elides contradictions inherent in the political postcolonial space, homogenises differences and asserts elitism while affecting to speak on behalf of the subaltern, and reinscribes the dominant and conservative ideology of the American Dream myth.

Carter transformed 'every little thing into artifice' (160),³⁴ her writing 'unpicks the fabrication process [...] It shows the divas to be the ideological products of light and celluloid, issued from the mirror chambers of a narcissistic, *male* imaginary' (162). Mukherjee's narrative style and the activity of her characters are marked by excess and exuberance. She evokes her powerful women by setting American canonical authors side by side with Hindu myths of female goddesses, weaving multiple tales together, seeking to reflect in her stories the simultaneous, burgeoning details of Mughal paintings which have 'many points of focus so that the stories are competing with each other to create a different sense of perspective' (Interview with Fred Bonnie 74). In so doing, she creates characters who reinvent and reshape their lives to become significant, even momentous, symbolising more than just themselves, and making up 'the full authorial vision' (ibid. 75). I probe how Carter and Mukherjee demonstrate that the male imaginary can be shattered and how women can reconstruct themselves from their own imaginary.

1.6 Thesis Structure

This study of Carter and Mukherjee's selected texts is divided into three main sections, each of which deals with different but related aspects of power and transgression. In the first section on 'Margins', I introduce the idea of living on the edge or being situated at the margins or interstices of society as a trope that finds expression in Carter's evocation of the carnivalesque and Mukherjee's reference to chaos theory. There is also an overlap between the writers in terms of *figures* on the periphery: for example, both concern themselves with those who are 'outside' the status quo and who present a threat to the social structure of the dominant. In particular, I examine some of Carter's prose writing and her later short stories and Mukherjee's *Middleman and Other Stories* and *Darkness*, looking at how the carnivalesque and chaos theory bring the texts into conversation with each other and how both authors use places at the limits (such as fairs, circuses and the underworld) and peripheral figures (who find themselves at the bottom of the pile, in the interstices of society) to contest power and to articulate how ascendancy arises from unexpected, edgy, border positions. I also focus on Carter's *Wise Children* and Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* to

³⁴ Carter's first collection of short stories is called *Fireworks*, the French translation of which is 'Feux d'artifice' (Jove 160), a phrase which has considerably more depth in French, implying artifice, creative skill and trickery.

discuss how women on the edge or outside of the mainstream are positioned as grotesque and how this positioning links the carnivalesque with chaos theory.

In the second section, I focus on various forms of crossings in the authors' texts. One of the ways of transgressing supposedly inviolate borders is through journeying – crossing against the current. Travelling becomes a way of rejecting what *is* current, presentable and respectable; it also enables the translation of one thing into another. Both Carter and Mukherjee go cross-current not only in their writing but also in their personal lives. Mukherjee interrupts the flow of the text by interspersing past, present and future. She writes history into her novels and interpolates it with real events and mythology so that there is uncertainty about the nature of meaning in the text. She deals with the difficulties of moving and relocating in her short stories as dislocation and transformation, ultimately viewing travel as an opportunity to negotiate other worlds and experiences. In her novels she articulates the movement and effects of crossings as a translation of characters and world-views. My primary focus here is on *Holder of the World* which traverses East and West. Carter's work crosses textually and stylistically as well as thematically. In *Fireworks* and *The Bloody Chamber* she transforms the stock features of fairy tales and myths to create translated stories, and in *Heroes and Villains* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* she constructs other worlds, opening up paths of discovery around transgression. The novels themselves seem to follow a trajectory of transgressive exploration: beginning with *Shadow Dance* which experiments with sexuality and violence and reaching its dénouement with the polemic of pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*.

In the last section, I look at the way that women are framed as monstrous in order to keep them submissive or marginalised and I spend some time setting the cultural context for this analysis. A common figure for both authors is that of the stranger, freak or foreigner who breaches boundaries. The stranger/freak represents the disjunctive rupture of all that is known and understood – she is both the exotic foreigner and the dangerous outsider; she is also the seductive monster who creates ambiguity and threatens containment. She warns us to keep our distance but also beckons us to come closer, to be curious, and sometimes to celebrate our difference (see Ahmed, 3-4). We see these figures represented by Mukherjee's foreigners in *Darkness* and in her eponymous heroine *Jasmine*. Carter's *aerialiste* Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* is the exemplary figure of a woman who 'goes too

far', performing her 'freakishness' outrageously and humorously, using her 'monstrosity' as a launch pad for ascendancy.

I argue that the authors reframe women's monstrosity and saturate it with excess, evident in their characters' extreme violence or excessive displays and wanton behaviour, to recuperate its power. Mukherjee's unruly women in *Jasmine* and *Leave it to Me* subvert notions of foreignness and assert agency by becoming female avengers who fearlessly inflict violence on their enemies. Carter focuses on rupturing sexual constraints and enabling her female characters to proclaim their sexual freedom, sometimes violently as in *The Sadeian Woman* or her 'profane' tales.

This study aims to demonstrate that the work of Carter and Mukherjee reflects an awareness of the 'dangers of being recuperated' by the dominant mythology (Arthurs and Grimshaw 14). It asks whether the texts are successful in finding a space of recuperable transgression and whether the mythology of the 'ungovernable female appetite' can be made to work for women. Warner questions whether the postmodern strategies of 'ironies, [...] subversion, masquerade, appropriation' can overcome the male mythology's demonisation of women (*Managing* 11). I argue that much of the energy of the texts lies in the authors grappling with these dangers, balancing between neither being co-opted nor dismissed as the 'lunatic fringe', and in the process finding a powerful space for transgressive women along unexpected and sometimes jagged paths.

2. MARGINS

2.1 Introduction: Margins and Interstitial Spaces

Margins and edges by their nature are sites of ambiguity: they denote, on the one hand, a sense of disempowerment, even insignificance; on the other hand, they may be precisely the space where power is challenged and dethroned. In this section I will examine how Mukherjee and Carter use the ambiguity of the margin to map out the contested relationship between peripheries and centres, between spaces that are set aside (either rendered invisible or hypervisible) and proscribed and spaces that are open and authorised. The margin sets itself against the centre, and despite – or because of – its peripheral, transitional and unstable nature, it becomes a site of contestation, transgression and potential empowerment. Transgression is always an ‘edgy’ affair; throughout this thesis I argue that transgression is a necessary bolster in the journey towards power, and here I will show how Carter and Mukherjee employ the notion of transgression in this way, either metaphorically through crossing over normative boundaries or literally through tales of travel or translation: in both instances, transgression is signified as fundamental to the appropriation of power. While I appear to mark out the terms ‘margins’, ‘peripheries’ and ‘centres’ as distinct, self-enclosed and inflexible, I do so primarily for conceptual purposes in an attempt to uncover the signification embedded within each of these terms; but the terms themselves, like the spaces they signify, are not discrete and they seep into each other with every attempt to keep them apart.

In using the term ‘border’, I mean the dividing and defining marker between what is central, acceptable or mainstream and what is outside, other and peripheral. Taking my cue from Mary Douglas, I regard the border as the sometimes variable and wavering¹ line between what is permissible and legitimate and what is not; this definition also includes the geopolitical line that *is* fixed but permeable. According to Douglas, boundaries help to avoid ambiguity and disorder, ‘enforcing conformity’ and preventing the discharge of ‘dirt’ or ‘impurity’ (2); they protect ‘the consensus on how the world is organized’ (xi). Events that

¹ I refer to the nuance of the wavering line further down, in my discussion of Derrida and Malabou.

are anomalous, such as the birth of twins in certain societies for example, are perceived as dangerous because they attack the apparent firmness of defining lines and threaten consensual categories; they produce uncertainty, even anxiety, about the stability of order and containment, creating ambiguity about what must be kept in and what out (49). Thus, the rupture of borders impinges on the integrity of these demarcations and is often construed as transgressive. These breaches challenge the hegemonic order of the central, privileged space that is inside the border; they may also challenge the dividing line between self and other – the self and the contaminating ‘other’ – as happens in the encounter with the foreign and the strange.

Margins refer to spaces at the edge or at the border, on the periphery; they denote places that are set aside, away from the centre.² The term ‘margin’ also infers the idea of ‘marginality’, a signifier of what is culturally and socially outside the mainstream, and a concept that talks to the question of power and representation.³ If marginalisation means a deferral to the edges, it also implies difference or otherness: to be marginal means to be kept at the periphery and rendered strange by virtue of one’s difference. It is this very difference that can be alluring and fascinating, and hints at power. According to Stuart Hall, marginality is concerned with the ‘cultural politics of difference’ (467); while it challenges cultural hegemony, it simultaneously shores up cultural or racial identities (ibid.), keeping unwanted groups at the edges and legitimising and centralising others.

Amit Chaudhuri affirms that while marginality represents the space of the insignificant or ‘the superfluous’, it also offers an opportunity for reassessing and reclaiming the marginal (25). In referring to the work of the poet Rabindranath Tagore (who, like Mukherjee, was a Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta),⁴ Chaudhuri claims that Tagore uses marginality as a ‘sort of space [...] a reconfiguration of emptiness, or a crack, a gap...’ (ibid.), a way of re-evaluating what is significant in life. I argue that Mukherjee and Carter similarly reconfigure the margins in their work as a ‘space’, as an opportunity to ‘take the gap’ rather than to be

² The nuanced meanings of a margin are captured in this definition: a margin is the ‘outside limit of an area’ but also ‘the periphery of a community [...] where those not wholly committed or not wholly accepted find themselves’ (*Penguin Complete English Dictionary*, 2006).

³ See Julien and Mercer: ‘De Margin and De Centre’ for a discussion on the politics of marginalization, representation and legitimation: ‘ethnicity is still placed on the margins conceptually [which] tends to reinforce, rather than ameliorate, the perceived otherness and marginality of the subject itself’ (452).

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore was a Bengali Brahmin poet raised in Calcutta; he denounced the British raj and was the first Indian writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. See Mukherjee, ‘Tagore’s Poetry: Ballad of Humanism’.

sidelined or victimised, to reposition the superfluous or the insignificant in and of itself; they also recognise that such a space enables the transgression of boundaries of moral, cultural and literary codes. In other words, being situated at the margins has an ‘edge’ to it that engages the possibility of contestation of power as well as suggesting a movement across boundaries, a movement that is transgressive and edgy, that may be temporal, spatial or psychic, but which ultimately produces a demonstration of presence and unsettles power. What I am proposing then is that both the margin as a space *and* the crossing over or transgression of margins offers the possibility of empowerment: indeed, I suggest that both terms – margins and transgression – are intrinsically caught up with each other and implicate the other, especially in relation to power.

While margins refer to borders and edges, interstitial spaces are in-between zones, neither here nor there, a threshold or limen. Threshold or ‘half-way’ states – which are the psychic or social counterparts of the interstice – are unsettling and discomfiting because they constitute a passage between two points,⁵ a space of ambiguity, existing outside the formal structure: ‘Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable’ (Douglas 119). The danger here refers to the ambiguity of the transitional state (ambiguity being inherently discomfiting and threatening) and the possibility of existing patterns becoming unsettled. Yet the potential for creative re-patterning comes from this unsettling, this ambiguity, this disorder; hence, Douglas maintains that disorder ‘symbolises both danger and power’ (117). Such threshold-passages are symbolically powerful because they are associated with rites of passage which instigate change; significantly, a person undergoing such rites is temporarily cast out, ‘has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being’ (121).⁶ Although here Douglas is referring primarily to rites of passage, I view the space that certain marginalised groups occupy – these borderlands – as marked by similar uncertainties and dangers, especially when it constitutes a transition from one location to another and when it lies between what is known and what is unknown. In the work of Mukherjee and Carter, these interstices denote the in-between, murky spaces occupied by a particular outgroup, such as the Gothic

⁵ The terms, ‘space’ and ‘passage’, imply non-fixedness; space refers to a continuous area (Concise OED 11th ed. 2004) and ‘passage’ denotes movement, a transition, or even a journey.

⁶ Victor Turner (1967, 1969) is primarily responsible for developing and popularising the term ‘liminality’ based on the work of van Gennep who used it to describe rites of passage; both authors are mentioned by Douglas.

spaces frequented by the characters in Carter's *Shadow Dance* or the illegitimate places housing foreigners in Mukherjee's short stories.

In the *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Alon White stress the symbolic power of the socially peripheral. They contend that places traditionally associated with the 'lumpenproletariat' – the outcasts and riff-raff of the working class – such as the fair, the carnival and the circus, 'play a symbolic role in bourgeois culture out of all proportion to their actual social importance' (20). It is these spaces that Carter works repeatedly in her fiction, giving voice and recognition not just to the outcasts but to the marginal spaces of the fair and the circus.

Marina Warner extends the symbolic meaning of interstices, suggesting that they may connote 'non-places where non-citizens can take up a position, turning both the site of occupation and themselves, hitherto disregarded, into significant presences' ('Death in Plain Sight' 19).⁷ Mukherjee uses the trope of interstices similarly – as sites for demonstrating presence and for contesting legitimacy and power; these spaces and figures of non-belonging and their effect on the mainstream constitute the driving impetus of her work. In some of her stories about immigrants, the interstitial spaces occupied by outcasts are not only symbolic sites but are also literal geopolitical areas where existence is 'bracketed' and transient; for example, the waters of the Gulf Coast of Florida in *Jasmine*, or the frontier farm where Hannah and her mother live in *Holder of the World*, or the illegitimate spaces that attempt to operate under the radar such as the backstreet bar in Toronto in 'Tamurlane'. Her work signifies the ways in which the marginal impacts on and shifts the centre; utilising the principles of chaos theory, she suggests that the introduction of even the minutest vicissitudes can unsettle the system (a principle called 'the butterfly effect', which I discuss later). In order to affirm their rights of entitlement, Mukherjee's outsiders appropriate mainstream American dreams or myths: they push the frontiers, upstage class, reinvent themselves and pursue individualistic ideals of upward mobility;⁸ their complex

⁷ While Warner is not referring to 'non-place' in the same way as Marc Auge does, for example, as large areas of transit (stations and airports) or supermarkets, her use of the term has a similar resonance to his in the sense of the transience and feeling of parentheses which govern such places (Auge, 1995).

⁸ In an article titled 'American Dreamer', Mukherjee noted that, unlike the USA, "'America" [...] exists as a myth of democracy and equal opportunity to live by, or as an ideal goal to reach'; it is 'the stage for the drama of self-transformation'.

status, as *both* marginal *and* mainstream, causes upheaval and shakes up the prevailing ethos.

While Carter and Mukherjee invoke different kinds of borderlands – the one largely associated with pleasure or imagination, the other, primarily physical – both regard the interstices as spaces of non-belonging from which to critique sociopolitical structures of power. However, Mukherjee's earlier stories, which concern physical borders that keep people out (and/or in), tend to evoke postcolonial theories of the other, focusing more acutely on the anguish of interstitial existence and the political and economic control by the centre to keep the 'other' in place, whereas Carter uses the gothic and the carnivalesque to signify the power of the 'other'. In Mukherjee's later novels (starting with *Jasmine*), she moves away from her earlier position and embraces chaos theory to suggest that power can be unleashed from the margins and interstitial spaces. In viewing their work side by side, what emerges is a sense that, despite their different orientations, the 'edge' has a force of its own and 'otherness' has the capacity to transgress limits and to render the centre vulnerable.

Although a number of anthropological and social theorists have alluded to the idea that places of marginalisation and ostracism can paradoxically become spaces of power, it is not one that has been extensively taken up in literary critiques of Carter's work; and while many critics have noted Mukherjee's propensity to deal with immigrants and exiles,⁹ they have not remarked on the possibility that the margins (occupied by immigrants and women, groups which are frequently conflated in social theory and which here she draws apart as well as intersects) are viewed by her as potentially liberatory places of power. The progression of Mukherjee's work – beginning with the novel *Wife*, where the protagonist Dimple finally abjures her marginalised status as an expat wife in New York by stabbing her husband, to Tara Lata who is married to a tree but becomes the powerful matriarch of her community in *The Tree Bride* – stages an on-going engagement with the possibility of power emanating from a marginalised position. Similarly, Carter's oeuvre focuses on side-lined and eccentric female characters in a declining trajectory of age and status: in her second novel, *The Magic Toyshop*, the central character is a young girl on the cusp of discovering her sexuality who had 'grown up with the smell of money', sent to live in a murky, gothic place

⁹ See Emmanuel Nelson: *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical perspectives*, 1993.

(7). With her last novel, *Wise Children*, the gothic has been left behind, but the protagonists occupy a marginalised position both in terms of age and profession: they are seventy-five years old, living on the 'wrong side of the tracks', and of uncertain occupation although they profess to have been song-and-dance girls (1-2). Yet, they and their 'topsy-turvy' world transgress propriety and smug morality to produce an emancipatory rupture of societal constraints and a 'wild' carnivalesque critique of authority and control. Chaos theory and the carnivalesque are two lenses through which I approach the work of Mukherjee and Carter, examining how these intersect and the light each casts on the other. In the following section, I argue that both chaos and carnival converge through the tropes of the low domains and the grotesque.

2.2 Carnival and Chaos: The Low Domains and the Grotesque

A reading of Carter and Mukherjee alongside each other suggests new ways of looking at their texts in terms of the carnivalesque and chaos theory, and also shows how the authors, given their fundamental differences, nonetheless throw into relief particular ways of viewing the world which are both historically grounded and politically transgressive. A number of critics have read Carter's work in the context of the carnivalesque, commenting on her feminist gloss,¹⁰ and the way that she opens up new ground with her attention to the feminine; especially Bakhtin's conception of polyphonous voices¹¹ provided her with a theoretical impetus for foregrounding female voices and female sexuality as a mode of unsettling power structures. While many of Carter's texts resonate with Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque, it is only in later works that she specifically references his work. In an interview with Lorna Sage, she stated that she had been unfamiliar with Bakhtin's work and only came to read him latterly 'because he was invoked so often by readers' (188). Helen Stoddart and Linden Peach, in particular, have extended the carnivalesque critique to incorporate circuses, clowns and cinema, especially the films of Federico Fellini, as being central influences in her writing (see Stoddart, *Angela* 48). Stoddart argues that at times Carter is critical of Bakhtin's ideas on the carnivalesque

¹⁰ See, for example, selected articles in Bristow and Broughton; also Geraldine Meaney, Elaine Jordan, Merja Makinen, Pauline Palmer and Linden Peach

¹¹ Bakhtin developed the concepts of polyphony and dialogism, meaning that multiple voices and perspectives are simultaneously present and remain un-submerged into a single viewpoint; no single voice gains ascendancy or binds the text to a particular unified point of view (see Andrew Robinson 1).

(evident in her description of the clowns in *Nights at the Circus*) in that unrestrained carnival can lead to a sense of emptiness and disillusion (ibid. 115). Ultimately, it seems that Carter was sceptical of the capacity of carnival to effect any permanent transformation.¹² In a late short story, she wrote, 'You can't keep it up you know; nobody ever could. The essence of the carnival [...] is transience [...] a release of tension, not a reconstitution of order' ('In Pantoland' *Burning* 389). Nonetheless, the carnivalesque plays a significant role in her work, including her employment of many of its tropes and its transgressive and parodic critique of societal functions.

In relation to Mukherjee's work, Judie Newman¹³ in particular has remarked extensively on its indebtedness to chaos theory. Newman notes that in Mukherjee's use of chaos theory as a paradigm, 'the migrant and the marginal' become sites for new discovery ('Bharati Mukherjee' 542), implying that what seems small or peripheral (the migrant) and insignificant or ex-centric (the outsider) can render major upheaval on the centre and impact significantly on established orthodoxy. Transformation of the centre by those who appear marginal is a key theme in Mukherjee's work. Taking her impetus from chaos theory she shows that the migrant or foreigner can have an unanticipated and destabilising effect on the whole body politic.

By bringing the tropes of carnival and chaos together, this thesis draws out some striking resonances between the two theories and the two writers. My readings of their work suggest an undeclared affinity between the marginal, the foreign (or the migrant) and the grotesque, uncontained body which is fundamental to carnival. This affinity is expressed in ways that have been previously unexplored by scholarship, and which I tease out in the section below on 'Fairs and Foreigners'.¹⁴ The following analyses also suggest that the abject presents another confluence between the carnivalesque and chaos theory in that it informs not only the grotesque body but also the foreign 'Other': both figures are associated with the low domains and are characterised by overflowing edges and bulging,

¹² The purpose of transgression, as I note in my Introduction, is to critique and change the status quo; for Carter, carnival had its limitations: 'The whole point about the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before...' (Sage, Interview, ibid.). Terry Eagleton (*Benjamin* 148) makes a similar critique of carnival's limited capacity to invoke revolutionary change: 'Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony...'

¹³ See *The Ballistic Bard* (1995, 150-6). Newman is one of Mukherjee's most erudite and affirming critics.

¹⁴ Although Newman registers the connection between marginality and chaos theory in *The Ballistic Bard* (144-172), she does not extend this to a discussion of Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body.

irregular shapes. In the middle sections of the chapter, I deal with the transgressive and excessive aspects of the carnivalesque and chaos theory which enable the margins as sites of power. Finally, I close with a critique of carnival and chaos and their points of intersection. To begin, however, I start with a short explanation of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, followed by an outline of the principles of chaos theory.

In the 1930s, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Russian literary philosopher, theorised on the subversive, chaotic and topsy-turvy effects of carnival and the grotesque through his study of Rabelais, the French Renaissance satiric writer. For Bakhtin, carnival, as exemplified by Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, included an intermingling of all sectors of society normally separated, the mixing of the sacred and the profane, the inversion and/or parody of normative practices, and the twinning of people and bodies that could be construed as disjunctive or misaligned (see Robinson).¹⁵ Stoddart, in her guide to Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, usefully distinguishes two further aspects of Bakhtin's carnivalesque: rituals that enact the 'dual energies of destruction and renewal' in which every act within the carnivalesque cycle 'produces or contains its reverse'; and parody as a form of laughter which is inherent in the carnivalesque, a mocking that does not entail the wholesale rejection of the parodied object (28). According to Terry Eagleton, 'radical humour' estranges 'power structures [...] through grotesque parody [...]. Absolutely nothing escapes this great spasm of satire' (*Walter Benjamin* 145). Carter uses laughter as one of the ways to embark on her radical re-writing of the status quo.

In addition to the upside down world of carnival, Bakhtin focused attention on the related figure of the grotesque body, derived in part from his study of Rabelais, and expressed as the exuberant, open and never-finished reproductive capacity of the people, continually growing and renewing itself as a material body, but also spilling out beyond its borders and seeping from its orifices (Bakhtin 19). The grotesque body 'is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' primarily through bodily functions (ibid. 26). The body here is figured as the grotesque physical body as opposed to the elevated and spiritual, and

¹⁵ Although there appears to be little evidence for the Bakhtinian type of carnivalesque within the Hindu paradigm, the festival of Holi, for example, allows for chaotic play with water and colours, and the intermixing of all ages and genders. But it seems neither caste nor gender is subverted during this spring festival of love; rather it is intended to generate renewal and harmony within society. Interestingly, in Northern India, women are entitled to let off steam by hitting the men (playfully) and men are expected to take whatever the women 'dish out' to them, but this is truly a temporary event and has no effect on the status quo.

represents the lower strata of society. Within a patriarchal context, women (especially unruly women) are frequently consigned to the low and situated alongside the grotesque (see Russo, *The Female Grotesque*).

This intermingling of the low and the high is expressed in the novels of Carter, often represented by female protagonists that populate her novels, such as the figures of Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*, with an exaggeration of all that is base and disreputable placed (mockingly) alongside the intellectual and/or spiritual. Carter extended her transgressive focus on the grotesque to include women's sexuality and pornography and, controversially, she saw this focus as a method for liberating women from patriarchal straitjacketing, what she called 'the mind forg'd manacles' – a quote from William Blake – or the 'social fictions that regulate our lives' (*Shaking* 38). She argued that 'A male-dominated society produces a pornography of universal female acquiescence' but the pornographer (unwittingly) becomes 'a sexual guerilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of [sexual] relations' (*Sadeian Woman* 20-2). The Marquis de Sade was an 'unconscious ally' of women because he exposed the truth of sexual power relations and gave women the right to express sexual desire and perversity (*ibid.*). Carter's views drew on a multiplicity of sources, and while her work seems evocative of Bakhtin primarily, it exceeds his frame (spills over, so to speak) and has a complementary debt to the theories and writing of Georges Bataille, especially in terms of her feminist gloss. Although the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia¹⁶ were significant in providing a stylistic structure for her focus on woman's sexuality and agency, I argue that Bataille's work on eroticism, which included the breaking down of boundaries, a sense of dissolution that 'corresponds with dissolute life' and moral unrestraint (*Eroticism* 17), gave her the added impetus to drive this transgressive sexual agenda. While Carter clearly invoked the carnivalesque particularly in her last two novels, I suggest that in her earlier work, her apparent rendition of Bakhtinian notions is based on her familiarity with *Bataille's* ideas on excess, ecstasy, and the need to transgress the 'constant experience of limits' in human experience (Jenks 7).

¹⁶ Within heteroglossia, multiple styles and voices exist in the text but the creativity of the novel resides in the way they exist together, not in their elements (Robinson).

Although Bataille and Bakhtin were contemporaneous, Bakhtin's writing was not known in the West until 1968,¹⁷ long after Bataille had written his major works. (In contrast, Carter, who was fluent in French, would have read Bataille in the original). Despite there being little possibility of contact between these two social theorists, their work demonstrates a remarkable convergence of ideas regarding the way that ordinary life is thrown into turmoil and turned on its head at the time of the festival. In *Eroticism*, Bataille states that 'Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns [...] of the regulated social order' (17-18). For Bakhtin, it is carnival and the grotesque body that transgress order. According to Winfried Menninghaus, 'Bataille and Bakhtin describe the time of festival not least of all in terms of lustful excesses [...]. Bakhtin's grotesque world of carnival has nearly the same structure as Bataille's "sacred world" and its artistic and erotic equivalents' (355); both worlds are described as transgressing limits where extraordinary things happen. Carter's review of Bataille's erotic novella, *The Story of the Eye*, indicates her admiration for him as a 'surrealist fellow-traveller and sexual *philosophe*'; she comments that 'the tradition of anti-clericalism' amongst European intellectuals 'underpins Bataille's theory of active sexuality as the assertion of human freedom against the laws of church and state' (*Shaking* 68). 'Pornography squarely in the service of blasphemy' implied 'transgression, outrage, sacrilege, a liberation of the senses through erotic frenzy' (*ibid.*); this formulation enabled her to extend and exceed the ideas of the carnivalesque towards an interrogation of women's sexuality and power.

Mukherjee's fictional universe, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the local and the global and the fractious encounter of the relocated woman not only with a new culture but with a new technological world (see Newman, 'Bharati Mukherjee'). The terrain that she maps in writing about these encounters engages with the Hindu system of belief in recurring patterns and cycles of nature. Mukherjee contemporises these beliefs by interfacing them with modern scientific theories of chaos; for her, one of the key features of chaos theory is its apparent resonance with Hinduism, significant because of her own Hindu beliefs. In an interview with Angela Elam in 2005, she argued that 'Chaos theory is close to the Hindu explanation of how the world works. Quantum physics is really what our creation,

¹⁷ The year 1968 was an interesting moment in modern history: France and Eastern Europe experienced political uprisings of the left; in Soviet Russia, where Bakhtin's work represented a form of resistance against Stalin, 1968 marked a resurgence of a Stalinist form of communism.

destruction, re-creation is all about.’ (132-3). In a later interview with Bradley Edwards, she said that her interests in cosmology came from her ‘initial interest in the Vedic descriptions of the cosmos’ and that perhaps destiny was about ‘fractals’¹⁸ and the “butterfly effect”¹⁹; that nothing is unplanned, that every movement has consequences’(155). Her novels repeatedly demonstrate this elision between scientific theories such as chaos theory and information systems and Hindu explanations of the universe.

Chaos theory destabilises linear scientific paradigms of cause and effect and introduces ‘a paradigm of orderly disorder’ that can account for the dynamics and fluctuations in complex systems (Hayles xiii, 2). Similarly, Hinduism suggests that, despite the turbulence and unpredictability within life’s chaos, there exists a deep or hidden level of order (Interview with Edwards 155). Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine*, in particular, reflects these concepts of chaos theory,²⁰ with its incongruity between cause and effects (the migration of one person from a small village in India produces dramatic upheaval on a continent at the opposite end of the world), its sensitivity to initial conditions (Jasmine determines to reposition her fate), its concerns with irregular forms (Jasmine is scabrous armed and marked for life by a scar on her forehead), and the shift from individual units to ‘recursive symmetries between scale levels’ (Jasmine not only tracks a new path for herself but is often referred to in cosmic terms as a cyclone).

Mukherjee’s novels have been accused of dealing in too many themes and creating implausible story lines (see, for example, Kakutani). A different interpretation – and one which this thesis proposes – seeks to advance the argument that her multi-narrative form reflects her philosophical alignment with chaos theory, and marks a rebellion against the linear scientific order of Western thought. In a similar way, the carnivalesque as foregrounded by Bakhtin expresses a radical nonconformity, a resistance to ‘every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook’ (3). An intriguing intersection between chaos and carnival emerges in Newman’s reading of intertextuality in Mukherjee’s

¹⁸ Katherine Hayles describes fractals as one of the building blocks in Benoit Mandelbrot’s formulation of chaos theory. James Gleick defines the fractal as the regular irregularity of certain shapes and ‘the degree of irregularity remains constant over different scales’, for example, as reflected in the coastline (98-99).

¹⁹ According to Gleick, ‘Tiny differences in input could quickly become overwhelming differences in output’; in weather forecasting this is known as the ‘Butterfly Effect – the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York’. (8),

²⁰ See Hayles 10-15.

work. Newman suggests that various stories and schemas in Mukherjee's novels interact and move into each other in 'feedback loops', implying that 'intertextuality is a literary equivalent of chaos. Even the smallest story can have enormous effects. [...] the local story may become a tornado when it hits the west, demolishing paradigms of the "universal", the linear, the classic' (*Ballistic Bard* 169). The concept of intertextuality was developed by Kristeva, based on an interpretation of Bakhtin's dialogism (works and authors in dialogue with each other), as the interplay between texts and signs, and the interrelatedness of texts.²¹ Kristeva refuted the idea of the 'autonomous' text and described 'carnivalism as a space where texts meet, contradict and relativize each other...' (Moi, *Kristeva* 34).

Intertextuality is the literary kin of Bakhtin's grotesque body, with a text always open and transforming. Using Kristeva's definition as her starting point, Newman argues that intertextuality is fundamental to a consideration of postcoloniality because postcolonial writers are self-conscious in their attempts to converse with and deconstruct the works (usually Eurocentric) that have influenced them (*Ballistic* 2-8).²² Although Mukherjee contests her status as a postcolonial writer (Chen and Goudie 76),²³ she engages in similar self-conscious revisioning and interleaving of certain canonical works and their themes; for example, *Holder of the World* strongly references Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and the epigraphs of each chapter of the novel contain sequential stanza segments from Keats' *Ode to A Grecian Urn*; moreover, allusions to *Jane Eyre* occur throughout *Jasmine*. Carter's use of intertextuality has been well documented:²⁴ she alludes to literature, film, theatre and popular culture as well as to literary theorists, both English and French, anthropologists and psychologists in her novels and short stories. In their use of pastiche, parody and allusion, and their referencing of multiple stories and ideas, Carter and Mukherjee perform a hybridisation of writing which often brings together mismatched and misaligned elements and celebrates the grotesque.

Both Carter and Mukherjee are interested in complexities that 'don't fit' and topographies that move beyond a regular storyline or character. With her depiction of Fevvers in *Nights*

²¹ See Kristeva, *Desire in Language* and Maria Alfaro, 'Intertextuality'.

²² *The Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin was a key text in defining the field of postcolonial studies and the way that the colonies confront the residue and articulate critiques of colonisation.

²³ Contrary to Mukherjee's positioning of herself, some critics do view her as a postcolonial writer (see, for example, John Hoppe 137).

²⁴ See, for example, Roemer and Bacchilega; Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter; Flesh and the Mirror*.

at the Circus, Carter engages in the description of a body that seems illogical: a trapeze artist with wings who is lumbering and raucous, whose legs are like tree trunks, but who nonetheless can fly. She is a 'Cockney aerialiste' (note the inherent oxymoron even in the epithet: one who is base-born but borrows a name from high-culture). Mukherjee's character, Devi, in *Leave It To Me*, like Fevvers, is born in uncertain circumstances with a different name. She is taken in by nuns as an orphan, adopted by a 'decent' family and renamed Debby DiMartino. She begins a search for her 'unclaimable part' (*Leave It* 10), following the trajectory of the goddess Devi, after whom she names herself, igniting fires and destruction, causing chaos in her wake. Both these characters spill out and over from the regular line of characterization and narrative, engaging with the complexities and irregularities of chaotic or carnivalesque aspects of life and story. One of the key convergences between Mukherjee and Carter resides in the area of indeterminacy, a critical feature of chaos theory (see Hayles 181); texts by both authors cannot be contained by genres and are permeated by immeasurable contexts and intertexts so that their meaning is either indeterminate or over-determined.

While ideas about carnival and the carnivalesque have not generally been associated with formulations emanating from chaos theory, my readings of Carter and Mukherjee reveal fascinating points of interface between the two paradigms: in both, naturally occurring events tend to be cyclical, chaotic and unpredictable, and linear explanations of causality cannot be usefully applied to such events; both focus on a known and predictable social order that is thrown into confusion, resulting in a topsy-turvy world marked by excessive activity and information, which nonetheless has embedded in it a deeper structure of regularity.

Carnival may be likened to the material manifestation of chaos; it is the place where the monstrous, the outrageous and the grotesque interact side by side with the domain of the everyday. Monstrosity is the mark of the carnivalesque but significantly also characterises the inconsequential 'other' on the margins or at the periphery – the other who is frequently represented by the figure of the foreigner. When Benoit Mandelbrot, one of the forefathers of the new science of chaos, argued that complex and non-linear figures appear in nature,²⁵ mathematicians described his fractal geometry (nonlinear geometry) as 'pathological' and

²⁵ Mandelbrot first discussed the theory of chaos in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (1983).

‘monstrous’ (Hayles 164). Because scientists had been trained to perceive regular linear forms as the only acceptable scientific forms, they applied the label ‘monstrous’ to what was foreign, strange and unfamiliar (ibid.). Interestingly, Mandelbrot was himself ‘other’, a refugee who never fitted the norm; according to Gleick, ‘Even mathematicians would say [...] that whatever Mandelbrot was, he was not one of them’ (90). Here, then, the carnivalesque and chaos theory meet unexpectedly: both are characterised by monstrosity because their tenets clash with prevalent norms and run counter to convention; they throw the world-as-it-is-known into disarray.

For both Carter and Mukherjee, figures and spaces on the margins are emblematic of the non-linearity and ‘monstrosity’ embedded in chaos and carnival. In the following section, I focus on fairs and foreigners as symbols of these margins that disrupt and destabilise familiar established structures.

2.2.1 Fairs and Foreigners: Places and Figures on the Margins

The theories of Douglas on the relationship between dirt, pollution and danger and Kristeva’s work on the abject as the simultaneous expulsion and beckoning of that which is disgusting and sordid are apposite to the novels and short stories of Carter and Mukherjee.²⁶ Although neither author makes explicit reference to the work of Douglas or Kristeva in her fiction, many of their figures and spaces assume the status of the abject. Unlike the grotesque body that is uncontained and leaks out, the abject is ambivalent: it is both of the body and just beyond it; sometimes it is the margin itself, at other times, it is positioned on the verge or just outside, suggesting an existence continually in a struggle with what is inside and what is out, and unsettling both. In their texts, the margins signify the ‘low domains’ – places such as fairs, circuses or shadowy outposts at society’s edges – which are designated as dirty and disgusting and ‘expelled as Other’. Like the nether regions of the body, these places are associated with base physicality and sexuality, and they return, signalling ‘longing and fascination’, implying that ‘disgust always bears the imprint of desire’ (Stallybrass and White 191). Carter’s review of *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates her astute

²⁶ A number of critics have foregrounded Kristeva’s theory of abjection in their examination of Carter’s work; see, for example, Gerardine Meaney; Lucie Armit and Andermahr & Phillips. To my knowledge, apart from my study, no critiques of Mukherjee’s work have focused on the abject.

awareness of this association; when Catherine sees Heathcliff covered in muck, she retreats from him, 'from what she suddenly perceives as "a rising tide of filth"'. Carter makes no apology here for the *double entendre*; rather, she writes that Catherine's return to the Lockwood family reveals that 'Together with her new clothes and her new femininity, she has put on repression.' (*Shaking* 597). But the 'other' cannot be fully expelled and cast out of sight: it waits just on the outside, hovering on the edges, compelling and fascinating. Kristeva explains it thus: these abject parts '*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands...' (3); and they exert a continuous seductive pull on the regulated, ordered body precisely because they affirm the subject while interrogating its limits.

The 'low-domains', and their articulation through margins and the grotesque, links the work of Carter and Mukherjee in unexpected ways. In Carter's texts, edgy places, such as fun fairs, circuses and music halls, are where the mores that operate in daily (ordered) life are questioned, contested and unsettled. They often invoke both seedy nostalgia and decadent romance – yearning and repugnance – although 'fun' may seem to be their ostensible objective. The places themselves, like the abject, are paradoxical and ambivalent: they are set aside, as it were, expelled to the fringe or the edge of town, or placed at the sea side (another perimeter); yet they are also hypervisible – big, loud, showy, and eye-catching, announcing their temporary presence with flamboyance and bright lights. They assert a struggle between the periphery and the centre, signalling the allure of the exotic, which is only rendered safe by virtue of distance and transience.

If the grotesque is associated with the lower bodily strata and 'low' culture, 'a deviation from the norm', I contend that the foreigner or migrant who figures in Mukherjee's work is frequently designated as such, and is similarly paradoxical: marginal, marginalised and hypervisible.²⁷ Trying to remain undetected and out of sight, pushed to the periphery of society, s/he announces her presence by accent, clothes, skin colour and even deportment; her difference is both fascinating and threatening. The foreigner is constructed as spectacle while simultaneously dismissed as the abject or grotesque other, threatening boundaries as

²⁷ According to Russo the grotesque body represents 'a deviation from the norm' which is 'abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics' (10-11). See also Mathew Martin who, in a study of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, notes that the foreigner is potentially grotesque (92).

she attempts to insert herself into centre space. In *Jasmine*, the story of a young woman from a small Indian village who undertakes the tumultuous journey to America, for example, Mukherjee shows how even the smallest details proclaim difference and ‘otherness’ in her new country: Lillian, the ‘facilitator who made possible the lives of *absolute* ordinariness’ that migrants longed for, tells Jasmine, ‘... beware the shoes [...] shoes are the biggest giveaway. Undocumented aliens wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels’ (132). Lillian also exhorts her to ‘Walk American’, to eat American foods, and not to be afraid – as Jasmine stands at the escalator, hesitating, Lillian says ‘They pick up dark people like you who’re afraid to get on and off’ (133). Blending into American mainstream is essential to survival; it requires a demonstration of entitlement and confidence and an assertion of the right ‘to get on and off’, to travel ‘light’ and act free, in order to effect at least a pretense at belonging.

In Carter’s prose piece, ‘Fun Fairs’, she acknowledges that ‘Fun is peripheral to one’; but for the creator of the fun ‘it is so much hard work’ (*Shaking* 341.) The funfair provider and the foreign ‘other’ alike have to overreach themselves to stake any claim on mainstream society. Their attraction and charm is based upon the acknowledgement that they are alien but provisional and therefore do not threaten the structure and boundaries of normative life. Carter underscores this provisionality and transience of the fair by quoting the shirt-seller at Hammersmith market (a modern-day form of fair): ‘We’re not here today and gone tomorrow, we’re here today and *gone today!*’ (ibid. own emphasis). In an interesting comment on the early commercial link between fairs and foreigners, Natalie Davis maintains that in the sixteenth century in Europe there was an economical advantage to having foreigners operating at the fairs. In the city of Lyon, for instance, foreign merchants controlled the money markets at fairs, so that places on the edge of towns became the stomping ground for the foreign who were socially peripheral but economically significant, even powerful (qtd. in Stallybrass and White 35).

Both foreigner and fair-hand possess the allure of the stranger, portending difference and danger, and drawing a gaze that is sanctioned, even encouraged within this temporary and provisional context. Mukherjee iterates this point in her fiction: the Indian as exotic other is a fantasy of the West, essentialised and gazed upon from afar. In *Desirable Daughters*, the protagonist Tara is constantly courted for her representation of anything Indian, but this is

‘the backpacker’s India [which] feels as remote, as alien, as Mars’ (87); hence, both her appeal and lack of threat.²⁸

Whereas the foreign may be a symbolic figure of the grotesque, the fairground is the space where the grotesque is located. It is filled with the abject of society amongst whom are the ‘exotics’ from far-away places. Since fair people (and here I include circus performers) and foreigners alike appear to hover on the ‘outside’, at the edges, in and of the ‘low domains’, they are excluded not only from participating in conventional life but also from the dominant mechanisms of social control. Moreover, at the fair ground there is the free-flowing mix of people of all statuses and nationalities, as well as an authorised celebration of excess, where the regulated social mores are overturned by burlesque and parody. While the fair is a marginalised place with the charm of travesty, for Carter, it is also the preeminent location that *supersedes* or ignores all topographical borders, so that it is both an edgy place and a meta-place, both *of* the margins and superseding margins and centres (a kind of global ‘margin’). It is peopled with a cast who share ‘the sullen glamour of deformity, an internationality which acknowledges no geographic boundaries. Here the grotesque is the order of the day’ (‘Lady Purple’, *Fireworks* 30). It is an everywhere and a nowhere, a place for those who disfigure normality – a diaspora of the dispossessed. Yet these marginal spaces and figures also evidence the potential for shifting the structures of power as Mukherjee and Carter demonstrate in their texts.

Like the fairground performer, the foreigner functions as spectacle and her imitation of the dominant (as in the example of Jasmine quoted above) parodies normative behavior. In an interview regarding the integration of foreigners into local culture, Mukherjee notes that trying too hard is a problem that foreigners experience: ‘sometimes they get the codes wrong’ (Raban). Commenting on the spectacle and display of the other (including animal creatures) at fairs, Stallybrass and White observe that these spectator-acts ‘play with thresholds of culture’ and parallel the ‘double process of Colonialism’: the other attempts to transform into the same and, indeed, transforming into the same is demanded of the other in order to fit in (41). ‘But at the same time, the Other’s mimicry of the polite is

²⁸ In an interesting reversal of the East/West configuration, Carter comments on how in the novel *Naomi* by the Japanese author Junichiro Tanizaki, the White Russian countess becomes the fantasy for the Japanese protagonist; she is the ‘absolutely forbidden’, the powerful, strange and erotic other (*Shaking a Leg* 268).

treated as absurd', giving rise to laughter and consolidating a sense that being 'civilized is always-already given, the essential and unchanging possession which distinguishes the European citizen from the West Indian and the Zulu...' (ibid.). In Mukherjee's work, this mimicry, precisely because it is excessive, can function in reverse, as a parody of the dominant culture. For Homi Bhabha, the power of 'mimicry' lies in its simultaneous 'resemblance and menace' (123); as it discloses 'the ambivalence of colonial discourse', it also 'disrupts its authority' (126).

My reading of Mukherjee's work suggests that the figure of the foreigner extends Bakhtin's logic of the grotesque and similarly contests power by operating as a 'critique of dominant ideology'. Stallybrass and White explain that Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the grotesque denotes two meanings: one that sets the grotesque in binary opposition to the classical, the other that implies hybridisation so that the intermixing of different and irreconcilable elements transgresses convention and gives rise to a sense of disequilibrium. Accordingly, hybridisation not only inverts norms but 'generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it' (43, 58). For Mukherjee, the foreigner and the concept of 'mongrelisation' perform a similar logic of critique, but instead of unease she suggests that creative energy is released. In an interview with Edwards she claims that mongrelisation 'implies a kind of accidental, spontaneous coming together – you don't know what is going to result from this coming together – and the energy that a new group or new species brings to society. [...] it means that you don't care about preconceived social hierarchies, about racial or class status' (164). Here hybridisation and mongrelisation perform the same function: the production of new, inventive structures and relations that supersede traditional notions of racial and caste purity.²⁹

In Mukherjee's novels, these old-world, traditional views are comically derided. One example occurs in *Desirable Daughters*, the story of three sisters narrated by Tara, the youngest, a divorcee, and previously in an arranged marriage to a Silicon Valley computer mogul. Tara's Bombay-based sister, Parvati, asks her find a suitable wife for the son of a

²⁹ Salman Rushdie used the term 'mongrelization' in a similar sense in his discussion of *The Satanic Verses*: it is a novel that 'celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure' (394).

Calcutta-based aunt. Aunt Bandana is from the 'old school': she insists on strict observances of caste, and more so, on Brahmin purity. She believes that 'if you sow the wrong kind of seed in the wrong kind of soil, you are bound to end up with an unhealthy sapling' (112). Yet, Tara who immerses herself in the study of science and cosmology (82), knows the opposite to be true: in aiming for the purebred, the unhealthy sapling is produced. According to Parvati, the Aunt's orthodox views emerge from her having lived her whole life in Calcutta without ever leaving; whereas, she tells Tara, living in cosmopolitan Bombay means 'you lose all sense of who you are and where you come from. We're getting to be as mongrelised as you Americans' (113).

Tara herself lives with a foreigner, Andras, a Buddhist-practicing construction worker from Hungary, an ex-delinquent with a troubled past who is remaking himself into a San Francisco 'new age' man. She regards herself and Andras as 'border-crashing claimant[s] of all people's legacies' (82).³⁰ Crossing over boundaries and 'mongrelisation' enable access to many cultures and many possibilities, including the possibility of remaking oneself entirely – a dominant theme in Mukherjee's oeuvre.³¹ Newman notes that these reinventions of subjectivity constitute a survival 'strategy of hybridization', particularly evident in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (*Ballistic* 162); here, reincarnation is figured as neither a mystical nor religious process but rather a technological one that evokes 'the image of the spirals and strange attractors of chaos theory' (*ibid.*), with the soul 'like a giant long-playing record with millions of tracks', each linking microscopically into different lives (*Jasmine* 127).

Mukherjee's conceptualisation of mongrelisation is suggestive of Bakhtin's grotesque hybridity as that which destabilises norms and generates new energies: it is an 'unpredictable, sometimes undesirable' presence (Mukherjee, 'Imagining Homelands' 78). Effectively, Mukherjee proposes that this intermixing of the foreign with the local contests inclusiveness and unsettles the dominant ideology (both local and foreign, American and Indian) through the bringing together of apparently mismatched and misaligned elements. According to D'Souza (189), Mukherjee is concerned with the 'permeability of the boundary

³⁰ Andras represents the foreigner trying to merge into the 'melting pot' of America, only to become a suspect belonging to the 'exploitable underclass', when Tara's house is firebombed (*Desirable* 288).

³¹ I have used the term hybrid/hybridisation primarily in the Bakhtinian sense although I am aware of course of its prominence in postcolonial theory (see Bhabha and Robert Young). Mukherjee uses the term 'mongrelisation' as a form of hybridisation, but disdains the word 'hybridity' because it implies 'a kind of scientific laboratory setting' (Interview with Edwards 164).

between Inside and Outside' and the markers of 'Difference' which empower a new form of subjectivity. The incursion of the foreign into the sphere of the domestic can be understood in terms of Douglas' theory on dirt and danger: it is akin to the function of dirt intruding into what appears to be a closed system, suggesting that the borders of such a system are not impenetrable and that their stability may be disrupted. The foreign other, then, is the abject body that can be neither entirely separated nor assimilated, and that threatens to spill over into the space of the sanctioned and the dominant. For Mukherjee, such spilling over has positive consequences: the foreigner represents a transgressive and transformative challenge to the orthodoxy of the centre.

The significance of the foreign 'other' and the grotesque are also evident in *Nights at the Circus* where Carter extends the connotations of the funfair (a world unto itself), with its fast paced and kaleidoscopic spectacle (see Stoddart, *Angela* 113), to the circus. Like the fairground, circuses are often peopled with those from foreign lands and circus acts tend to indulge in the excesses of the grotesque, with crude clowns uttering profanities and animals performing human-like antics (see Bouissac, qtd. in Stallybrass and White 58). In Carter's text, which narrates the journey of Fevvers, the *aerialiste*, as she travels with the circus³² through three different countries in increasingly bizarre landscapes and encounters, almost every circus act – and action associated with the circus – is marked by inversion and hybridisation, the defining characteristics of the grotesque. Sybil, the 'particularly accomplished' pig, is the 'pardner in the Ludic Game' of Colonel Kearney, the circus impresario. Sybil – a play on the name of the sibyls who were prophetic Greek goddesses – accompanies him wherever he goes and has the final word on all his decisions (*Nights* 98-99).³³ Stoddart notes, too, that Kearney, pronounced 'Carney', suggests Carter's intentional association between the circus and carnival (*Angela* 115). The elevation of the pig abases all those cast below it and mocks the social status and rankings prominent in ordinary life. In earlier times, the pig was frequently a symbol of celebration or demonisation, a focus of 'displaced abjection, the process whereby "low" social groups turn their figurative and

³² The modern circus, has its origins in 1768 with the creation of Philip Astley's exhibition space for horse tricks and other performance arts (see Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*); like Fevvers herself, the circus began 'life in London before taking off around the world' and achieving early success in Paris and St Petersburg (Stoddart, *Angela* 111).

³³ According to Stallybrass and White, 'Toby, the Real Learned Pig' was presented at Bartholomew Fair in 1833 as the 'Unrivalled Chinese Swinish Philosopher' (58). Carter's description of Sybil is certainly drawn from these accounts of Toby.

actual power, not against those in authority, but against those who are even “lower” (women, Jews, animals, particularly cats and pigs).’ (Stallybrass & White 53). The pig stands at the threshold between human and animal, disturbing this boundary, signalling danger and power, symbolising a site not only of ambivalence but also of competing contradictions (ibid. 49).

Like the pig, primates trouble the human-animal border. The chimps of Colonel Kearney’s circus overturn their roles and, in a biting parody of their human masters, terminate their manager’s services, take charge of their act and negotiate advantageous financial terms for themselves with the Colonel. They *act* dumb, spoofing the stereotype of dumb apes, but in fact use their circus act to brush up on the finer details of economics and finance, and finally outwit the Colonel by going off on their own with a tidy profit (perhaps aided by the dual loyalties of the pig). The circus strongman (another prototype) also upends his typecast: after raping and then falling in love with one partner of a lesbian tiger-taming couple, his remorse and passion provoke him into acting as their life-long loyal butler; thus, he forsakes brutality for sentimentality. Even Walser, the rationalist journalist who is attempting to document Fevers’ life and joins the circus as a clown, is forced to reconfigure himself through a journey as the shaman’s apprentice.³⁴ Echoing Mukherjee’s ideas of mongrelisation, the text seems to demonstrate that something unexpected will come from all these jumbled inversions and misalignments hitting up against each other. And indeed, what the novel makes clear is that previously defined categories and boundaries are broken up, scattered and repositioned to create a different and unexpected social order beyond the circus, epitomised by Fevers’ reverberating laughter at the end of the novel, an ambivalent radical laughter which is at the heart of carnival and where, as Eagleton has noted, ‘power structures are estranged through grotesque parody’ (*Benjamin* 145).

2.2.1.1 From Abjection to Power

The foreigner and the fairground as symbols of the grotesque are marked by the abject, a state of marginality, a hovering at the edges. For Mukherjee, the abject is found in hideouts

³⁴ Walser’s name also has other connotations: it is both a dancer and the fairground ride which spins its occupants in dizzying circles (see Stoddart, *Angela* 113). Walser is a man of changing times, living in a chaotic world and initially trying to make sense of his experience by assuming the role of spectator. By the end of the novel he has learned to engage with life and love.

and hidden corners, shadowy borderlands with the aura of illegal aliens, refugees and immigrants. These are places that simultaneously conceal and disclose the detritus of society, those discarded by polity. In her earlier stories (*Darkness* 1985), Mukherjee's abject characters evidence little hope of escape and they find significance only in extreme circumstances. In 'Tamurlane', the setting is dismal: 'We sleep in shifts in my apartment, three illegals on guard playing cards and three bedded down on mats on the floor. [...]. The walls are flimsy. Nights I hear collective misery' (*Darkness* 100). Tamurlane is named for the Turko-Mongol ruler in the 14th century called 'Timur the Lame', believed to have been extremely cruel and powerful, but also known as a patron of the arts, the 'sword of Islam', and the forebear of the great Mughal dynasty ('Timur').³⁵ Mukherjee's use of the name 'Tamurlane' is only partly ironic: the character in the story, known as Gupta, is a disempowered foreigner but, like the original Tamurlane, he is surprisingly strong and fearsome, resisting his imposed abject status. Gupta is the tandoori chef of a cheap restaurant, lame because of an injury sustained through being thrown on the 'subway tracks' in Toronto. With the use of the title 'Tamurlane', Mukherjee is clearly referencing the juxtaposition of different cultures and the bathos inherent in the chef's current ignominious situation and station: whatever he may have been in another (home) culture (perhaps a 'Tamurlane'), in Canada he is reduced to Gupta the chef, an 'other' from the low domains, part of the underclass.

When the 'Mounties' of the story – the Canadian immigration officer and policeman – enter the restaurant looking for illegal immigrants, Gupta appears fearless, ordering them out of his kitchen. The officer makes a move to grab hold of the chef but is not quick enough to escape attack: 'Gupta whirled, falling as he took a step, with the cleaver high over his head. He brought it down in a wild, practiced chop on the Mountie's outstretched arm'. As Gupta falls (since he cannot move without his crutches), he manages to sit upright, reaching for his Canadian passport which he places in front of his face: 'That way, he never saw the drawn gun, nor did he try to dodge the single bullet' (*Darkness* 108). In a move towards empowerment and towards refusing to 'live servilely', in Bataille's words, Gupta confronts his oppressor with the only weapon he has – his meat cleaver – leading to his self-imposed

³⁵ Carter cites the cruelty of Tamburlaine the Great in a journalistic piece on the ravages of atomic warfare: He 'enjoyed reducing cities to rubble and slaughtering women and children' (*Shaking a Leg* 48).

death. The poignant ending makes clear that for the abject individual choosing death becomes the last option for making a significant statement about a life that is robbed of meaning and is the only way to put an end to power's reign.³⁶ In tragi-comic irony, it is the Canadian passport that takes the bullet before it reaches Gupta's head; Gupta becomes the paradoxical sign of legitimisation which turns back on itself, throwing into question the vexed idea of who belongs and who does not.

In *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Mukherjee begins to consider more varied options for overcoming abjection, and those that occupy abject zones now include Americans as well as foreigners. Jeb, the crazy Vietnam vet in 'Loose Ends', describes the cities of Florida as full of 'touts and pimps': 'It's life in the procurement belt, between those lines of tropical latitudes, where the world shops for its illicit goods and dumps its surplus parts, where it prefers to fight its wars...' (50). Alfie in 'Middleman', the title story of the volume, finds himself in a 'moldering spread deep in Mayan country' but he has seen 'worse' in 'Baghdad, Bombay, Queens'; he has grown up in Baghdad subordinate to French colonial rulers, sometimes grateful for being 'native' and 'invisible to our masters' (3-5). Paradoxically, the capacity to escape these places of abjection and to break out from the margins is enabled precisely by the use of skills that have been learned there. For Jeb, this dubious skill is the readiness to kill rather than be killed and knowing that 'Job One is to secure your objective' (50); for Alfie, it is having learned at an early age how to please a woman and how to play 'middleman': having survived a potentially fatal attack from his lover's cocked pistol (a sardonic parody of Alfie's energetic performance as zealous lover with his own 'cocked pistol'), and acted as middle-man for a delivery of weapons for the 'revolution', he acknowledges 'how simple the rules of survival are' (21). But, for these characters, attempts to overcome abjection are doubtful, and the primary choices available concern survival (of the fittest) in the margins, rather than the margins themselves representing a site of power that can impact on the centre.

³⁶ In *The History of Sexuality:1*, Foucault claims 'Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion; death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it' (138). Expressing a similar sentiment, Carter observes that, for Emily Brontë, another marginalised figure, 'the only free choice she appears to have entertained was that between life and death, and perhaps her death was in itself a kind of jail-break.' (*Shaking a Leg* 597).

On a more optimistic note, Panna, the wife and narrator in 'A Wife's Story', uses her skills more successfully. She says: 'I've been trained to adapt' but her adaptation has a sting: while watching a David Mamet play which seems to mock Indians, she takes offense. The people in the row 'shush' her; the fat man next to her has been laughing so hard at the Patel joke he has nudged her arm off the shared armrest. 'I stare, mean and cool, at the man's elbow. [...]. "Excuse me," I say. My voice has the effortless meanness of well-bred displaced Third World women, though my rhetoric has been learned elsewhere. "You're exploiting my space."' (*Middleman* 26-7) The ability to learn an 'elsewhere rhetoric' enables a transgressive breach of boundaries and a mismatched appropriation of mainstream mores. Using the system to buck the system, Panna juxtaposes her foreignness with the high value placed on privacy within an American ethos; as the 'other', the figure of the low domains, she asserts the moral high ground in American terms. In the struggle to move towards the centre, such openings for comeuppance are espied and grasped.

Increasingly in Mukherjee's work, being out of place and consigned to the margins becomes a combative way of grappling with the 'new world', introducing disorder into it, and thereby effecting changes upon it. The way that her characters view their foreignness determines whether they can move away from a sense of alienation and marginalisation towards the mainstream. At the edge, 'we see things we shouldn't be seeing'; for Panna, what she sees at the edge is the 'tyranny of the American dream. First you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you're disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance' (*ibid.* 25-26). Breaching the border and negotiating this tyranny through 'mongrelising' confronts the centre with its own hypocrisy, just as Panna confronts American racism by mimicking American values and the language of individual prerogative and liberty, and Jasmine confronts the dominance of the American dream by appropriating it for her own journey towards self-made woman.

The move from the low domains towards empowerment is the fight for seamless recognition as opposed to hypervisible dis-recognition and lack of entitlement. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara expresses her rage at the 'small army of American untouchables' who hang out in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco; she rails against the fact that '[t]heir marginality is rooted in a deep and profound ownership that I will never know', in contrast to her own sense of marginality which is defined specifically by a lack of proprietorship and

a sense of impermanence (83). But it is precisely this sense of being provisional that capacitates those at the edges and drives them to seek gaps for entry into legitimacy. For Panna in 'A Wife's Story' this means allowing 'memories of Indian destitutes' to mix with the hordes of New York street people' and to feel 'light, almost free [...] I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband, to get a Ph.D. in special ed.' (*Middleman* 28-9). Tara, in *Desirable Daughters*, feels 'not just invisible but *heroically* invisible' as she reads about science and cosmology in a Haight Street bookstore or plays with preschool children in her voluntary job at the local San Franciscan multicultural school; in these situations she can feel 'a kinship with the world' (82). But this is not a facile or uncomplicated passage into a sense of connectedness. Outside, she feels alien: 'I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I'm convinced. I don't belong here...' (*ibid.*). Both Tara and Panna continue to be haunted by the pull of other worlds as they struggle both for and with belonging, conscious of their hypervisibility and its concomitant troubling sense of illegitimacy in the new world. For both, their consciousness of imposed marginality pushes them to make a claim for being 'just as mainstream as anyone else' (Mukherjee, 'Imagining' 78).

2.2.1.2 Margins as Sites of Power: The Foreign and Exotic

For Mukherjee, the power of the margins is expressed through an erosion of boundaries where 'dirt' or disorder is introduced into the coherence of the 'inside' so that lives become implicated in each other and a misaligned and forceful intermingling occurs that produces a new, accidental energy. Power is also about bending the trajectory of an apparently fated karma or preordained pattern; being foreign in a new place provides an opportunity for transgressing these 'ordained' patterns and creating new ones.

While the margins host left-overs, cast-offs, and the impure, they also manifest the power of seduction and titillation.³⁷ Carter's stories of the low domains are full of riotous energy and sexual rambunctiousness, expressing the vulgar and effusive excess of the grotesque body that characterises those situated on the edges. In Mukherjee's work, elements of the carnivalesque are expressed obliquely through the simultaneous pollution and magnetism

³⁷ This is an iteration of Douglas' point: the margins sustain the internal unity of what they enclose but also suggest danger and power because they hint at the unknowable (see also Newman, *Ballistic* 86-87).

of the foreign: the low domains are often exoticised so that, although defined in terms of exclusion, they are inscribed with allure and magnetism. Graham Huggan, in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (13), notes that the exotic represents an interesting reversal of 'the other' in that it appropriates and reinstalls the foreign into the mainstream; he maintains that exoticism is an aesthetic way of perceiving foreign places and people so that they are maintained as strange even as they are domesticated.³⁸ Mukherjee extends Huggan's thesis to critique the (mainly) white liberal position that appropriates and markets the foreign as exotic, but her characters also know when to seize the exotic label and turn it into an opportunity to get ahead. She understands that 'real foreign is scary' but when it is diluted and labelled 'exotic' it can be tamed and controlled (*Middleman* 83); yet, the foreign 'other' can also direct the label towards itself, turning it into a weapon of power.

Jasmine tells the story of the trans-continent movement and evolution of Jyoti who becomes Jasmine and then Jane Ripplemeyer, living in the mid-west of America, 'five miles out of town'. In explaining her relationship with Bud, a banker who is confined to a wheelchair because of a sniper's bullet, Jane/Jasmine says: 'Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom' (200). This 'Jane' knows the pull and push of dark skin and a foreign accent: 'In Baden, the farmers are afraid to suggest I'm different [...] To them, alien knowledge means intelligence. They want to make me familiar' (33). It is a cutting comment not only on the foreign exotic but also a jibe at American chauvinism that views intelligence (in a woman? in a foreign woman!) as threatening and needing to be made familiar and tamed. Bud celebrates Jane's difference as the representation of the sexually exotic; the farmers, on the other hand, want to repress her difference so that she presents no risk, and in the role of care-giver, she is truly the domestic and domesticated. Jasmine, however, knows the value of the exotic and she uses her difference to bend the rules and forge her own path.

Difference rendered familiar, as Huggan suggests, is the way the mainstream inscribes the margin in order to reduce its power; it is a form of keeping the gaze averted but peeping sideways, pretending that there is nothing extraordinary about the 'other' while sustaining fascination with it. According to Huggan, writing about the margins is a way of marketing

³⁸ Quoting Gayatri Spivak, Huggan notes that marginality may be approved by the Academy which helps to commodify it: marginality may be 'an advantageous subject-position' within the postcolonial field (Huggan 23).

the exotic, too, and some critics have accused Mukherjee of doing just that (see, for example, Kumar 23). To write about those at the margins is also to risk playing to the exoticising market, creating a form of double-bind for the writer that is difficult to escape. Carter similarly gets caught in a double-bind, accused of playing into patriarchal views through her excessive, overblown style and her pornographic themes; some critics view these as threatening to engulf her oeuvre rather than seeing them as exploding stereotypes and valorising popular culture alongside high culture. Mukherjee is cognisant of the possibility of being co-opted, and her setting American and European characters alongside 'exotic' types, with humour and irony, highlights and warns against the domesticating tendency by the host nation.

Mukherjee has commented on the personal sting of being an alien, 'a visible minority' in Canada ('Imagining Homelands' 75), discriminated against, but also exoticised because of her accent and skin colour. The ethos of the Canadian 'mosaic', which focuses on the ethnic and cultural differences of groups, appears to be underpinned by liberal values, but for Mukherjee it functions as an 'othering' device, with the message, 'Do your exotic thing, hang onto your exotic costume' (Interview with Bonnie 73). In other words, stressing difference as authentic patronises the alien and domesticates the foreign; in this regard, she has commented that 'Multiculturalism emphasizes the difference between racial heritages. This emphasis on the differences has too often led to the dehumanization of the different.' (qtd. in Hoppe 137). In *Carnival and Cannibal*, Jean Baudrillard, the postmodern philosopher, describes this exoticisation by the West as part of the modern day spectacle evident in museums and art galleries: 'today's humanity succeeds in turning the worst alienation into aesthetic, spectacular delight' (7); and it is frequently an exoticisation practiced by the educated 'left'. The couple who employ Jasmine, for example, teach at Columbia University in New York; their apartment is 'stocked like a museum' with artifacts that are offensive to 'blacks or women or Red Indians. There were slave-auction posters [...] prints celebrating the massacre of an entire Indian village [...] a poster of a naked woman with parts of her body labelled...' (*Jasmine* 174). Those who have been consigned to the margins are doubly exploited and exposed, made visible and gazed upon in much the same way as happened at fairs and carnivals in the past where the foreigner as grotesque body was set aside for spectacle and spectator.

Mukherjee's short story, 'Fighting for the Rebound' (*Middleman*), also deals with the theme of difference exoticised, domesticated and re-formed; but here it is imbricated in the personal love relationship between Griff, a middle-American everyman, and his girlfriend, Blanquita, an immigrant from Manila, who live together in Atlanta. At one level the story reveals the difficulties of an ordinary love affair: her frustration with him and her desire to find something/someone better; his vacillation, his inability to commit, his attraction to her otherness. On another level, it is concerned with differences between the domestic and the foreign and how these are complicated by issues of class. Griff, the narrator, is a 'low-level money manager, a solid, decent guy in white shirt and maroon tie and thinning, sandy hair...' (80), according to whom, the 'dear old redneck' attitude is a thing of the past. Atlanta is a cosmopolitan city inhabited by people from all over the world who come to make their fortune: 'Just wheel your shopping cart through aisles of bok choy and twenty kinds of Jamaican spices [...] and you'll see that the US of A is still a pioneer country' (81). Mukherjee presents Griff's idea of the pioneering spirit with playful irony: Griff frames it in terms of America's willingness to trade with the East, signified by the presence of foreign produce in the supermarkets. In reality, it is Blanquita (the foreign other) who demonstrates the pioneering spirit by crossing borders to travel to the West, and it is the same 'pioneering spirit' that elsewhere Jasmine grabs hold of in her quest to 'go somewhere' and leave behind her past identities.

Griff's affirmation of Blanquita's beauty suggests to her that he is 'a racist, patronizing jerk': she tells him, 'I'm just different, that's all.' And indeed, Griff articulates a naïve version of both beauty and the myth of the American melting pot. Despite himself, Griff's narrative focuses precisely on Blanquita's foreignness (ironically, her name means 'white girl'); this, overlaid with her upper class origins, is the source of her appeal. She is 'Blanquita the Beautiful' who took a 'crash course in making nice to Americans' and who wields her barbecue fork 'the way empresses wield scepters' (79-80). The allusion to the Queen of Sheba, outré queen of the East (either Yemen or Ethiopia) resonates with Carter's story about Jeanne Duval, mistress of Baudelaire, 'the 'deposed Empress, royalty in exile' ('Black Venus', *Burning* 238). Both Blanquita ('White') and Jeanne ('Black') are represented as Venuses, as exotic others who seduce men through their alluring sexuality.

Blanquita – like the drug cocaine which her name signifies - is dangerous, expensive and addictive. Her demands for declarations of love sound second-hand, like lines from movies; but Griff is enthralled by her performance and captivated by her physical attributes: the colour of her skin and her delicate hands. On the other hand, Blanquita cannot understand Griff's jokes or his choice in TV programmes. Both are caught in clichéd expectations and in preconceived ideas of the other; Mukherjee's story clarifies that stereotypical biases colour perceptions of difference and that othering works in both directions. Griff argues that 'there's a difference between exotic and foreign [...]. Exotic means you know how to use your foreignness, or you make yourself a little foreign in order to appear exotic.' (83). Griff seems to articulate a particular (American) view of the foreign which implies that the foreigner consciously dupes the 'American', seducing him by being simultaneously mysterious and scintillating. In a sharp indictment, Mukherjee makes it clear that for Griff, 'Real foreign is a little scary' but a 'little foreign' can be 'put on' and advantageously marketed as exotic. Griff's view denies the demeaning experience of being foreign, suggesting rather that foreignness is a commodity to be packaged and marketed, as Huggan has described. This is not to say that the foreigner cannot use her exoticism to fight her way out of the margins; but in so doing she asserts agency rather than being subjectivated as a romantic alien icon.

This exoticising of the other occurs not just between Americans and foreigners but between different communities of 'outsiders' too. In *Leave it to Me*, the protagonist, Debby/Devi, is an orphan born in Bombay and adopted by American parents. Frankie Fong, the American-Chinese empire builder, senses that Debby is not American-born and becomes excited by his discovery of this mysterious 'other': "'That's it!' Frankie snapped his fingers. 'I knew there was something exotic about you. A touch of Merle Oberon.'" (33). Debby's appearance conjures images for him of the enigmatic film star born in India of Anglo-Indian parentage, or the women of Burma who balance jugs on their heads; he is seduced by the 'charm of foreignness' (36). Debby recognises that her difference gives her power over Frankie, but they also both discern that the exotic 'other' is a pose, a self-invention, made-over or made-up (*Leave* 33, 39).

In a review of the Japanese novel, *Naomi*, by Junichiro Tanizaki (*Shaking* 267-270), Carter unpicks the conundrum of difference, exoticism and foreignness; she articulates how the

‘foreign’ threatens the subject’s sense of self (hence the need to domesticate it as ‘exotic’). For the Japanese male protagonist, Kawai-san, ‘Naomi stands for the allure of the exotic – but she *only stands for it*, she does not embody it. She is, in reality, just as Japanese as he is’. Her point is that Kawai-san would not be able to bear ‘real foreign’: ‘His own sense of self is never at risk with her, as it would be with a real foreigner’ (*Shaking* 268). As for Griff, so for Kawai-san, ‘real foreign’ signals the grotesque body that threatens to erode boundaries of identity and to overflow and pollute the subject.

The ‘myth’ of exoticism and sentimental notions of an unchanging and unspoiled Third World keeping its traditions intact is exploded in *Jasmine’s* sub-plot about an Indian family, the Vadheras, who live in Flushing, New York. Theirs is an enclave that attempts to preserve an imaginary Punjab, a self-enclosed, true-to-its-roots, Indian community. But the fantasy of an authentic India ensconced in a secure and welcoming America is shattered when Jasmine discovers that Professor Vadhera is not a teacher at all, but ‘an importer of human hair’ from India which is used for the manufacture of scientific meteorological instruments. As Newman points out, Vadhera is indeed a marketer of the margins, plundering the ‘unspoiled’ to his own advantage, yet simultaneously attempting to preserve the world of the ‘unspoiled’ from which he has come (*Ballistic* 163). Although Mukherjee critiques not only the Vadheras’ hypocrisy but also the West’s role in encouraging this kind of plunder through its valorisation of the authentic, she extends her analysis to the complexities of global economic relations between India and America, and to the way that American cultural and economic imperialism still benefits from the bounty of Third World countries, now in the name of science (see Newman *ibid.*).

The centrality of the ‘other’ in Mukherjee’s work and the American push towards cultural authenticity (Newman, *Ballistic* 162; Rang) make it difficult for Mukherjee to avoid the contradictory dilemma of being nominated by others (host nation, fellow writers) as a writer of the margins who demonstrates a ‘colonialisation of the mind’ (see Carter, *Shaking* 38). Judith Butler warns that ‘subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés [...] through their repetition within a commodity culture where “subversion” carries market value’ (*Gender Trouble* xxiii). But in her texts (both novels and short stories) Mukherjee clearly attempts to avoid the commodification of subversion; although her position on ‘marketing the margins’ is nuanced in that she sees it as a possible

gap for the 'othered' individual to grab opportunities and assert potency, she is scathing about the notion of being co-opted as an exotic or of writing about the 'other' to pander to or 'subvert' Western notions of the foreign. She rejects a form of marketing that commodifies the foreigner for consumption by the mainstream and that negates individual agency. Rather, she complicates the image of the margins, noting that those who inhabit them may refuse commodification whilst simultaneously seizing on the power inherent therein.

In contrast to Huggan's thesis, then, Mukherjee reframes the margins as sites of resistance. For her, the power of the margins is precisely not in its *marketing* but potentially resides *in* the margins themselves and arises specifically from their capacity to produce non-conformity as well as the resourcefulness that the margins demand from its occupants. Her writing suggests that aggressive immersion in a new culture – deliberately learning a new code – is the most effective way to engage with the travails of immigration and marginalisation. However, she is cognisant of the fact that some residue of the 'other' – the past (temporal) and the borders (geographical) – always remains and invests a new identity and a new life with the power of difference (thus neither strange nor domesticated). Hence, she names such immersion 'mongrelisation' – a methodology that not only refuses co-option and exploitation by the host culture but that, in a contrary move, actively exploits it, either through conscious mimicry or deliberate entitlement. In a sense, Mukherjee's paradigm itself is a form of mongrelisation with her re-presenting chaos theory as a modern form of Hinduism and her confident intermingling of old-world ideas and new-age theories.

Re-imagining the margins as a site of power in the context of colonial exploitation³⁹ represents a point of intersection between Mukherjee and Carter, and it finds particular expression in Carter's short story, 'Black Venus', about Jeanne Duval – whore, creature of the slums, and mistress of Baudelaire (*Burning* 231-44). If the margins can be exoticised, part of their appeal stems from their association with what is forbidden or disgusting. The title of the story prefigures the twinning of desire and disgust: in all classical Western iconography, Venus is fair-skinned; dark skin and blackness connote the savage, the dirty

³⁹ Mukherjee's treatment of colonialism runs through all her work but is especially evident in her depiction of Britain in *The Tree Bride*.

and the rampantly sexual. Black Venus, like the Hottentot Venus, is an ironic oxymoron.⁴⁰ In the story – as in reality – Jeanne reveals the apparent paradox of repugnance cohabiting with desire in the form of her syphilitic infection: ‘was the pox not the emblematic fate of a creature made for pleasure and the price you paid for the atrocious mixture of corruption and innocence this child of the sun brought with her from the Antilles?’ (235). Baudelaire’s desire for his Muse is tied to her dark beauty, her ‘perfect’ strangeness and unashamed baseness; she ‘straddled the gutter, legs apart and pissed as if it was the most natural thing in the world’ and then she walked beside him ‘like an ambulant fetish, savage, obscene, terrifying’ (241). He is both horrified and entranced, repulsed and longing.

Like Mukherjee’s *Blanquita*, Jeanne Duval is also situated within Western iconography as the fantasy ‘Empress of all the Africas’ (238). It is a dubious soubriquet: she is a ‘deposed Empress’, dispossessed of all the wealth of those African countries, ‘deprived of history’, and reduced to prostitution, the ‘pure child of the colony’ whose mother went off with sailors and whose ‘granny looked after her in one room with a rag-covered bed’ (*ibid.*). Her nascent power is far from regal, but rather lies in her ability to use her exoticism to pleasure her lover, the French poet and iconic representative of high culture, Baudelaire. She is his Muse and subject matter for *Les Fleurs du mal*, enabling fame to be conferred on *him* for his poems about *her*. Baudelaire co-opts Jeanne’s exoticism in his writing to market himself and ‘subjectivate’ her (see Butler, *Psychic Life* 11); she exists in the western world only as a commodified product of his poetry, and her exoticism is simultaneously domesticated and rendered strange by one of France’s most influential writers.

In *her* story of ‘Black Venus’, Carter enables a different subjectivity for Jeanne, recuperating her from her passive and produced position at the margins of civic and social life and focusing instead on her capacity for resistance. Carter articulates Jeanne’s creative agency and her ability to mete out some pearls of her own: she returns to Martinique and, until her old age, the erstwhile mistress of Baudelaire dispenses ‘to the most privileged of the colonial administration, at a not excessive price, the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis’ (243-4). In Carter’s cutting irony, the legacy that Baudelaire leaves

⁴⁰ The notion of savage and dark sexuality informs Sarah Bartmann’s salacious title as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ (see Samuelson, 85-87) – a ‘Venus’ more similar to the fertility figurines of pre-historic times, the most iconic of which is the ‘Venus of Willendorf’ with bulging torso, huge breasts and vulva – a ‘failed Venus’ (Witcombe).

the French colonial masters, via his mistress's choice to return to the colony, is not the pearl of his poetry, but that notorious and common bequest of the colonists to the margins and the 'raped continent's revenge': the 'pox' (235).

The story of 'Black Venus' is consistent with Carter's tendency to subvert high art and culture, reconfiguring it or returning it to its popular roots.⁴¹ In particular, she avoided commodification by taking an already-recognised commodity – such as fairy tales or Shakespeare or Baudelaire, for that matter – and reworking its themes and motifs. In *Wise Children*, for example, she sends up the Shakespearian-like comedy 'What you Will' by turning it into 'that soon-to-be-famous West End revue' (87), inflecting its title with hilarious double-entendres: 'What? You Will!' (88), 'What! You Will!' (186), or 'What? You Will!?!' (217). (She also plays with the name of William Shakespeare, as he himself did by punning on his name in his poems and plays). She was moreover a political writer, wary of domestication and opportunism. Her struggle was to find a way of writing that would break free of the patriarchal 'colonialisation of the mind' without entrenching the very framework it was intended to rupture; she did not just want to put 'new wine in old bottles', she wanted 'the pressure of the new wine' to make 'the old bottles explode' (*Shaking* 37). Frequently, her themes and style of writing were explosive (see, for example, *The Passion of New Eve* or *The Sadeian Woman*). Her capacity to use the laughter of the carnivalesque and to stretch Bakhtin's notion of carnival to include taboo topics, raucous sexuality and women as its focal point – turning the tide on the tale, so to speak, as she did with 'Black Venus' and the Marquis de Sade in *The Sadeian Woman* – was one way of refusing commodification and reconfiguring the margins as a site of power.

2.2.1.3 'The Profane Church'

Consistent with carnival's delegitimising of authority, Carter's transgression of taboos includes her attack on patriarchal religions and on Christianity in particular. By abasing religion, she situates the spiritual alongside the vulgar and the low. In this, her views express what Bakhtin described as 'grotesque realism' whose 'essential principle [...] is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level...' (*Rabelais* 19). In 'Fun Fairs', from Carter's collection of selected prose writings

⁴¹ See Aidan Day, for example, in *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 1998.

(*Shaking* 340-44), she celebrates the low domains and popular culture with mordant assaults on the overblown self-aggrandisement of patriarchy, religion and the bourgeoisie. The fairground, 'a fun cathedral for the poor' (343), provides visual spectacles and sensational thrills just like 'the Catholic church [with] its rococo pleasure domes in Southern Mediterranean countries' that offers free admission and fun: 'you could just walk around, look at the bright lights, enjoy the paintings, listen to the music and the ululations of those actually undergoing the ordeals...' (344). Carter's description of the Catholic cathedral bears a remarkable resemblance to earlier accounts of fairs: in the Greenwich fair in the 18th century, for example, revellers could 'pay a penny for the pleasure of peering through a telescope at the tarred bodies of executed pirates hanging in gibbets across the Thames...' (*Time Out* 42). Unexpectedly, both church and the fairground offer a shared specular delight in the suffering of others.⁴² Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests that Carter was influenced by Herbert Marcuse and Guy Debord, both of whom believed that the modern society of the spectacle was the result of the undesirable technological appropriation and proliferation of images ('Surrealist' 126-7).⁴³ Both were scathing in their critique of organised 'fun and leisure', which they saw as a form of accumulation of spectacles, creating distance in relations between people and their environment. In 'Fun Fairs', Carter uses humour and irony to present an historical complication of this view of spectacle: that the spectacle of others' suffering, like carnival, acts as a release mechanism for the poor in a world of harsh inequalities. Witnessing the suffering of others is an age-old form of *schadenfreude* and allows for the celebration of one's own (narrow) escape from the pitfalls of hell or heinous crime and punishment.

Carter's play on the religious connotation of the fair as a 'fun cathedral' where 'the fun of the fair is entirely sensational' (*Shaking* 342) also harks back to the idea that carnival was originally tied to religious festivities where onlookers and participants intermingled and where sacred rites were violated.⁴⁴ Extending Bakhtin's idea of carnival as a form of inversion of the social order and a celebration of the lower realms and the grotesque body,

⁴² Stephen Pinker comments that it was 'perfectly normal in medieval Europe for citizens to turn out and be entertained by the torture to death of a petty criminal' (see Hampton's review 42).

⁴³ See Guy Debord *Society of the Spectacle*, 1983; Herbert Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin notes that 'carnival... does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' (*Rabelais* 7); he also refers to 'sacred parody' - 'the parody of sacred rites and texts' - which occurred during medieval festivals such as the feast of fools (ibid. 76-77).

she articulates the ambivalent status of the fairground: on the one hand, it symbolises a spilling over or oozing low domain, one that is 'dirty' in the physical and sexual sense;⁴⁵ on the other, it resonates with Bataille's idea of the sacred in that the experiences of 'whirling, bouncing', 'falling and spinning' and 'the systematic derangement of all the senses' match the desire for something rapturous, almost ecstatic (*Shaking* 342). Her blasphemous suggestion is that fun fairs might be as (or even more) liberating and uplifting as the Christian church; and they offer fun 'cheaply and without guilt; [the fun] has connotations [...] of the straightforwardly sexual, which is all in the flesh and blood' (ibid.). The ironic reference to flesh and blood recalls the Catholic belief in transubstantiation where the wafer and wine used in the Sacrament imbibed during Mass are believed to be the body and blood of Christ, but here it is the fair that literally produces the 'fun' of flesh and blood, with all its sexual implications. Rather than a spiritual experience, it generates one that is ecstatic, sensational and visceral (without Judeo-Christian guilt), and the description implies that both the sensual and spiritual are sensational in the true sense of the word. In a review of Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Carter commented provocatively that, whereas the English think of blasphemy as 'silly', French intellectuals are 'exhilarated' by it – pornography is placed 'in the service of blasphemy' and produces 'liberation of the senses through erotic frenzy, and the symbolic murder of God' (*Shaking* 68). She found the capacity to transgress through sacrilege and profanation illuminating.

My reading of Carter's piece on 'Fun Fairs' proposes that she develops Bakhtin's carnivalesque to include Bataille's emphasis on excess and ecstasy, the experience of which is truly transformative: 'after ecstasy comes enlightenment', she wrote in 'Love in a Cold Climate' (*Shaking* 590). She highlights that sexual excess as defined by Bataille – that is, expenditure without reserve, the collision of sacred and profane love 'in order to create that explosion of transcendence the surrealists called "amour fou"' (*Shaking* 592) – may indeed be a path to the sacred and the experience of power.⁴⁶ Such expenditure as occurs in the moment of orgasm – or in the exhilaration of the rides at the fair where 'All around, the shrieks and crazed hysterical laughter of those in the grip of orgiastic physical excitation' can

⁴⁵ See *Time Out* which comments that the Greenwich Fair 'spilled out from the original site on a piece of waste ground...' (June 23-29 2011).

⁴⁶ Commenting on Bataille's novel, *Madame Edwarda*, Yukio Mishima proclaims that it 'demonstrates the manifestation of God to man, and is at the same time a work that is extreme in its obscenity' (11).

be heard (343) – is equivalent to sublime ecstasy. It also bears some resemblance to Mukherjee’s idea of ‘violent propensities’ which her female protagonists evince and which engage the kind of sensational and explosive violence found in pulp fiction films (see D’Souza 196-7). When Debby in *Leave it to Me* sets fire to Frankie’s ‘ten-bedroom Victorian on Union Avenue’ (30), she is overawed by the ‘spectacular extravaganza of light, sound, heat.’ (53); what she has gained from her violent propensity is ‘inner peace’, a kind of post-coital orgasmic moment.

Carter’s interpretation of the experiences of the fun fair is consistent with Bataille’s description of the orgy (again extending Bakhtin’s picture of the carnival) where everything is turned upside down, and the excesses of this ‘topsy-turvy’ world ‘derive their most acute significance from the ancient connection between sensual pleasure and religious ecstasy’ (Bataille, *Erotism* 112). In the intermingling of the body and the spirit which the fun fair produces, nausea and terror (bodily sensations) and desire (sublime delight) are coupled. One of the marks of Carter as a transgressive writer is her fearless capacity to turn things on their head: situating ecstasy within the low domains revokes its normal positioning as the preserve of religious experiences. She insisted on celebrating the grotesque body, and her own prose performed a *mélange* of the low and high, the politically correct (her focus on woman’s agency and freedom) and incorrect (her celebration of pornography potentially in the service of woman). Even in her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, Carter’s transgressive style and pornographic focus are evident in her depiction of the violent encounter between ecstasy and horror as sadistic sexual fantasies are acted out on the altar of a mock up cathedral.

Carter’s short story, ‘Lizzie’s Tiger’, part of a collection of stories published posthumously,⁴⁷ advances the connection between the fun of the fair and religious experience, but here a sinister undertone portends disturbing future events. Little Lizzie Borden – the same Lizzie who achieved notoriety as an axe-murderer and who is the subject of an earlier short story by Carter (‘The Fall River Axe Murders’) – is desperate to visit the travelling circus (a type of fun fair) and see the Tiger. For Lizzie, the word circus ‘tinkled in her head with a red sound, as if it might signify a profane church’ (*Burning* 323). The ‘big top’ with its ‘red and white

⁴⁷ *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, published in 1993; it also appears in her collection of short stories, *Burning Your Boats* (2006).

striped tent of scarcely imaginable proportions' stands in 'a field on the edge of town', like a huge cathedral situated on the margins but dominating the skyline. Lizzie's experience at the circus is one of profound strangeness in the midst of the hullabaloo of diverse people and frenetic hoopla: 'too rich a feast for her senses, so that she was taken a little beyond herself and felt her head spinning, a vertigo' (324). The experience is akin to a religious one, but as in 'Fun Fairs', this vertigo of religious-type ecstasy is caused by an overwhelming sensational assault rather than a spiritual epiphany.

Thus, both in her prose and fiction, Carter debunks the notion of religious ecstasy as supreme, and reverts, in sentiment at any rate, to the word's origins, 'ekstasis', which means to go beyond or 'stand outside oneself'.⁴⁸ 'Going beyond' can occur in all sorts of ways: in the above story, Carter again privileges bodily sensations, but also hints that 'going beyond' harbours the risks of 'frenzy', or even madness. Once more, she takes her cue from Bataille who remarked on the dangers of that orgiastic moment when all is surrendered and unleashed and who noted that the sacred carries 'undertones of an inner secret animation, a deep-seated frenzy' to the extent that '[t]he ordeal of the Cross itself links Christian conscience to the frightfulness of the divine' (*Erotism* 180 -181).⁴⁹ Carter describes the experience of the fun fair in similar terms: the 'crazed hysterical laughter of those in the grip of orgiastic physical excitation' (*Shaking* 343) where 'you play games with vertigo, the quaking attraction of gravity that makes us want to plunge when we see an abyss' (342). Lizzie's encounter with the tiger, an 'exchange of cool regard for an endless time' as they lock eyes with each other (*Burning* 328) is an encounter with the abyss and leaves Lizzie 'mottled all over [...] with passion, with the sudden access of enlightenment' coupled with the experience of danger (*ibid.* 331). Elsewhere, Carter notes that 'Passion is the metaphysics of ecstasy' (*Shaking* 590); Lizzie experiences passion (in its religious sense) in that most irreverent of places, the side-show tent, a profane church, where she has grovelled in the grass and mud with a 'melancholy piglet' and kept a giant tiger spell-bound.

Places at the edge offer the possibility of sacred experiences – the possibility of going beyond, transgressing normative boundaries, or standing outside oneself. And while these

⁴⁸ Concise OED 11th ed. 2004.

⁴⁹ Bataille notes that 'In order to reach the limits of ecstasy in which we lose ourselves in bliss we must always set an immediate boundary to it: horror' (*Erotism* 267).

places harbour power they also carry intimations of danger so that there is always the risk of over-reaching, falling over into the abyss, or falling apart; in short, the risk of uncontained chaos.

2.2.2 Carnival: High Culture, Low Class

One of the major assertions of this thesis is that the power of the margins can manifest in unexpected and often maverick ways. For Carter the tropes of the carnivalesque enable power through the transgression of norms, the exaggeration of the lower domains set alongside the propriety of those in apparent control and the excess displayed by the grotesque body which spills over into the centre. In her last novel, *Wise Children* (the title itself an oxymoron bringing together misalignments), Carter looks at how the low domains and the grotesque body function in society and interact with norms and mores to prop up the artifice of 'high' culture. But here her 'low' characters are neither abject (like the characters of Mukherjee's early stories) nor do they take pleasure in 'creeping through the abandoned dark' (*Shadow Dance* 90). With old women as the primary protagonists of her last novel, Carter enters the territory of disgust and turns it inside out, recuperating the old women as characters of verve, eroticism and sexuality.

Winfried Menninghaus points out that in almost all cases where disgust has been the subject of philosophic or literary treatment, 'the disgusting has the attributes of female sex and old age'; this female figure is the 'embodiment of everything tabooed: repugnant defects of skin and form, loathsome discharges and even repellent sexual practices—an obscene, decaying corpse in her own lifetime' (8); in short, an embodiment of the grotesque. Not surprising then that Carter takes this figure and doubles it in the form of twins, situates them in a Shakespearian-type setting, and with carnivalesque flamboyance upends all intellectual and sexual expectations. The Chance twins make their opening debut on their 75th birthday; they are exuberant, coarse, vulgar, and overly present, which serves to emphasise their corporeality. They are creative and effervescent and thrive on a fully engaged physical life. They don't mind *what* happens – 'something nice, something nasty' – 'Just as long as something happens to remind us we're still in the land of the living' (*Wise Children* 4).

Dora, the narrator and one of the pair of twins (of which there are numerous in the novel) introduces herself as an occupant of the low domains: 'Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks ... Me and Nora, that's my sister, we've always lived on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the *bastard* side...' (1). With ribald humour, Carter embellishes and exaggerates the 'bastard side' of life: Dora says of herself and her sister, Nora, 'We used to be song and dance girls. We can still lift a leg higher than your average dog, if called for.' (2). Even though the landscape of 'urban deprivation' has changed – '...you can't trust things to stay the same. There's been a diaspora of the affluent, they jumped into their diesel Saabs and dispersed throughout the city' (ibid.) – the opening pages acknowledge the seductive pull of the wrong side, the 'wild-side'. The novel begins with a whoop of music-hall celebration – 'what a joy it is to dance and sing!' (5) – and the writing style, topsy-turvy with common puns intermixed with references to a range of cultural and intellectual topics, evinces the irreverent, transgressive and satiric power of the carnivalesque.

Dora and Nora Chance live on 49 Bard Road, Brixton. Their address references Shakespeare the 'Bard', whose oeuvre bubbles through the entire text, but Bard Road of 'Brixton' extinguishes any hint of intellectual snobbery. Throughout the novel there is a juxtaposition of the canonical and the popular, high culture pretensions and working class bawdiness. Dora's idea of looking back into the past perforates ideas of grandiosity: 'I am at present working on my memoirs [...] see the word processor, the filing cabinet, the card indexes, right hand, left hand, right side, left side, all the dirt on everybody. What a wind! Whooping and banging all along the street, the kind of wind that blows everything topsy-turvy. [...] the kind of wind that gets into the blood and drives you wild.' (3). The combination of past and present (the word processor and card indexes), high and low-brow, and the depiction of the wind as both literal and metaphorical, gusting along the road sending everything flying, and blowing away the covers and facades, dishing 'all the dirt on everybody', literally and figuratively, is characteristic of the riotous energy of the entire novel. Here high culture is continuously undercut and the low classes are celebrated with an injection of socialist commentary: when Dora tells her German teacher that she is getting married to Genghis Khan,⁵⁰ the film producer, her teacher's retort is 'Marry him and ruin them. [...] What I say

⁵⁰ Another in-joke: Genghis Khan was the most powerful ruler of Central Asia and China in the 13th century. He also founded the Mongol Empire and his influence was far reaching. In this novel, Genghis Khan is an American film producer, inferring that the American film industry has a similar global effect that is equally rapacious.

is, fuck the bourgeoisie' (150). Legitimate and illegitimate, the proper and improper, continuously collide in the novel, suggesting not only the limitations of both but also highlighting that their value and significance depends on context.

Wise Children, much more so than *Nights at the Circus*, is a novel about the possibilities of laughter and fun caught in the half-shadow of tragedy. Dora and Nora Chance have danced and sung their way to stardom 'on the left-hand line, hoofers, thrushes, the light relief'; always upstaged by the Shakespearian rhetoric of the Hazard Dynasty, which has spawned the twins' putative father, Dora acknowledges that tragedy has 'eternally more class than comedy' (*Wise* 59). But it is precisely the matter of class that Carter is concerned to deflate, using the comic and the parodic to create possibilities of empowerment for those cast to the side. As Clare Hanson points out, *Wise Children* is 'elegiac', signifying a sadness about the achievements and passing of a generation (69); but it is also comic and a tribute to the 'classless'. Carter's acknowledgement that tragedy is more 'classy' than comedy is neither an endorsement of tragedy nor a privileging of high culture.

Quite the contrary: Carter is concerned to puncture the notion of 'class' and she imbues the 'left-hand side', the comic and the feminine, with a different kind of power, one that can bring the house (of the father) down, literally, and turn the Shakespearean actors into fools. For Carter, of course, Shakespeare has been improperly appropriated by high culture; she aims to dismantle him and unleash his populist appeal. (Moreover, Carter demonstrates the absurdity of those who pretend to represent high culture: the only 'high' artist she creates is the hire-wire aerialist also known as the 'Cockney Venus' – Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* may be 'Helen of the High Wire' but she knows her roots). Hanson's interpretation of Carter's novel that 'To associate femininity with comedy is thus, ultimately, to stress its powerlessness' (70) suggests that Hanson is ultimately seduced by precisely that trap which Carter aims to expose: one that affirms, or at least unhappily accepts, the legitimacy and power of patriarchy. Significantly, both sets of twins in *Wise Children*, the female daughters of song-and-dance theatre (the 'Chances') and the male fathers who are Shakespearian progeny (the 'Hazards'), have surnames that render them equally victims of random acts of fate. The name 'Hazard' intimates a sense of danger, and indeed the Hazards are ultimately the true buffoons of the novel, 'two-dimensional' characters (230), at risk of losing their

lineage and significance, while the Chances are robust, corporeal personalities, rooted in a material existence, who will 'go on singing and dancing until we drop in our tracks' (232).

Wise Children renders an invocation of many of Bakhtin's ideas, including the crowning and deposing of the fake king that happens during carnival, for example. Melchior Hazard, the 'genius' Shakespearian actor, carries around the inheritance of his cardboard crown; in the final scene of the novel, the crown is found hidden away under 'posthumous clothing', and Melchior is crowned by his daughter – 'a touch too long in the tooth for Cordelia but there you are' – with an ironic exclamation by his brother: 'Prince of players! Reclaim your crown!' (225-6). In trying to secure a more balanced appraisal of Carter's work – one that exemplifies 'the tension between a radical will and a sceptical Nietzschean pessimism' (Hanson 71) – Hanson glosses over the fact that, at the end of *Wise Children*, Melchior does not retain the crown of legitimacy (as representative of 'status and patriarchal power') nor of respectability (see Meaney 139-40). While Carter does indeed recognise 'the power of power and the vulnerability of those who attempt to subvert or circumvent it' (Hanson 70), she nonetheless pokes carnivalesque holes in the presumption of patriarchal power: Melchior's crown is a remnant of childhood, a play-play crown, 'battered and tattered and the gilt was peeling off' (*Wise* 225).

By the time everyone leaves the carnivalesque party where Melchior has celebrated his hundredth birthday, his crown is 'still on, though much askew by now' (228), and Dora asks Nora 'don't you think our father looked two-dimensional, tonight? [...] he had an imitation look [...] like one of those great, big papier-mâché heads they have in the Notting Hill parade, larger than life, but not lifelike.' (230). In a clear nod to Bakhtin, Gerardine Meaney comments that, at the end of this closing carnival, Melchior presides 'less as the ghost of imperial majesty than as lord of misrule': Shakespeare is returned to his true populist roots and Melchior the buffoon has been crowned and deposed (130). The novel ends with a sense of 'becoming, change, and renewal' which is the hallmark of carnival as the 'true feast of time [...] hostile to all that was immortalized and completed' (Bakhtin 10). In an echo of its opening lines – 'you can't trust things to stay the same' – Dora acknowledges that there is no completion, no dénouement: 'we were doomed to a century. Just when I'd been thinking it was high time for the final curtain. Which only goes to show, you never know in the morning what the night will bring...' (*Wise* 230-1).

But, as with the finale of *Nights at the Circus*, the ending of *Wise Children* hopes to point to a new paradigm, tentative though it may be. It is a paradigm that requires a restructuring of gender and roles. Although Carter had said about carnival that ‘after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind...’ (‘Pantoland’ 389). Dora and Nora, like Lizzy and Fevers in *Nights at the Circus*, contest and debunk their given roles. Meaney has suggested that in *Wise Children* Carter attempts to broach a confluence between Kristeva’s separation of the symbolic order (law of the father) and the semiotic order (pre-symbolic space of the mother) by producing ‘a new articulation of the thetic’ (139). This new articulation is evident in Nora’s reference to their joint roles as adoptive parents to twins in the closing pages of *Wise Children*; Nora says: ‘We’re both of us mothers and both of us fathers [...]. They’ll be wise children, all right.’ (230). Carter’s own biography seemed to have sown the seeds for her understanding of how the symbolic and semiotic orders may converge: in writing about her parents, she cannot ‘summon one [parent] up without the other’, but of her father in particular, Carter claims that he ‘did not prepare me well for patriarchy; himself confronted [...] with a mother-in-law who was the living embodiment of peasant matriarchy, he had no choice but to capitulate, and did so’ (‘Sugar Daddy’, *Shaking* 21). In *Wise Children*, she recuperates Shakespeare’s twins as female powerhouses, valorising older women from the wrong side of the tracks who act out all manner of roles with vigour and delight. Here, the profane (music hall) is celebrated and superimposed on the realm of the traditionally sacred (Shakespeare) as those from the margins take up full centre-stage.

2.2.3 Chaos Theory: Women at the Edge

In a different vein but extending the idea of the margins as a site of power, Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* expresses its protagonist’s capacity for resistance and self-determination. Chaos theory underpins the novel which begins with an epigraph from James Gleick’s *Chaos*: ‘The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined’. Mukherjee’s use of chaos theory not only sets up possibilities of change for the individual but it also challenges the ‘global’ order: economic and cultural divisions are jagged and cannot be smoothed over into an overarching ‘smoothness’. *Jasmine* is the story of a young Bengali girl’s journey from Hasnapur in India to Florida in the USA, then New York, Iowa, and

beyond. The novel begins with 'Jane' (later renaming herself Jasmine), the wife of Bud, a disabled American farmer, who recalls herself as a young girl named Jyoti, back in her home village, 'fast and venturesome and scabrous-armed' (3), set apart from the other girls who were 'slow, happy girls with butter-smooth arms' (4). Her difference is marked not only by her rebelliousness but also by the physical scar on her forehead that she re-visions as her 'third eye', and which represents a refusal of masculine and traditional cultural dictates. For her sisters, the mark means that Jyoti (Jasmine) may not find a husband, but she derives a different meaning from her mother's stories: the extra eye turns her into a 'sage', enabling her to peer out into 'invisible worlds' (5). Jasmine hurtles through the text, burning old identities and rising into new ones. She changes names, clothes and locations, forging a path towards a destiny she creates. Her ability to chart her own journey - one which mimics the American frontiersman - to triumph over old patterns, to make her own future, to 'reposition the stars', all signal her will and determination. She will not be defined by culture or history; Jasmine's push for power is centred on the un-nostalgic overthrow of old customs and traditions that hold women back and she is prepared to risk being a tornado in order to push the limits and go 'somewhere' in her life (240-1). Hindu mythology combines with chaos theory to inform this text, advocating that reincarnation is possible within this world and that identity is neither static nor singular but can be refashioned repeatedly in one life time. In this way, Jasmine refashions her traditions, transplanting them onto the American landscape and, in the process, recasting herself as a powerful 'new' American woman. Mukherjee's trajectory comes full circle with her last novel titled *Miss New India* in which Anjali Bose remakes herself into one of the Bangalorean 'new' Indians.

In a detailed critique, Newman has pointed out that *Jasmine* is a novel that deliberately marries stories of Hindu goddesses with facets of chaos theory, showing how technology and information systems can embrace re-inventive ways of engaging with the world (*Ballistic Bard*). Although John Hoppe ignores the theoretical underpinnings of chaos theory in Mukherjee's work, he takes up the significance of technology for her (144); he contends that Jasmine's ability to reinvent herself - for example, 'to take up and cast off cultural, religious and other roles' - signifies her capacity to alter her cultural traditions into 'active tools of power' and casts her as determinedly 'American'. Mukherjee uses the 'mutability of technology' as a metaphor for the mutability of subjectivity, and in this she places herself

squarely in the domain of American ideology (Hoppe 153). I argue that Mukherjee's use of both chaos theory and innovative technology sit alongside her engagement with Hindu mythology: these positions are not antithetical but articulate the power of mongrelisation.

Mukherjee herself has claimed that she aims to show that chaos theory and information systems are universal and can be used constructively in works of fiction, *alongside* the mythologies of Hindu goddesses. Crossing continents and time zones and interweaving different cosmological approaches is akin to the kind of expansive detail found in Mughal paintings, a myriad of minutiae which presents a new story with every viewing: 'an art that knows no limit, no perspective and vanishing point, no limit to extravagance, or to detail, that temperamentally cannot exclude, a miniature art forever expanding' (*Holder of the World* 19), containing a multitude of contradictory possibilities.

Katherine Hayles maintains that 'chaos' is not the privileged binary term of 'order'; rather, 'the science of chaos reveals a territory that cannot be assimilated into either order or disorder' (17). Chaos, like the grotesque, is an animating force in the world; Mukherjee views chaos 'as the engine that drives a system toward a more complex kind of order' (Hayles 23), and it is in this complex underlying order where she finds affinities with Hindu cosmology: life may seem unintelligible and devilish, but for Hindus there is always an alternate reality, a deeper structure to the way life appears in all its fluctuation and confusion. In Mukherjee's later novels, geographical and temporal crossings are not unidirectional; in *Desirable Daughters*, for example, which I discuss below, the plots crisscross, skip time zones, and traverse geographical borders. Like the world of chaos theory – and intersecting with themes of the carnivalesque – the novel overflows with information, loose threads, and multiple possibilities, and the results are turbulent: how to make sense of the novel's multivalent paths, its burgeoning body?

The text itself begins with a trail that heads for the jungle surrounded by fog, smoke and toxicity: 'a one-way procession of flickering oil lamps sways along the muddy shanko between rice paddies and flooded ponds, and finally disappears into a distant wall of impenetrable jungle' (*Desirable* 3); the year is 1879 and a little girl of five is being carried on a palanquin to meet her future husband. En route to the meeting and marriage, the intended young groom is killed by a snake bite; his family accuse the girl's father, Jai Krishna,

a successful lawyer who has become a 'reborn Hindu', of having omitted certain rituals: 'The goddess [Manasha, who causes and prevents snakebites] must not have been sufficiently pleased ... You Westernized types think you are stronger than our Hindu deities' (13). When the boy's father demands the wedding dowry, Jai Krishna knows that the demand is 'untenable, nakedly greedy'; he 'repositions the stars', deciding in that instance that his daughter will be married that night, whether to a 'crocodile or a tree': she will be prevented from becoming 'the second worst thing in her society' – not quite a widow but 'a woman who brings her family misfortune and death' (14). At nightfall the child is married to 'the god of Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest, come down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery' (17). The Sanskrit epigraph to the novel makes the father's actions clear: when all paths are closed or go nowhere, the seeker/traveller finds another way.

Ironically, her father's commitment to Hindu tradition enables Tara Lata, also known as the Tree Bride, to remain unmarried and unfettered by children, husband, and in-laws.⁵¹ 'Unburdened by a time-consuming, emotion-draining marriage and children, never having to please a soul' (17), she uses her marital dowry to support political insurrection in the form of Gandhi's salt march and she pursues a life of activism dedicated to ousting the British colonial power. Here then is the full impetus of power generated by a life literally lived in the margins. Chaos theory, like Hindu cosmology, conspires to produce unexpected and unusual consequences: a small and seemingly inconsequential incident, a young groom dying of snakebite, ignites a significant political movement funded by a woman married to a tree ('the butterfly effect').

In a spiralling effect typical of chaos, the novel ends with a parallel to its beginning but some 150 years later: now, the modern-day descendent of the Tree-Bride, Tara – who has divorced her wealthy, software-developer husband (an arranged marriage) and lives in the Haight-Ashbury district doing voluntary work – revisits the place where her ancestor had been holed up for 60 years before being hauled out and hung for treason.⁵² She walks with her son along a road from the Tree-Bride's house, which rises 'above ponds on either side',

⁵¹ This is a tidy convergence with Carter's view that freedom for a woman was based partly on her ability to control the right not to have children.

⁵² In similar fashion, Carter's *Nights at the Circus* has an ending that parallels its beginning: starting with one kind of laughter and ending with another, the novel is spirally circular.

on a 'shanko' – a word she has never used in her life, that signified the path of the young Tara Lata on her way to her wedding, comes to her. But unlike the path in the opening of the novel which headed for the jungle, the trail ahead is now visible, lit by 'kerosene and naphtha lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors' (328). Tara understands that destiny and knowledge, technology and tradition, bring her to the point where she must follow the Ganges 'all the way to its source': 'The Tree-Bride [...] is the quiet centre of every story. Each generation of women in my family has discovered in her something new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again' (305-6). Tara recognises that, regardless of the expansion of the universe and the calendar sped ahead 'a hundred years', destinies must be fulfilled (31). In the Hindu universe, like the Universe explained by chaos theory, time and space exist on parallel planes.

The figure of the Tree Bride represents the voice of the outcast that cannot be silenced – a voice that has been doubly marginalised as (maverick) Hindu woman, and a member of the underclass of a British colony. Indeed, it is this voice that articulates the power of the periphery, that 'signifies' from the margins of authorised power, and in Mukherjee's work it is the inspiration for women's agency across time and space.⁵³ In the words of Homi Bhabha, it is the voice that instigates the desire to 'live somehow beyond the border of our times' (7). In a different style, I venture that Angela Carter had the same idea about the Chance twins in *Wise Children*: they too represent the risk and opportunity that living 'beyond the border of our times' represents.

2.2.4 Carnival and Chaos: A Conclusion

Carter's use of the carnivalesque in her later work is nuanced and complex, its celebratory capacity edged by a lining of loss and transience (Hanson 59; Gamble, *Fiction* 184). Certainly Carter was aware that Bakhtin himself did not view the carnivalesque as simply celebratory but rather as 'a bitter carnival' where '[it] loses its ideological optimism', focussing on 'the procreation of living matter even in excretion and death' (Menninghaus 384).

⁵³ Bhabha remarks that 'The "right" to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition'; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are "in the minority" (3).

Carter had some reserve about Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque, noting its patriarchal bent and transient effects. With an understanding of its limitations, she developed her own brand of carnivalesque, focusing in particular on humour which she used to confront and upset the status quo. Laughter as a form of parody and transgression played a central role in the work of both Bataille and Bakhtin, as it does in the work of Carter and Mukherjee.

Laughter enables a system of expulsion, a release from tension; sometimes it is an expression of repugnance or ridicule that, in its discharge, aids in the overcoming of disgust.⁵⁴ Bakhtin also emphasised the ambivalence of carnival and carnival laughter: '... gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding' (*Rabelais* 11-12). Whereas *Nights at the Circus* ends with Fevvers erupting in carnivalesque laughter, in *Wise Children*, Dora acknowledges 'There are limits to the power of laughter and though I may hint at them from time to time, I do not propose to step over them' (220). Carter steps over a different kind of limit, however: she broadens the boundaries of the carnivalesque to include the role of women as agents and to enable gender transgression.

In a serendipitous convergence of carnival and chaos, Mukherjee seems to have stumbled on the bitter laughter of the carnivalesque in arguing that she thought of *Leave it to Me*, arguably her most violent novel, as part comedy, and she was surprised that it was taken so seriously. The inability for Western readers to find the novel comic may represent a cultural divide that Mukherjee has pointed to previously in regard to 'non-white women' versus Western women;⁵⁵ but it may also be fruitfully contextualised in terms of Bakhtin's differentiation between Romantic (as in the Romantic period) and medieval laughter and its evolving relationship to the grotesque and terror: Romantic laughter became 'cold humour, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be joyful and triumphant hilarity' whereas in medieval and Renaissance folk culture, terror was represented by comic monsters 'who were defeated by laughter. Terror turned into something gay and comic' (Bakhtin 38- 39). Perhaps, then, Devi as the goddess Durga, wreaking a 'righteous vengeance', becomes the co(s)mic goddess,

⁵⁴ Kristeva's theory of the abject appropriates ideas from both Bataille and Bakhtin. In an analysis of the abject and disgust, Menninghaus likens laughter to vomiting: it is 'a successful (and, in this case, comical) contact with the abject' without threat to the stability of the subject (384).

⁵⁵ According to Mukherjee 'The 1970s was a time in the history of the US Feminist Movement (think *Ms. Magazine*), when white American women were imperiously dictating to non-white women in the US and especially to women in developing countries that their methods—consciousness-raising groups, etc.—were the only valid methods of being feminist' (Interview with Marilyn Clark).

avenging all those co(s)mic monsters (manifestations of the Buffalo Demon) who stand in her way.

According to Hayles, 'chaos has its frightening as well as its liberating aspects' as Mukherjee's stories demonstrate (27); like carnival, it has its dark underbelly, generating 'fragmentation and unpredictability', not always an occasion for celebration (Hayles *ibid.*). Mukherjee's *Leave it to Me* is such an instance of the terrifying aspect of chaos: Devi as Hindu Warrior Goddess wreaks vengeance, leaving destruction in her wake as vengeful murder (the local) is paired with a violent earthquake (the global) in the final dénouement of the novel: '*Violent propensities. The sea has them, the Earth rocks with them*' (235). The epilogue declares that 'Destiny works itself out in bizarre loops' (239). Destiny, like the underpinning structure of the universe, is not static; Mukherjee regards 'dynamic destiny' as a set of given choices, 'but you have to cope with the choice [...] The pot of gold being at your feet is part of your destiny, but your decision about it is dynamic destiny, it is not determinism' (Interview with Rodriguez 69).

Carnival, like chaos theory, represents a time of disorder; a 'turnabout' that is upside down and inside out; disruption and turbulence are the result. But this is an intentional chaos which signifies a temporary liberation from all that is ordered and structured. Indeed, Bakhtin's evocation of carnivalesque behaviour seems to intersect with elements of chaos theory, particularly, as Hayles suggests, when applied to literature; in her discussion of Derrida and deconstruction, she notes: 'texts are always open to infinite dissemination. Far from being ordered sets of words bounded by book covers, they are reservoirs of chaos' (180). Similarly, Bakhtin noted that the experience of carnival was 'opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability,[it] sought a dynamic expression; it demanded changing, playful, undefined forms' (11). Chaos theory is a way of pushing boundaries and has a similar effect to carnival: it disrupts authority and convention and questions established forms of truth and reality.

While the carnivalesque offers possibilities for transgression and empowerment, numerous theorists have argued that it can act to safeguard hegemony. According to Holquist, however, the idea that 'carnival was a kind of safety valve for passions the common people might otherwise direct to revolution, flew directly in the face of the evidence Bakhtin was

then compiling' (qtd. in Bakhtin xviii). For Holquist, 'Bakhtin's carnival [...] is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself' (ibid.). In refuting this claim, Terry Eagleton (see *Walter Benjamin*) and Stallybrass and White maintain that, while carnival does have its transgressive elements, it can also enable the ruling elite to make a space for ritualistic contestation and so promote 'licensed complicity' (Stallybrass and White 19). Thus, carnival has the potential to prop up the status quo rather than promote revolution or radical change; nonetheless, it does represent 'one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure (ibid.)'⁵⁶ Despite its possible limitations in regard to revolutionary change, Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque, and its relation to the collectivity and the grotesque body, remains seminal in the unleashing of riotous energy and transgression within literary texts. Like chaos theory, it signifies the critical importance of disruption and turmoil in enabling transformation and change.

⁵⁶ For an in-depth discussion see also Andrew Robinson (2011).

3. CROSSINGS

3.1. Introduction

Both Carter and Mukherjee focus on interstitial spaces and margins as one possible source of power, but they also conceptualise the notion of crossing borders as a way of translating marginality into power. Within the context of this thesis, crossings (of one kind or another) denote the possibility of transgressing boundaries and borders – a movement from the margins which unsettles centre-stage – so that order and control is disrupted and destabilised. I have deliberately used the broad term ‘crossings’ to suggest an array of journeys, both symbolic and literal. In the most literal sense, crossings mean travels over lands or across oceans. But they also imply the traversing of symbolic, metaphorical or textual boundaries such as occur in the transgression of gender, class and race boundaries, transculturations, translations or ‘genre contamination’ (Curti 48); furthermore, they may refer to crossing of frontiers between the familiar and the strange, the discarding and reinvention of self and familiar worlds, or journeys across time zones.

Travel marks the movement from one place to another and provides the opportunity for crossing over into a different kind of life or for reconstructing a new subjectivity according to different codes and norms of behaviour. According to Stanley Stephen, translation means both physical movement and transformation. It is a trope that both Mukherjee and Carter use to access an innovative order of society, including the historical or fantastical.

Translation is a metaphorical form of crossing but equally provides access to a different world and diverse cultures. Both travel and translation (not in the linguistic sense but rather in the etymological sense of being carried across and transformed) are themes taken up by Mukherjee and Carter as forms of crossing that engage with issues of power and domination, as the struggle ‘between possession and dispossession, or between reinscription and obliteration’ (see Budick and Iser): who can hold on and who must give way? Or is some level of mutuality possible? According to Sanford Budick, ‘Translation necessarily marks the border crossing where [...] one culture passes over to the other, whether to inform it [...], to capture or enslave it, or merely to open a space between the other and itself’ (11). It is apparent, then, that dynamics of power and the potential for

transformation inhere in the notions of travel (crossing) and translation (being carried across), and these currents run through the texts that I examine in this section.

While neither travel nor translation are socially transgressive in and of themselves, in the sections below I argue that the term ‘crossing’, which can incorporate travel and translation, implies a breach of boundaries – not just a crossing over but a crossing against or a crossing out, so that in the crossing something (a moral code, cultural paradigm, social hierarchy, literary convention, and so on) is challenged, disrupted or even obliterated. This crossing may be by way of rupture, a violent break in the border, or through seepage that occurs because of a wavering or permeable boundary, infiltrating ‘dirt’ or pollution across the border and engendering contamination. Douglas has noted that where dirt or pollutants still have an identity – ‘a half-identity’ that clings to them – they are dangerous because they don’t belong anywhere: ‘the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence’ and they have the power to push the boundaries, making them unstable and breachable (197-9).¹ These ‘obtrudants’ (unwanted half-things) manifest as the abject, unsettling the space where it finds itself.

Carter and Mukherjee write texts that are patterned ‘with intersecting tracks and grooves that are made by the characters “crossing, crisscrossing” the globe’ (Webb 287). Their characters cross/infiltrate borders, dis-ordering and reordering the spaces they find themselves in. In Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers journeys across the world from London to Petersburg and then to Siberia – starting at a centre and moving further and further away, confronting and transforming herself and those around her in the process. Mukherjee’s novels too inscribe travel from centres to the outer edges and back again, invoking collisions between authorised and illegitimate zones of contact and their occupants. Both authors interrogate the interaction between peripheries, borderlands and centres.

In *Counterpath*, a text written/travelling between Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, Malabou asks: ‘How does one cross a border if “the shore is divided in its very outline?” [...] Derrida shows that every border is perforated by a multiplicity of openings that render

¹ Things that have lost their identity are no longer ambiguous; they can be domesticated and assigned a place within a given order (Douglas 198).

infractions of it ungovernable, uncontrollable, even impossible.² The frontier always intersects or breaches itself. Everything that is kept outside of it, expelled, not tolerated by it, comes back at it from the other side, confrontationally or indirectly' (164-5). This inevitable and reflexive breach of frontier/border/dividing line – the rupture, transgression and collision, which vent the abject – is what enables Carter and Mukherjee to use the margins to open up transgressive spaces, both literal and literary.

In literary terms, they write across the edge or over the line, so to speak, juxtaposing different moral codes, different time zones, or the artificial and the natural, to expose the fault line or 'seam' of the text, thereby producing the sense of the liberatory (Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text* 7). For Barthes, it is the collision of *two edges*, one conforming and obedient, the other seditious, even violent, that produces the sense of 'jouissance'³ or liberation, so that rather than the frontier breaching itself, it collides with another, more subversive frontier and, in the impact of the meeting, which is always 'the site of loss, the seam', the space in-between, a tenuous but emancipatory sense of power is felt. The novels of Mukherjee and Carter engage with both the Derridean 'ungovernable' edges and the Barthesian 'gape' between the edges (9). Their writing styles and their subject choices – their marginal and maverick characters who occupy spaces of 'non-belonging', at the edges, in the interstices or seams, and who cross literal boundaries guarded by police or figurative ones guarded by patriarchal culture – expose how borders can be broken and how crossings can generate a transgressive confrontation with the centres of power by breaching protocols of decorum and propriety. Along these jagged journeys of crossing and collision there appears an unexpected meeting between the oeuvres of these two authors.

3.2 Crossings as Textual: Transcribing and Transforming

This section will examine the way that Mukherjee and Carter transgress the confines of convention in their writing and in their thematics, and how their texts and/or characters cross into meaning by crossing over/out conventions, often by inhabiting or enacting areas of taboo. In Mukherjee's work this is most evident in her drawing on Hindu mythology to

² This is an image which mirrors the 'jagged outlines' or the 'twisting coastline' of chaos theory (Gleick 98).

³ I use the term 'jouissance' advisedly because Barthes refers to this 'seam' or 'site of loss' as the 'dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss' (7).

sanction female violence and update myths in terms of chaos and information theories, so that stylistically too her work overflows with multi-narratives; but is also evident in the crossing of the dark waters (the 'Kala Pani'),⁴ both for herself and her characters, to remake a new life. Carter's crossings occur in the subversive rewriting of fairy tales, as well as in her stylistic jamboree (mixing and mismatching language, textual referents and genres), and in her blatant dallying with taboos such as pornography and incest.

The capacity of the literary work to enable entry into other worlds, securing a reader's rapture or engagement with new contexts and imaginary lives, has been one of the primary arguments for advocating the significance of literature.⁵ In this chapter I use the paradigm put forward by Rita Felski that a work of art is captivating by virtue of its ability to expand and enrich the viewer's experience and to extend boundaries through an engagement with something beyond the self and its immediate environment. In *Uses of Literature* Felski elucidates various clusters of metaphors that explain the value of literature. The first cluster debunks the notion that literature is either a reflection or a mirror of real-life; as a reflection, it is always a poor, even false reflector and, as such, produces a series of untruths about the state of self-hood and the world. A work of art conceived as a mirror to the self, or a window on the world, presumed to reveal the truth of life as it is, in all its glorious and inglorious manifestations, is also misleading; mirror images are invariably tainted or out of focus so that the presumption of art's transparency lacks credibility and devalues its relation to the real world. Moreover, metaphors of perception only focus on visual apprehensions of the world and ignore linguistic mediations.

A second cluster of metaphors regarding the significance of literature centres on the artwork's expressive power to shine a light on what has been previously hidden, so that truth is revealed in a semi-sacred way, destabilising how the world has hitherto been viewed; in this paradigm – influenced by Freud and Nietzsche – literature is severed from the ordinary and everyday events of life, to reveal instead unconscious desires and hidden truths 'Epiphany emerges as a signature mode of modernist aesthetics; the work of art discloses [...] what is otherwise inaccessible to thought' (Felski 79). As an apparent reaction

⁴ As mentioned in the first chapter, the crossing of the Kala Pani refers to the taboo of crossing the seas, breaking away from Hindu traditions and caste and the possibility of reincarnation.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the significance of literature, its relevance to life and its function in the 'real world', see Wilna Meijer.

to these neo-Romantic ideas, New Criticism emerged in the middle decades of the twentieth century as a formalist movement that encouraged a scientific or empirical approach to the aesthetic object, and it initiated a development in literary theory that continues, with 'wave after wave of intellectual skepticism', to evade all references to truth, reality, knowledge and mimesis (Felski 80).

However, to varying degrees, Felski argues, literature does reveal worlds that are both related to reality and also go 'beyond the self', and it provides knowledge that can 'expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are' (83). For her, literary mimesis is the key to literature's significance and, unlike the classical view of mimesis, it is not limited to or by realism, nor is it an endorsement of the dominant ideology. Following Paul Ricoeur, she suggests that mimesis is the creative 'act of making rather than copying' (84) and literary conventions and forms are 'devices for articulating truth' rather than a means to discovering an objective reality 'out there'.

This model, which views literature as a form of 'new' mimesis, seems to me to align itself with a particular theory of translation (which I refer to below) which views it as an act of recreation rather than faithful copying or imitation. Just as translation cannot be restricted to ideas of fidelity, according to Lawrence Venuti, so the literary text cannot be constrained by representation of correspondences or 'truth-telling'; an ethics of translation suggests that while translation cannot resist domestication, it should always 'register the foreignness of the foreign text' (22). Similarly, literature must always register its reality-referent while creating its own world of text and textualities; this means that the text itself executes a form of domestication on truth-telling, weaving the original into an innovative fabric. While this new formulation of mimesis enlarges and 'augments our understanding of how things are' (Felski 86), it does not, in my opinion, exclude literature's capacity to transform and transfigure perceptions and experiences of the world. Here, I extend Felski's notion of creative mimesis to argue that, in addition to offering 'illumination', delight and knowledge, literature also excites awareness, raises consciousness, and generates self-transformation through engagement with imaginary worlds and other lives, beyond merely a reordering of beliefs and conceptions. Precisely because mimesis is a creative, reconstructive act performed not only by the writer but also by the reader, the imaginary worlds that are created in and through literature always reveal something different to and beyond their

source. It is this openness to the un-ordinary, the strange and the other in fictional worlds that invites enchantment, knowledge and change.

In what ways do the novels and stories of Carter and Mukherjee engage with this form of mimesis and textual translation? In the following sections I deal with this in terms of the type of imaginary worlds the authors create and how they broaden or refuse genres; in other words how they rewrite, reformulate and rescript traditional, putative stories, or create new, transgressive tales, injecting them with sometimes shocking, sometimes seductive, overtones.

3.2.1 Fairy Tales and Myths

Both Mukherjee and Carter have drawn on myths and folklore as a springboard for narrating their stories, a platform for resisting a particular kind of telling, an impetus for telling the story differently, or an overarching structure to give meaning to their stories. However, their use of myths differs significantly in terms of their attachment to and investment in mythology. Carter's views on myths ranged from quizzical, to skeptical and finally outraged, regarding myths as shoring up and perpetuating a patriarchal culture. Taking her cue from Barthes, Carter believed that mythologies aim to transform ideologies into 'nature' and buttress the hegemony of cultural constructs.⁶ Through the repeated telling of archetypal stories, ideologies are reinscribed and protected, producing archetypes of gender and performance – heroes and heroines – that are spurious both in terms of 'dimension and capacity' (Carter, *Sadeian* 6). Carter debunks myths as 'consolatory nonsenses' (5); her focus, rather, is on the remaking and retelling of folklore, which she regards as consistently resistant, a more pliable structure for the re-articulation of contemporary stories written in an old, familiar mode, derived from and accessible to the 'common people'.⁷

Mukherjee's attitude to Hindu myths has been more ambivalent, even indulgent; she may update their context, foreground their feminist aspect or draw analogies to Western

⁶ See Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*: 'in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down [...] the ideological abuse which [...] is hidden there.' (11).

⁷ According to Warner, 'Angela Carter changed her mind about what tales were up to in relation to reality [...]. Fairy tales came to represent the literature of the illiterate: the divine Marquis yielded pride of place to the anonymous peasant' ('Bottle Blond' 255).

foundational tales, but regardless, she weaves them into the fabric of her stories as affirmations of their truth, even while eager to invent *her own* myths. Despite their different attitudes to mythology, in their rewriting of popular stories – myths and folklore – Carter and Mukherjee share an insistence on repositioning power structures and foregrounding what Jack Zipes calls ‘female desire’ (*Why Fairytales Stick* 140).

While there are some grounds to distinguish myth from fairy tale on the basis of the sacred and profane, and high versus popular culture, certain critics such as Zipes refuse to make a strong case for such a distinction, arguing that both deal in constructs or ‘mythemes’ (where the function or construct remains constant even if the characters change) and share a denial of verisimilitude (Sellers 9). However, whereas myths seem to have a ‘knack of surviving’ and, according to Maria Warner, giving out the pretence that they are immutable (see Sellers 8), Zipes argues that fairy tales – even those regarded as classics and therefore accorded a kind of mythic status – are ‘neither ageless nor universal but the products of a particular historical and economic conjunction’ (*Irresistible Fairy Tale* 46).

Carter believed that ‘the fairytale is the (anti-)myth of origins, a recipe for transformations’ (Sage, ‘Fairy Tale’ 79), and she delighted in liberating their subversive subtexts. Unlike myths which derive their power from a patriarchal construction and designation, fairy tales represented the oral telling of stories whose history is domestic, emanating from ordinary people, who were often poor, and frequently women (Carter, *Book of Fairy Tales* xi). The value of fairy tales is that they can be ‘remade again and again by every person who tells them’ (ibid.), they are ‘portable, part of the invisible luggage people take with them when they leave home’ (ibid. xvi), and they have ‘a relaxed attitude to the reality principle’ (ibid. xix) which, in the words of Sage, means that they can deal with beings who were ‘not-human without being divine’ (‘Fairy Tale’ 70). Warner contends that fairy tales (or wonder tales as Vladimir Propp referred to them) generally have an anonymous source and are traditionally situated in remote ‘unreal’ settings – forests, castles, nameless kingdoms – which facilitate ‘the stories’ ability to grapple with reality’ (*Beast* xvi). Sage commented that the fairy tale’s ‘potential poverty, bareness, lightness, represent the possibility of rendering the obsessive matter of cruelty, desire and suffering [...] profane and provisional’, thus making the tale available to interpretation and changeability (‘Fairy Tale’ 69).

In a recent article, Zipes concludes that 'Almost all endeavors by scholars to define the fairy tale as a genre have failed. Their failure is predictable because the genre is so volatile and fluid' ('Meaning' 222). The slipperiness of the genre occasions both frustration and delight: it is difficult to say exactly what it is, but it therefore can become many things. According to Cristina Bacchilega, fairy tales constitute a 'borderline' genre, carrying the traces of oral stories and socio-cultural traditions, but it is also a genre that has shaped literary traditions (*Tales Transformed* 20-2). The radical instability of the fairy tale genre appealed to Carter and provoked a repositioning; like carnival and chaos theory, fairy tales speak of mutability.

Carter loved fairy tales too because they were stories that she could restage with her own imagination (Sage, *Flesh* 21). As a child reading *The Day of the Triffids* serialised in the newspaper, the idea gripped her 'that the literal truth might not be the whole truth', and that one of the ways to ask questions that could not be asked in any other way was 'through constructing imaginary worlds in which ideas can be discussed' (*Shaking* 34-35). The story of the *Triffids* left a lasting impression on her because it taught her 'that writing didn't have to be true in order to have meaning, and a catastrophe that was impossible, that was purely imaginary, could both move and disturb me' (ibid 32). One approach she adopted to engage with the imaginary was to transcribe the make-believe worlds of folklore and in this she effected the type of mimesis that Felski describes; a creative act, based on the original, but refiguring it with newly-heard voices and re-gendered heroes: women or girls who are fierce and powerful.

Although Carter made some attempts to write an anti-mythic text such as *The Passion of New Eve*, which she conceived of as a 'feminist tract about the social creation of femininity, amongst other things' (*Shaking* 38), she finally debunked the whole issue of myth, preferring to deal with 'the shifting structures of reality and sexuality [...] derived from orally transmitted traditional tales' (ibid.). The myth she was most anxious to trash was the one of female subservience and passivity. She did this by writing her own fairy tales which were published as *The Bloody Chamber* alongside her polemical revisioning of Sade's pornographic depictions of Justine and Juliette; *The Sadeian Woman* was an intellectual contestation concerning the 'culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it' (*Sadeian* 1). Both works challenge the ideology of the 'natural' implicit in mythology and they pull the rug from under the feet of

those who wish to find an excuse for living 'unfree' lives.⁸ One of the key factors in Carter's textual crossings (such as her polemic revisioning the Sade's pornographic material written alongside stories in a genre overwhelmingly reserved for children) is the intertextuality of her own writing: streams of influence eddy across her various forms and comment on each other as well as engage with texts as far ranging as those of Sade, the Grimm brothers, John Wyndham, Marcuse and Jorge Luis Borges (Carter, *Shaking a Leg* 34-7).

Carter's oeuvre follows a trajectory in the way that she repositioned ideas of women, specifically in relation to fairy tales where she used the tales' characteristics to explore gender and violence. In her early novels (*Shadow Dance* and *Love*) she portrayed female characters who 'exist in the passive case' and therefore 'die in the passive case' which means, in effect, to be killed (or commit suicide) (*Sadeian* 77). Both Ghislaine and Annabel in the preceding novels are vulnerable young women who exist almost entirely through the eyes of men, as objects defined by male need, although there is something subversive in *their* offering themselves up for sacrifice. Ghislaine's self-sacrificial stance becomes a parody of the suffering woman and Annabel in *Love* signifies the mad woman, a re-enactment of Ophelia. Elaine Jordan points out that such parody exists on a dangerous edge, closer to a realist experience of a young woman's passage into adulthood (208). But in her early novels, Carter was setting up the image of a cultural construct and then debunking it: the Sleeping Beauty who is not awakened with a kiss but is set to sleep (indeed killed) with a sword because of her own misguided desire (Ghislaine) or who sets herself to sleep (Annabel's suicide) in a hopeless quest for an awakening kiss that will not come. The beginnings of the subversion of the fairy tale princess are clearly visible here.

But it is with her short stories that Carter's reworking of the genre came into its own. Aside from her outlandish depiction of the grotesque and weird cast of characters, Carter's choice to write fairy stories itself constituted a form of transgressive writing.⁹ In the sixties no-one wrote fairy tales. But Carter realised that both the ritualistic force and the darkly playful character of these stories would enable her to formulate intellectual and politically charged

⁸ See Barthes *Mythologies*: 'in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down [...] the ideological abuse which [...] is hidden there' (11).

⁹ Subsequently, Carter has been extremely influential on writers and visual artists who have used both the forms and motifs of fairy tales (Warner, 'Bottle Blonde' 253).

commentaries on contemporary life. Although Carter dates her use of folklore to *The Bloody Chamber*, in her earlier short stories she was already using some of the stock motifs and structure of fairy tales while simultaneously interrogating their assumptions. In *Fireworks*, for instance, she frequently employs the topoi of woods, forests, the circus, haunted houses and overgrown jungles. 'Reflections' in the *Fireworks* collection opens with 'I was walking in a wood one late spring day [...] I was alone in the spring-enchanted wood.' (103). The male protagonist hears the voice of a young girl singing – 'far more ornate than that of the blackbird' (104) – and distracted, he falls upon a shell too heavy to lift and possessing an ominous coldness. He is taken captive by a ferocious gun-toting girl who marches him to a dilapidated house that 'slept' in an overgrown garden. Awaiting him, amongst the cobwebs at the top of the creaking stairs, is a strange, paradoxical creature, old and wizened yet extremely beautiful, half perfect male and half perfect female, a being impossible to locate in any physical aesthetic: 'The crippled being [...] had the most regal cast of chin and mouth imaginable and the proud, sad air of the king of a rainy country. One of her profiles was that of a beautiful woman, the other that of a beautiful man.' (111).

The gun-toting girl and the 'androgynous' force the protagonist to enter the mirror world where everything is reversed. The story is replete with fairy tale motifs: overgrown paths, ominous captivity, unfathomable creatures who are not-real but mimic a skewed reality, and cruel captors. The genders of the characters are deconstructed and punned: the 'androgynous' 'can go both ways, although she cannot move at all' (114), and there is a play on absolute and relative potency. Here the wanderer in the woods is male and the wolf/beast is represented by the girl and her indeterminate 'Aunt', both displaying their provocative and daunting sexuality, their towering erections and phallic guns. Once in the mirror world, the narrator is led by the girl back to the woods where everything is reversed: sights become sounds so that 'the sweetness of the wild roses rang in my ears like a peal of windbells' (123). Finally, in a scene designed to shock, the girl throws herself on to the protagonist 'like a quoit on a peg' (125), and rapes him; he feels his being leaking away from under him as 'she pumped away indefatigably at my sex' (ibid.). The story ends on a baffling note of male arrogance as the narrator faces himself in the mirror, and having murdered the girl and the androgynous, he encounters his own image as assassin and destroyer of the world.

Ultimately, I believe, the story is not successful as a re-written fairy tale because the convolutions of the mirrors and the reversals require so much explanation that the narrative thread is lost. But it is a story designed to take common motifs, unravel them (much as, in reverse, the androgyne ruler of the house of mirrors knits the world *into* existence unceasingly, a missed stitch meaning a hole in the story of existence), and shock the reader with the sinister and sexual recasting of a tale that shares some similarities with 'Little Red Riding Hood' but which calls into question the notion of the security of binary opposites: what happens when we deconstruct male/female, builder/destroyer, black/white, age/youth, beauty/ugliness, and reverse them into an infinity of progressions?

'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest' in *Fireworks* tells of a brother and sister who venture too far into the forest and get lost (a reworking of Hansel and Gretel). The title gestures towards the sexual content of the story; in a revisioning of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, the sister invites her somewhat naïve but enthusiastic brother to discover the fruits of sexual knowledge. 'The Loves of Lady Purple' begins with a fairy tale riff: 'Inside the pink-striped booth of the Asiatic Professor only the marvellous existed and there was no such thing as daylight' (*Fireworks* 27).¹⁰ 'Lady Purple' is also known as the 'Shameless Oriental Venus', 'the famous prostitute and wonder of the East' (34). Carter deploys the Orient as *exotica*, foregrounding an early critique of how the West presents and frames the East, and pre-dating Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The puppet show which the 'Asian Professor' performs, assisted by a dumb girl and a deaf boy, is 'entirely exotic', although none of its performers had ever 'comprehended to any degree the foreign' (29).

While Carter's aim is to unsettle with these early stories of shifting ground, it is her later writing in *The Bloody Chamber* that reworks the fairy tale most successfully. According to Bacchilega, while literature's fairy tales have been institutionalised to protect the virtue of upper class young girls, Carter liberates them from this domesticated confinement and fleshes out 'the complex and vital workings of desire and narrative' (*Postmodern Fairytales* 59); the release of multiple voices from the captivity of the tale produces empowering possibilities for women (ibid. 53). I have deliberately not focused on *The Bloody Chamber* in this thesis because the collection has been extensively reviewed and researched. However,

¹⁰ Note the Asian exotic! Mukherjee has commented on how the West frames 'Asia' as the place of mystery and danger.

one critic at least has remarked that *The Bloody Chamber* does not represent a reworking of fairy tales but rather a gothic employment of fairy tale motifs. In a cogent argument, Lucie Armitt suggests that fairy tales by virtue of their structural conventions are self-enclosing, of necessity offering 'narrative consolation in the never-never world of happy ever after' (89). Carter's tales need to be freed from the constraints of the fairy tale if unconventional readings of the texts may spill out and over. Thus, Armitt views this collection in particular as 'Gothic tales that prey upon the restrictive enclosures of fairy-story formulae' (ibid.). The Gothic is a term frequently applied to Carter's work. According to Amit Chaudhuri, Ruskin understood the meaning of Gothic (in architecture) as allowing the expression of the 'rude', the unacceptable, the 'savage' and the grotesque (166). It was a wayward critique of the Enlightenment but it did not posit a binary between 'barbaric' and 'civilised' but rather problematised "'Englishness" itself as a stable category' suggesting that Englishness contained its own internal 'barbarism' (ibid.); hence its applicability to Carter's work and to this collection in particular.

Warner suggests that Carter's rewriting of fairy tales was a reimagining of 'the material that lies all about us, ready to hand' and expressed a form of expedience: why go tunneling into the 'depths and darkness of the past to recover a different story for women: we could improvise from what we already knew and liked' (*Signs* 51). Certainly, for Mukherjee, this is true too of Hindu mythology which is 'embedded' in her consciousness, enabling her to make sense of the world and to integrate Western experience into a world view that perceives resonances between mystical or religious forces and modern physics.¹¹ If Carter was fascinated with folklore and magic, Mukherjee's childhood was steeped in it: 'I grew up chasing ghosts away at dusk following my grandmother as she held a holy lamp...' (Interview with Michael Krasny). Hindu myths, just like Carter's fairy tales, provide ample room for improvisation: female goddesses are more present here than in other religions, enacting cosmic dramas of destruction and rebirth. In her novels, Mukherjee's female characters frequently embody or enact the myths of Mukherjee's Hindu upbringing, following in the footsteps of Kali or Devi, Hindu goddesses who invoke violence for the sake of purification and change, or acting out and transforming the story of Sita, the loyal and courageous

¹¹ Mukherjee is certainly not the first to see such resonances; see Fritzof Capra (1982); and, more recently, Sunanda Mongia (2000).

heroine from the Ramayana (as does Hannah, a white woman, ironically, in *Holder of the World*).¹² In a conversation with Bradley Edwards, Mukherjee claimed that: 'Some of the stories, like that of Sita, the perfect wife who is self-sacrificing and self-effacing, are the ones that I want to attack, critique [...]. I would like to make up my own myths' (107).

In an example of Mukherjee's interweaving of Hindu and Western mythology, *Jasmine* takes the reader on a journey that invokes the goddess Kali but also articulates the American myth of the pioneering spirit. Jasmine's manifestation as the goddess Kali – black tongued and dripping blood – is made clear in her murder of her rapist, Half Face. Nearly strangled to death at birth for being a girl, Jasmine follows the Hindu pattern of destruction and rebirthing, changing names and personalities a number of times; but she also revisions the American dream, travelling across America to conquer new frontiers, refusing to get stuck in a dead end place. A number of critics have argued over what constitutes Mukherjee's myth of American-ness: is it her depiction of the capacity to change which, according to Kristin Carter-Sanborn, becomes a 'domesticated fantasy, a classic American dream of assimilation' (582); or is it, as John Hoppe suggests, her 'non-integration', her individualism, that 'marks her, within the terms of the text, as most identifiably American'? (153). The quarrel over this question points to the significance of her engagement with both Hindu and American world views, and it is this fusion – these textual and cultural crossings – that I believe specifically enables Mukherjee to engage both with where she comes from and where she is headed. As David Cowart points out, it is a mistake to think that Mukherjee repudiates her past. She herself says that she knows where she comes from but she also chooses to change and to re-make herself in this lifetime – why wait for reincarnations?

Leave it to Me, even more than *Jasmine*, is underpinned by Hindu mythology; here the myth of the goddess Durga who slays the buffalo demon in a battle between good and evil – although the clarity of distinguishing lines is interrogated in the novel – is an incantation of destruction and regeneration. Mukherjee's novel, *Holder of the World*, attempts to bridge mythologies of East and West, and to link past and present, by invoking Hindu beliefs in destiny, destruction and renewal, and chaos theory's concern with information overload and the spiral effects of small events. According to Stanley Stephen, since 'myths embody

¹² Mukherjee states in an interview with Francisco Rodriguez that 'as a feminist born in India I had to reject the Sita model but then I also had to use it for Hannah's captivity narrative' (65).

archetypes, they speak to readers irrespective of their ethnicities' (106). He sees Mukherjee making attempts to combine Greek and Hindu mythology in order to appeal to a wider audience. Cowart has a slightly different view; he notes a correspondence between Eastern and specifically American perspectives: American social mutability has its complement in Eastern philosophies that focus on cycles of death and reincarnation, but the disjunct occurs in that Hindu creation is fluid and there is endless rebirth out of destruction, whereas in America 'nothing lasts' (77).¹³

Significantly, Mukherjee's focus on myths extends to those she finds in the country of her adoption. Not content with transformation/domestication of the assimilated self, Mukherjee also aims to transform those that are 'at home' and to foreignise the domestic. Jennifer Drake suggests that she 'loots', retrieves and reorders myths from the American stockpile (61). Mukherjee admits to fusing her own mythological background with the traditions of the West as her way of generating newness from the merging of different cultural reservoirs. While her reworking of myths and tales seems less nuanced than Carter's, both writers work to disentangle and reassemble aspects of mythology and folklore to write alternative worlds and world views.

3.2.2 Other Worlds/Other Lives

Fiction in general and fairy tales in particular present a way of gaining entry into worlds that are different to the prosaic and the everyday.¹⁴ According to J. Hillis Miller, the opening lines of many iconographic literary works 'instantly transport me into a new world. [...] The words are radically inaugural. They are the creation, in each case, of a new, alternative universe'(25). He goes on to say that 'One of the main pleasures of reading literary works is the power they give to put aside our real cares and enter another place' (32). Cristina Vischer Bruns in her book *Why Literature: The Value of Literary Reading* cites a number of scholars who argue that it is precisely literature's ability to induct the reader into other

¹³ Some critics have argued that Mukherjee's use of Hindu mythology is facile and exoticising, see, for example, Aijaz Ahmad; Debjani Banerjee maintains that Mukherjee exploits political situations for sensational reasons.

¹⁴ See, for example, the British Academy literature week (11-17 May 2015) whose theme **Other Worlds**, has as its main focus fairy tales and writers associated with the fairy tale, including Angela Carter, Marina Warner and Jack Zipes (http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2015/Literature_Week_2015.cfm).

worlds and other lives that affirms its value. For example, Gregory Jusdanis claims that literature's provision of an alternative world enables the critiquing of our everyday one (Vischer Bruns 21). Charles Altieri contends that by entering other worlds and other lives, readers are given other 'experiences which make possible the reworking of our relation with this world' (qtd. in Vischer Bruns 26). Using Felski's categories of the affective modes of literary experience, Vischer Bruns grapples with the issue of the significance and value of literature's ability to transport the reader to a different dimension and concludes that the effect of literary reading goes beyond its capacity to create affective responses in readers; it also provides the space for cultural contact between the text and the reader and 'between the various cultures represented by the readers' and thereby engenders 'an important formative human function' (110, 116). Literary reading blurs the boundaries between inner and outer experiences, between the self and the text, so that readers begin to make sense of their own worlds and their own selves (116). The 'transitory spaces' that literature opens up make possible the exploration of both psychological and cultural work (ibid.).

Echoing this point of view, I assert that, by creating and imagining other worlds, Mukherjee and Carter enable the exploration and critique of linguistic and cultural constructions of the ones they inhabit. The genesis of another world is 'radically initiatory', in the words of Hillis Miller (32). For both writer and reader, entry into other lives and alternate spaces is a drastically original experience which constitutes a crossing as well as a kind of translation, a form of being carried across to somewhere else in a manner that is transformative. The creation and entry into other worlds is transgressive in the sense of breaking boundaries and getting to grips with different kinds of semantic. It is precisely this type of transgressive crossing that Carter and Mukherjee explore as a way of re-imagining and repositioning power for those conventionally assigned to the margins or signified as outcasts.

In this chapter I propose that selected texts of Carter and Mukherjee advance ideas of translation as a form not only of moving into but also creating another space which represents both physical and symbolic transgression, both a crossing (passing over thresholds) and a countering (breaking boundaries). This transgression challenges the status quo and destabilises power, but also suggests the possibility of an alternative structure of power, one that may not be situated at the centre but, despite that, is frequently stronger

for exerting itself at the periphery. Often the movement for these novelists is not one from periphery to centre but rather from centre to periphery, or from the margins to beyond, into other worlds; this movement, while transgressive in itself, may ironically constitute an engagement with power. Yet there is a risk to such edginess which is the danger of being too far out (both literally and metaphorically) and remaining 'unassimilated' (see Sage, *Flesh* 20).

A recent work on heterotopia in Carter's fiction by Eliza Filimon¹⁵ has attempted to sketch out Carter's worlds of otherness and to pin down their specific, albeit contradictory, meanings. I resist this temptation, recognising that Carter was elusive in her symbolism and that her meanings in projecting other worlds are overdetermined: often, in fact, meanings that appear implicit are contradictory, ambiguous or complementary, depending on context and time, so that interpreting and reifying the inferences of these worlds, as Filimon does, seems contrary to Carter's style of writing and her thematic intentions.¹⁶ While Filimon acknowledges Carter's work as 'kinetic and fluid, animated by opposing forces' (307), she nonetheless attempts to extract and define the connotations of these forces. Furthermore, she characterises the journeys that the protagonists make to exotic locations as specifically 'routes of alienation for both characters and readers' (308); this circumscribes the nature of the journeys and limits Carter's wide range of possibilities.

In this section on 'Other Worlds' I deal primarily with three novels by Angela Carter: *Shadow Dance*, *Heroes and Villains*, and one of her speculative texts, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, and I only gesture towards some texts by Mukherjee. (In the next section on 'Errant Travellers' I reverse this and take up Mukherjee's work in more detail, only nodding towards Carter). I argue that these three novels are increasingly transgressive in their creative imagining of other worlds as a means to interrogate the hegemonic nature of power in a world dominated by patriarchy. By creating strange realms or, alternately, making even the familiar strange, Carter opens a space for the marginal – those traditionally

¹⁵ Heterotopia is a concept coined by Foucault to mean spaces of otherness, neither utopia nor dystopia, but spaces that have the capacity to be different and contain many meanings (Filimon 18-19).

¹⁶ For example, Filimon sees Carter's castles as constructs 'of murderous erotic fantasies, more often male' (44); or 'There is no fresh air in Angela Carter's castles, no light, they are spheres of chaos that stifle all the senses' (47). Clearly, however, this is not the case with all her castles; the ruined castle in *Heroes and Villains*, for example, is open to the sky and therefore signifies differently.

set aside because of status, age or gender – demonstrating the symbolic import of the margins in countering the power of the normative. In casting worlds at a distance, she enables a view of how communities construct their own structures of idiosyncratic social patterns which appear random and variable but are underpinned by particular ideologies. Her novels foreground the cultural production of norms, signifying that ‘nature’ itself is a construct which can be challenged through the fictive creation of alternative paradigms.

Beginning with *Shadow Dance*, Carter clearly articulates how cultural and populist notions interact to create particular hegemonic standards. In this novel she paints what appears to be a typical sixties scenario of British counterculture; but it is skewed and distorted so that it becomes estranged from the real. She disturbs the everyday and the commonplace in ways that are slightly off-beat or off-centre, and unsettles the reader through her overuse of clichés – a subversion of high art through the use of ‘low-art’ strategies (see Anthony Julius 65) – and Gothic undertones (dark, uninhabited houses which hold secrets, for example), much as an Expressionist artist unsettles a painting by drawing lines at unexpected angles and distorts appearances with shadows and darkness.¹⁷ The influence of Surrealism is evident in her literary creation of other worlds.¹⁸ Like the Surrealists, Carter wanted to show the ‘shifting foundations’ on which people have built their lives (see Julius 34). And, just as the Surrealists did in painting and pictorial art, her artistic endeavors attempted to rupture sterile forms and transgress taboos.

Shadow Dance traces the story of Morris and Honeybuzzard, two young men who have set up a junk shop, living in what appears to be Bristol of the sixties (see Marc O’Day 44). Honeybuzzard is camp and cruel. Morris, his sidekick, is neurotic, self-hating and half in love with Honey. Although married, he detests his wife, and is simultaneously feverishly attracted to and repulsed by Ghislaine, a waifish, girl-woman who is obsessed with Honeybuzzard and has allowed herself to be mutilated by him: a raw scar runs down the

¹⁷ Expressionism was united by common characteristics such as anti-realism and the expression of a world violently distorted through the overlay of moods, anxieties, and ideas. It was a precursor to Surrealism – a movement which strongly influenced Carter – often expressing the forbidden, especially in regard to sexuality and alienation in middle class society; see, for example, Munch’s *The Scream* (Beckson and Ganz 83-4).

¹⁸ Surrealism as an art movement was influenced by Freud, conveying the imagination and the unconscious. An element of shock is common to both Surrealism and Expressionism. Later in life Carter disavowed Surrealism because of its negative attitude towards women (*Shaking a Leg*.512).

length of her face. In typical Surrealist style, Carter opens the novel with the ordinary made extraordinary (much like Duchamp does with his found objects or Magritte with objects that appear commonplace but are not what they seem; see *Art Book* 142, 292). The opening lines of the novel conjure a staged scene: ‘The bar was a mock-up, a forgery, a fake; an ad-man’s crazy dream of a Spanish patio ...’ (1). This sets the tone for the rest of the novel which constantly signals a familiar world made strange. The shop set up by Morris and Honeybuzzard, for example, is located in a very ordinary part of England that is both recognisably middle class but with its own set of outlandish norms; it constitutes another reality, one that is at odds with the customary and normal, throwing Establishment codes under the spotlight and opening them to critique. Especially interesting is the character of Ghislaine, a fragile but masochistic femme fatale fluttering about like a butterfly, making ‘darts across the crowd’ (3), struggling to find a place for herself within the ethos of a ‘free love’ generation. Ultimately, though, she exists on the edges of a domain orchestrated by men, and her self-destructive impulse goes hand in glove with Honeybuzzard’s sadistic streak.¹⁹ In this first novel of Carter’s, she paints a world situated on the periphery of an identifiable city, a counterculture dominated nonetheless by the values of its male protagonists, albeit that they themselves are edgy and unsettled.

Carter frequently situates her narrative in the real cities of her experience: the fictional world is thus satisfyingly familiar, a powerful counterpoint to a landscape that suddenly veers off course. Both Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and the Chance sisters in *Wise Children* live in a London that is familiar but that becomes infused with magic and other-worldliness. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Melanie and her siblings are sent to live in their uncle’s house after the death of their parents; there, they find themselves occupying the top floor above their uncle’s toy and novelty shop in London, ironically a ‘dark cavern of a shop, so dimly lit one did not at first notice it as it bowed its head under the tenement above’ (39). It sits ‘between a failed, boarded-up jeweller’s and a grocer’s displaying a windowful of sunshine cornflakes’ on a street which appears grotesquely normal, lined with a butcher shop, a fruit shop and a sweetshop, besides some old junk stores (*ibid.*). This scene, although apparently

¹⁹ Ghislaine is reminiscent of Carter’s description of Marilyn Monroe – ‘A visible capacity for suffering provokes further suffering’: she is the vulnerable blonde whose ‘innocence is made real to us by the desecration of it’ – and her ending reflects Monroe’s fate (see *The Sadeian Woman* 64-70).

commonplace, is somewhat unsettling because of the Gothic overtones of the toyshop where the boundaries between the real and the not-real begin to blur. The house and shop are lifted out of mundanity as Carter evokes a world of darkness and mystery hidden within the ordinary. O'Day refers to this novel as Carter's 'crossover' text, allied with the realism of the Bristol Trilogy, 'but the period details and the laws of nature obtaining in its fictional world become far less certain once the action moves into the toyshop', bringing it closer to the speculative fiction of her later work in which she creates entirely other worlds (331).

Carter's creation of *unheimlich* or estranged places, having been hinted at in her earlier work, becomes more evident in *Heroes and Villains* and in her short stories, and reaches its apotheosis in the novels of the seventies. While Carter's earlier texts suggested a fragmentation of familiar places, it is *Heroes* which makes a complete break with the ordinary by creating a realm that is post-apocalyptic – both strangely post-nuclear and simultaneously pre-industrial. Here, the novel tries to tease out ethical behaviour in an unanchored world, in one set adrift, where the usual norms and conventions are shredded or upended. I focus on *Heroes and Villains* to demonstrate how Carter's depiction of other worlds and other lives is transgressive in its critique of dominant norms and in its empowerment of the margin, represented here by a young woman who is marginalised by patriarchy in both civilised, intellectual society (the rational world of the Professors in the walled city) and in unscholarly, barbaric society (the sensual world of the Barbarians in the forests beyond the walls). Carter makes it clear that the link between women and patriarchy constitutes a complex set of relations and she is scathing of reductionist binary oppositions, especially those that place woman as victim and man as victor, as well as symbolic sentimental oppositions between the city and the countryside.²⁰ The novel imagines unidentified spaces – destroyed cities and pastoral lands, places that typically represent areas of nostalgia but Carter de-romanticises them so that they turn out to be dead-end, frozen in time and sterile. The title of the novel is a parody of the notions of power; it plays on the themes of childhood games – 'cowboys and crooks' – or fairy tales, romantic novels and Gothic tales²¹ which generally have a plot line that involves the male hero destroying

²⁰ Carter makes a similar point to Raymond Williams: that rural life as simple and natural is a romantic 'myth'.

²¹ Gothic tales have similar features to fairy tales but Carter deliberately uses the Gothic variant in this story: a virginal maiden (Marianne), an older foolish woman (Mrs Green – although in this novel she is maternal rather

the villain, saving the girl and living happily ever after. But in this novel, there is no certainty about who constitute the heroes and villains, nor what heroism or villainy mean; and rescuing behaviour is shared by both girl and boy, with the girl ultimately assuming the mantle of power.

The epigraphs at the beginning of *Heroes and Villains* are indicative of Carter's textual moves into unknown territories and foreign languages, ways of externalising the text so that it engages with ideas rather than providing the space for reworking 'personal problems' (see Gamble, *Fiction* 49); they also show Carter's maverick humour and awareness of Gothic's force of parody and excess (see Hurley 142). She had said in an interview that she was irritated by critics' reference to her earlier work as Gothic,²² and her retort was to show them 'what a Gothic novel really was' (Gamble, *Fiction* 49). The Gothic is a mode that intrinsically foregrounds difference and otherness; it defends marginality and disturbs boundaries (Kohlke and Gutleben 2) and, hence, is the perfect genre for Carter to use in the creation of other worlds. The four epigraphs in *Heroes and Villains* suggest the themes of the novel, on the levels of both style and plot. They include a remark from the film *Alphaville* directed by Jean-Luc Godard²³ on the complexity of reality and the need for legend to make sense of it: the novel deals with the making of legends/myths as a way of understanding reality in the character of Donally, a kind of Shaman from the land of the Professors, who attempts to rule the Barbarians through a perversion of knowledge and the omnipotent display of pagan rituals.

The second epigraph is an extract from Andrew Marvell's poem 'The Unfortunate Lover', 'a gothic story of abuse, wounding, and incoherence' (Hirst and Zwicker), and here refers to the novel's lovers, Jewel and Marianne, who are engaged in melodramatic struggles for love and power. The third is a quote from Leslie Fiedler on the Gothic mode which he sees as 'essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of

than foolish), a hero who challenges the tyrant (Jewel as the hero – but he is defeated); Tyrant/Villain (Donally); stupid servant (Donally's son who he keeps on a chain) (see Chaplin 230-1).

²² The Gothic focuses on the mysterious, the dark and sometimes exotic; it fictionalises contemporary fears and uses the Double as a form to externalise sexual anxieties. The setting is often a character itself – a castle, or haunted house – which has secrets that evoke an atmosphere of horror and dread (see Wisker 116-119).

²³ 'There are times when reality becomes too complex for Oral Communication. But Legend gives it a form by which it pervades the whole world' ('*Alphaville*' by Jean-Luc Godard, 1965).

grotesqueness', and it is partly the style adopted by this novel. And finally, there is a French quote from *Manon Lescaut* which raises questions about the possibility of flight into unknown countries 'where wild beasts and barbarous savages live', pointing to the thematic content of this work. By the end of the novel, though, it seems that Carter questions the validity of escape to a 'somewhere else' in order to remedy the pressing issues of power and relationships; rather, she creates a 'somewhere else' to critique issues of gender, power and normative relationships in this world and to sketch the beginnings of an alternative paradigm of power dynamics.

One way of evoking the 'other' of other worlds is through a style of writing that elicits shock by its use of banality and its juxtaposition of the commonplace and the strange; the excessive injection of clichés is one such form of subversion whereby the normal is undercut by an unexpected and contrary encounter (as with the use of 'low' art strategies to counter the pretensions of 'high' art in the work of the Surrealists). Throughout the novel, mismatched objects and are thrown together, some of the characters are themselves paradoxical (like the intellectual but shamanistic Donnelly), and the stylistic disruptions are signposts for the reader to be aware that the journey through this text will stumble on the continuous shifting of reality. The narrative begins with a line about its female protagonist that is unanticipated, undermines all notions of femininity, and startles the reader: 'Marianne had sharp, cold eyes and she was spiteful but her father loved her' (1). She and her family live in a white tower of steel and concrete, surrounded by supposedly idyllic farmlands, bordered beyond by marshes, stone ruins and forests. Her father is a professor and the ivory tower of academia is here made manifest. The scenario is not so much idyllic as deadening: 'A pastoral quiet possessed everything' and time seems to have frozen; the 'clock carved the hours into sculptures of ice' (1).

As a young child of six, Marianne, is locked by her nanny in the white room (a reference to *Jane Eyre* although here the lock-away room is not red) at the top of the tower to keep her from creating a nuisance while everyone is busy with the May Day festival preparations (an ironic allusion to ancient festivities of fertility juxtaposed with modern celebrations of worker rights). The white room symbolises a world of intellect without passion, and, unlike Jane's response in Bronte's story, Marianne's reaction to being incarcerated is typically and

conventionally male: hers is a white fury rather than an impassioned red rage. The characterisation of Marianne continues in a sardonic counter to the stereotypical expectations of the emotional nature of femininity. She perches from a high balcony, looking out at the village festivities. These are interrupted by the violence of invading Barbarians, all hair, baubles, colour and passion. The scenes are wild and catastrophic as Soldiers and Barbarians fight in hand-to-hand combat, bodies and brains splitting and bursting and catapulting in the air – ‘Marianne bemusedly saw a good deal of blood’ – while further afield, the Barbarians ransack the houses and stores of grain, and she notices some of the Worker women helping them. ‘Marianne thought this was very interesting’ (5). And then she notices her brother in battle with a young Barbarian: ‘They were some way from the general fighting as if they had arrived beneath her viewing platform on purpose to demonstrate violence to her. [...] she saw them staring at one another, both oddly startled, as if this was the last thing they expected to happen, this embrace to the kill.’ (5). Marianne’s reaction is dispassionate and aloof, and jolts the reader.

Here the writing itself is transgressive. The emotional reactions of the characters are dislocated or dismembered and reader expectations are similarly disrupted. As Marianne views the battles and blood and betrayal, she remains indifferent to any familial feeling for her brother, even as she watches his embrace with the enemy result in his death. The boy-enemy expresses terror not at the fight but at being watched and witnessed by a small girl: ‘The boy looked up and saw the severe child who watched him. An expression of blind terror crossed his face...’ (6). The style of the aforementioned piece is detached and ironic and is totally at odds with the violence of the action, the boy warrior expressing the only emotion of the whole scene, and that only in relation to being observed. Nor does the description of Marianne conjure a six-year old child; Marianne does not even appear to inhabit the story. Like the author who aims to be external to the text, Marianne is external to the narrative action: she casts an eye over the scene being played out as though it were there to demonstrate an experiment. Being the daughter of scholars, she observes what is happening below her in a parody of the academic gaze, coolly witnessing the dramatic events. Her gaze here also evokes male gaze, inverted: Marianne, the young female child, looks down at the fighting boys, enjoying the spectacle but remaining untouched by it and

uncontaminated.²⁴

Questions concerning reality and truth and how myths are created and perpetuated pervade the novel: Marianne loves her father but wishes that ‘she could be more sure he was really there’ (10). She disbelieves her nanny who tells her old wives tales about girls being eaten by the Barbarians or women being raped, slit open and having cats buried inside them – ‘I think that’s most unlikely,’ said Marianne. ‘In the first place, I don’t think they have cats. We have cats to keep the mice from the corn and to use up our spare affection’ (10). Her scepticism is pragmatic and almost banal: the imperturbable irony of Marianne’s response demonstrates not only her mocking incredulity regarding the tales, but also that the stories – all our stories – have the element of the ridiculous and exist to shore up a kind of mythology that produces and promotes a paradigm of insiders and outsiders. The villagers are fearful about the dangers that lie on the outside, beyond the protected and protecting walls,²⁵ but Marianne is fearlessly determined to discover what indeed lies beyond the complex of Professors and Soldiers. When she has escaped the Professor compound and is out in the forest with Jewel, she experiences a new sense of reality: the roses emit the ‘most tremulous of scents’, and ‘Though this scent was so fragile, still it seemed the real breath of wholly new and vegetable world ...’ (22).

While Marianne’s transgressive crossing over into a new world requires an act of will that enables her to escape from the constraints of an old order that is boring and sterile, it does not automatically lead to freedom. She likes the ‘wild quattrosyllabic lilt of the word, “Barbarian”’ (4) and she has no desire to marry unless it is to a stranger so that she can escape the sterility of the white towers. But her father warns her: ‘I know you’d rather not live here but there is nowhere else to go and chaos is the opposite pole of boredom’ (11).²⁶ As her father has predicted, the new order is troubling and represents ‘the end of all known

²⁴ Stallybrass and White note that in 19th century literature the gaze suggested desire but touch meant contamination. The balcony enabled distance: ‘from the balcony, one could gaze, but not be touched [...] the bourgeoisie on their balconies could both participate in the banquet of the streets and yet remain separated’ (136).

²⁵ Wendy Brown argues that ‘Walls address human desires for containment and protection in a world increasingly without these provisions’ (26-27). She adds that walls ‘produce [...] the illusion of a future aligned with an idealized past’ (133).

²⁶ This is an interesting corollary of Mukherjee’s notion of ‘chaos’ although, as Hayles points out, it should not be thought of in binary opposition to ‘order’, and indeed Carter deconstructs the binaries in her work.

things' for Marianne (19); but it is also represents a form of vitality. At the same time, Carter parodies Rousseau's conception of the 'noble savage' as the optimal state of humankind: Marianne's father tells her, 'Rousseau spoke of a noble savage but this is the time of ignoble savages' (10). And indeed, Mrs Green, the matriarch of the Barbarian tribe, who is also a past runaway from the Professor community, states that the Barbarians 'don't think'; 'They jump from one thing to the next like kids jumping stepping stones and so they go on until they fall in the water' (38). As the narrative progresses, Marianne's desire for the other is shown to be a sentimental myth and she discovers that the world of Barbarians has its own set of problems. This novel then is about the danger of inversions and simplistic dualities: the reduction of chaos and order, intellect and passion, to binary opposites, for example, flattens the significance as well as the lived experience of both.

In her first ventures into the forest alone, Marianne expects (and desires) to find wild creatures: 'Here were wolves, bears, lions, phantoms and beggars but she saw nothing though she walked as softly as she could' (12). Instead, she comes upon a man bedecked in furs and necklaces, gathering plants, and referring to a book from time to time. Next to him, tethered to a tree, are a donkey and a child, the latter with a collar round his neck, being treated like a wild animal. When the child cries, the man kicks him repeatedly and returns to his gathering and reading. The subtext is a commentary on the bestial behaviour of men rather than beasts, despite the former's engagement with intellectual, so-called civilised pursuits. Subsequently, when Marianne enters the forest with Jewel, 'she waited for a red-eyed wolf or grinning bear who might come [...] to eat up hungrily both her and her companion. But nothing appeared' (22). In this reference to 'Little Red Riding Hood', Carter continuously undercuts the notion of the frightened girl child or the innocent girl of fairy tales and myths.²⁷ On the contrary, Marianne is intrepid and, above all else, curious and open to desire.²⁸

The wolf of fairy tales is dangerous and seductive and often signifies sexual desire. In this

²⁷ Tess Cosslett notes that fairy tales assume patriarchal western values which affirm whiteness, beauty and passivity as the ideal characteristics of women, while men are ultimately the rescuing heroes, although often assisted by external agencies (81).

²⁸ Carter takes up the theme of bestiality and sexuality in her various reworkings of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* which I discuss in the next chapter.

novel, Donally represents both the conventional and beguiling characteristics of the wolf: he is cunning, clever, manipulative and magnetic; he is also mutable and adaptable. He is a remnant of the old Professor order which he has perverted, remaking himself into the leader of the Barbarians. However, Marianne, like her 'Bloody Chamber' sisters, will be nobody's game; instead she actively pursues and embodies an alternative mythos of femininity, resisting the dominant structures of the Barbarians and asserting her will and her power, even though she discovers that this world is no less patriarchal than the old order.

In the character of Jewel – sparkling, bright and shiny, always tempting and teasing desire, 'a series of hallucinations' (*Heroes* 120) – Carter produces a kind of Byronic hero who is beautiful and brave, and then she undercuts his heroic status by parodying his ability as a lover and a leader; Jewel himself recognises that he is 'doomed to be nothing but an exhibit' (124), the object of the gaze so often associated with the condition of women in a male-controlled world. Carter interrogates the fixity of gender in both the characters of Jewel and Marianne. With her portrayal of Jewel, the interrogation is not through performance but through appearance; while Jewel's actions are stereotypically male, both his name and his beauty confound stereotypes. He looks 'marvellously exotic' and has a face of 'such desolate beauty so far from the norm it was as fearful as a gross deformity' (78-9).

Marianne, however, takes an active role in destabilising the construction of her own femininity. She refuses to be fearful even when confronted with the possibility of rape: as Jewel's band of brothers advances on her ominously, she 'discovered she was not in the least frightened, only very angry indeed ...' (49). Despite her general tendency to remain dispassionate and examine her experience objectively, anger and an uncontrollable sexual desire for Jewel are her primary emotions, both traditionally associated with the masculine.²⁹ In her sexual intimacy with Jewel 'she never expected such extreme intimations of pleasure or despair' and this is almost her undoing (83). She feels overwhelmed by her desire and her only solution is to try to escape from Jewel and his Barbarian community. Ultimately, it is neither Jewel nor the anti-Christ, Donally, who triumph, but rather Marianne: having initially rescued Jewel from the Professors and Soldiers, she helps him

²⁹ In Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, both rage and sexual desire are displaced from Jane and projected on to Bertha, the 'madwoman in the attic' (see Gilbert and Gubar).

escape, and then turns the whole Barbarian tribe on its head and chooses herself as its leader. On hearing that Jewel is dead and that the tribe hopes to pack up, move on, and leave her behind, Marianne responds, 'They won't get rid of me as easily as that. I shall stay here and frighten them so much they'll do every single thing I say.' (150). In a sense, *she* will overturn the fairy tale's patriarchal paradigm and become the archetypal wolf figure.

Yet Carter herself is neither romantic nor sentimental; she interrogates the formulation of power and acknowledges its cyclical patterns: in a parodic and dark moment she suggests that the desire for power is inevitable and drives all forms of control, and she suggests that Marianne too is implicated in this. Early in the novel, Marianne's father explains: 'the Soldiers are delegated to police us and protect us but they are developing an autonomous power of their own'. (9). Marianne is more powerful than all those around her – her initial reserve and spite and her negation of feminine expectations ensure her initial avoidance of the 'female phallacy'³⁰ and enable her to break the barricades of masculine domination. She is *not* Maid Marianne, the sentimental lover of Robin Hood, and her name is an ironic counter to that image; she violates the role of the beautiful young girl who needs rescuing. In fact, Carter plays with the conventional ideas of feminine beauty and behaviour: Marianne cuts her hair off so that she becomes ugly and she rescues the boy rather than have him rescue her. When she meets Jewel, he comments on her hair: 'Thought you was a boy at first. [...] Who chopped all your hair off?' She replies: 'Nobody. I did. Myself.' (23). It is a reply that describes her assertion of will and independence. Her autonomy is based on the rejection of conventional roles and ascribed behaviours. Yet she too cannot escape the seduction of power: she will be – not queen – but the 'tiger lady' who will rule with 'a rod of iron' (150). In this sense, she does not establish a new order because ultimately she cannot exist outside the phallic culture of power and meaning; she merely inverts it and inhabits it.

In her later speculative novels, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter continues her project of critiquing 'the mess of contemporary life' (O'Day 74), and attempts to break out of the 'phallacy of masculine meaning' by

³⁰ See Shoshana Felman: *Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy*, 1975. Felman argues that being a woman is equivalent to 'what *resembles* a woman' (italics in original); it is a 'metaphorical category that is explicitly bound [...] to a sociosexual stereotype', reflecting the narcissism of man (34).

creating imaginative, hypothetical worlds where she ‘reinvents’ language and new world orders (Felman 40).³¹ In these novels, narrative itself becomes her subject³² and the notion of story-telling is undermined, set on shifting sands of illusion much like ‘the peep-show cum cinematograph’ that continuously pops up in *Doctor Hoffman* and which offers a remarkable, life-like approximation of reality (*Hoffman* 27). In the worlds of these two novels nothing is familiar, landscapes and characters are strange or grotesque, and languages are neither named nor nameable; sometimes they are not spoken, only sung. The country of Desiderio’s origin (the male protagonist of *Doctor Hoffman*), for example, seems to be somewhere in South America, although its specificity remains uncertain and disconcerting. The setting for *New Eve* crosses continents to the ‘new world’ which is the site of an apocalyptic post-nuclear disaster; it traverses cities and deserts that are abandoned and fantastical.

Both *Doctor Hoffman* and *New Eve* were published in the seventies, and both were written in Japan, a country where, according to Carter, reality is undermined by shifting appearances: ‘Even buildings one had taken for substantial had a trick of disappearing overnight’ (*Fireworks*, 11). Tokyo exists ‘under a disoriented moon’, ‘a city dedicated to seeming’ (14). When she moves into the Japanese neighbourhood, Carter announces in a shock reversal, ‘I am the first coloured family in this street. [...] small voices murmuring the word “*Gaijin, gaijin, gaijin*” (foreigner) in pure, repressed surprise. We spy strangers.’ (*Shaking* 234). The feeling of strangeness, the disarticulations and sense of other-world-ness of the two novels reflect Carter’s own sense of disorientation, dislocation and estrangement in a country that she experienced as completely other. But it is this sense of being set apart that enables her interrogation of the materiality of this world through the creative imagining of others.

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman may be regarded as a fictional treatment of ideas developed by Jacques Lacan, André Breton and Georges Bataille on desire and

³¹ According to Felman, ‘The challenge facing woman today is nothing less than to “reinvent” language, to *re-learn how to speak*: to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure...’ (40).

³² See Brian Finney: ‘...many of Carter’s other works of fiction begin by making the narrative act their subject [...Carter draws] our attention to the fact that all narratives originate with the human voice telling a story and that all of them are retellings of an earlier telling’ (1).

sublimation (see Klem James).³³ The title of the novel refers directly to the tales of E A Hoffmann, an early 19th century German Romantic writer, who introduced fantastic and supernatural events into a naturalistic mode, even using real street and restaurant names in Berlin for the setting of his tales (much as Carter does in many of her works of fiction). It concerns the invasion of reality by surrealist images of desire, and it follows the search by Desiderio, the protagonist and narrator, for the ever-vanishing spectre of the most-desired, 'miraculous' Albertina.³⁴ The first epigram of the text focuses on the nature of desire – roughly translated as 'The laws of our desires are limitless' (literally 'without leisure' or 'without laws') – and is a quote by Robert Desnos (one of the founding associates of the Surrealist movement); it sets the scene for the tale of a young man driven to the edge of sanity by passion, a theme which also occurs in E A Hoffmann's most well-known tale, 'The Sandman' and was used by Freud to develop the notion of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny).³⁵

The effects of the uncanny are unsettling, producing an uncertainty about the familiar and an anxious intimation of other-worldliness. The uncanny also produces a confounding of identity where the self is doubled, divided or interchanged; while initially conjured as a 'preservation against extinction', the double may come to represent the 'ghastly harbinger of death' (Freud 387). The sense of excess turning into its nemesis is another instance of the paradox of the double and is one of the overriding themes in this novel: when, for example, desire or rationality is enacted and stretched beyond the limit, it turns into its opposite, becoming obscene and even destructive. Desiderio notes that Dr Hoffman, the liberator of desires, seemed to be 'a man without desires' (211). His 'stillness' expresses 'a willed concentration of thought that [...] might indeed rule the world [...] He seemed to have refined himself almost to nothing. He was a grey ghost sitting in a striped coat at a very elegant table'; in his own castle 'nothing could possibly be fantastic', nor was there any possibility of 'wonder' (200). The Minister of Determination, on the other hand, 'the most rational man in the world, [...] was only a witch-doctor in the present state of things...' (24). They are, of course, each other's alter ego or double, each the opposite of their stated

³³ According to Scott Dimovitz, *Doctor Hoffman and New Eve* incorporate a rewriting of the 'psychoanalytic stage theories of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and Jacques Lacan...' ('Narrative Chiasmus' 84).

³⁴ Andre Breton, founder of the Surrealist movement, described desire as the "only master that man must recognize." (see Jennifer Mundy).

³⁵ Freud maintained that 'the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed' and then comes to light again (401); primarily it is associated with the repression of oedipal urges.

manifesto.

Desiderio³⁶ desires and endlessly seeks his double, manifested in the enticing double-gendered character of Albertina (child of Dr Hoffman), in order to safeguard his existence, but he discovers that instead she is the harbinger of death. His passionate search for the woman who is described as ‘a series of marvellous shapes formed at random in the kaleidoscope of desire’ (13) almost results in Desiderio’s ‘direct durationless, locationless progression towards an ultimate state of ecstatic annihilation’ – a quote from Albertina in describing her father’s project of pursuing desire to its ultimate conclusion (202). Here, Carter brings together the psychoanalytic understanding of the uncanny and the surrealist notion of eroticism as expenditure (see Dimovitz, ‘Narrative Chiasmus’ 90).³⁷ The impetus of the novel derives from a type of ‘holy war’ between Dr Hoffman, who aims to objectify desire and thereby control the world, and Desiderio, who is initially the representative of the Minister of Determination and who seeks out Hoffman in order to do battle against his unruly and proliferating passions by asserting reason and rationality. Carter continues her juxtaposition of city (the urban contained by its walls) and the outside (the wilderness) that she began in *Heroes and Villains*: here the city is clearly the symbol of rationality and reason and everything beyond its walls is infected by desire and disruptive passions; but as in the previous novel, the domains cannot remain separate and fissures appear everywhere (12). By the end of the narrative journey, Desiderio returns to the ‘smoking ruins of a familiar city’ (221); he has managed to kill the source of his passion (Albertina) but in so doing he has also killed part of himself.

Desiderio travels through various realms and impersonations – ‘And so I made a journey through space and time...’ (13) – from the capital city where the Minister of Determination has built ‘a vast wall of barbed wire [...] to quarantine the unreality’ (12) perpetrated by Dr Hoffman’s guerrillas, to worlds of funfairs, rivers, erotic castles and African cannibals, and finally to the concealed fortress of Dr Hoffman’s laboratory, each time discarding a previous life and former identity. If the city is the symbol of rationality, Hoffman’s fortress, which is

³⁶ The name Desiderio is Spanish for ‘desired’ but also implies the desire to know, to find out.

³⁷ Bataille noted that the desire for continuity between two beings ‘is chiefly to be felt in the anguish of desire’ and ‘the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess’ (*Eroticism* 19-20).

the epicentre from where desire is harnessed and disseminated, is ironically the place of hyper-rationality. The effect of this spiralling movement through magical and grotesque locations and conditions is that both Desiderio and the reader become increasingly unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy.³⁸ The text works to loosen the reader's preoccupation with the notion of reality by focusing on the quest itself, so that what is real or magical becomes unimportant. By the time Desiderio reaches the land of the centaurs, reality is not granted a particularly central role in the experiences of either the characters or readers. Rather, each world has the specific purpose of interrogating the notion of reality and exploring the fictions that are perpetrated as fixed certainties rather than as produced paradigms that arrange the world in a particular way.

This novel, like Carter's Japanese city of mirrors, proliferates with 'whole galleries of constantly changing appearances, all marvelous but none tangible' (*Fireworks* 11), while the crossing into other realms questions the ontological construction of reality. Carter's creation of other worlds and her concern with the nature of the real aligns her with postmodernism. Rubin Suleiman calls Carter 'a feminist postmodernist' and quotes Brian McHale's analysis that all postmodern novels are preoccupied with the nature of being and the existence of diverse realms of experience: "'What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?'" ('Surrealist Imagination' 117-8). As Suleiman notes, *Doctor Hoffman* is the perfect example of this postmodern genre. In her short story 'A Souvenir of Japan', written a couple of years after *Doctor Hoffman*, Carter draws attention to the postmodern consciousness that refuses to mimic reality; talking of the lovers in the story, the narrator dismisses the realist style of making fiction resemble life: 'But I do not want to paint our circumstantial portraits so that we both emerge with enough well-rounded, spuriously detailed actuality that you are forced to believe in us. I do not want to practice such sleight of hand' (*Fireworks* 11-12). The narrator also questions the relationship between reality and legitimacy: 'how far does a pretence of

³⁸ In regard to successive encounters with different worlds, *The Infernal Desire Machines* most resembles Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. In both novels, the protagonists negotiate various frightening and difficult escapades and inhabit various identities that they discard with each onward move. However, Jasmine's quest is situated in reality – an America of opportunity and legitimate dreams – in which her search for liberation from previous stultifying traditions and inscriptions propels her towards a life of individual freedom.

feeling, maintained with absolute conviction, become authentic?' (ibid.)³⁹ *Doctor Hoffman* not only interrogates reality and appearances, but also tries to unpick the nature of conviction in contributing to the appearance of truth and authenticity.⁴⁰ In an ironic tongue-in-cheek comment, Desiderio notes that, 'At times I even speculated that Hoffman was altogether Prometheus⁴¹ and no Faust at all, for Faust had been content with conjuring tricks while the manifestations around us sometimes looked as though they were formed of authentic flame' (28).

Carter's narrative style in this novel constitutes transgressive textual crossings as she moves in and out of the narrative, engaging with philosophic and literary theories, producing parodies of other genres such as the gothic and the bildungsroman, and setting the prosaic alongside the extraordinary. McHale notes that postmodern writers tend to flatten out both characters and situations in a tactic that he calls 'the rhetoric of contrastive banality': 'the characters' failure to be amazed by paranormal happenings serves to heighten our amazement' (76). Here Carter's writing employs this tactic with the effect of simultaneous shock and seduction as the text is littered with horrendous images in the most matter-of-fact fashion. One perpetrator of the perversely sordid is the paradoxically blind peep-show proprietor, who is appointed by Dr Hoffman to accompany Desiderio on his quest for Albertina and the Doctor. He sets out various and seemingly random tableaux on a daily basis: one scenario displays 'a nursemaid mutilating a baby, toasting him over a nursery fire and then gobbling him up with every appearance of relish' (*Hoffman* 107); in another 'a young woman is trampled to death by wild horses' (ibid). The casualness of presentation of these scenes only serves to highlight their horror. But the displays are also reminiscent of fairy tales or nursery rhymes where horrible things happen (although usually resolved by a happy-ever-after ending).⁴² Carter teases out the logical extension of these grizzly images

³⁹ The notion of identity as performative and truth as variable is taken up by Kurt Vonnegut in *Mother Night*, for example, who dedicates his novel to Mata Hari, dissembler and the ultimate femme fatale, executed for being a spy, but against whom no firm evidence was ever brought. Vonnegut's novel opens with this warning: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be'.

⁴⁰ Moving across different worlds, from India to the USA, Mukherjee also grapples with the issue of authenticity, especially in relation the West's obsession with the 'authentic exotic' discussed earlier.

⁴¹ Prometheus is a Greek deity, the creator of mankind who 'defied the wrath of god to gain the prize of fire and was punished for it' (*Hoffman* 28).

⁴² Warner has suggested that fairy tales deal with terrors and human drives: the plots represent struggles to distinguish enemies from friends, the normal from the monstrous...' (*Beast to the Blonde* 410).

from childhood in the peep show tableaux, showing how myths and mythological figures prop up a particular world-view but also how it is possible to remove the props and change that view.

A more pronounced example of 'contrastive banality' occurs further into the novel when Desiderio and the Count come upon the 'House of Anonymity' (a clear reference to Sade); when they arrive at the house – a typical gothic castle – they are made to don bizarre phallic costumes: 'two pairs of black tights made in such a way that, once we put them on, our genitals remained exposed in their entirety, testicles and all' (129). Dressed in their curious garb, they are shown into the 'Bestial Room' where all the furniture is constituted by live animals; only the humans seem inanimate and have no reflection and therefore no substance. Carter describes a fantastical scene: lions form the sofa, their gigantic heads making up the arm-rests, hyenas lope about as occasional tables, yelping, carrying 'bowls of salted nuts and dishes of stuffed olives on their backs', while others balance 'between their pricked ears a pot of carnivorous flowers or else jars of Japanese porcelain containing tasteful arrangements of bodiless hands' (131). The nonchalance of the writing, the assumed and exaggerated clichés, and the probability of normality that the author sets up and then promptly debunks, produces both humour and shock: 'Japanese porcelain bowls' that should contain tasteful arrangements of flowers instead hold 'tasteful arrangements of bodiless hands'. By estranging the familiar in her employment of 'contrastive banality' – similar to Felski's notion of shock as one modality of the literary experience – Carter enables an examination of those things that are taken for granted in our daily lives.

Desiderio escapes the bizarre Gothic 'Mansion of Midnight', only to get caught up in the watery death/murder of Mary Anne, the piano playing somnambulist; he is rescued from capture by Nao-Kurai of the river people. Suddenly, and in stark contrast, the writing changes from the fabulations of the previous chapter to a description of the Portuguese and then the Dutch colonisation of 'our nation' (whose particularity is never clarified). Despite the anthropological digression which details the evolution of the river and its 'ethnic confusion' through successive colonisations, Carter returns seamlessly to the fictional world of the novel, introducing Desiderio's Indian blood as one of the reasons that the river people take him 'for one of their own' (70). The river has kept the illusory machinations of Dr

Hoffman at bay: 'I soon realized they were entirely immune to the manifestations. If the hawk-nosed, ferocious elders who handled their traditional lore said such a thing was so, then it was so...' (ibid.). But, of course, while the tribe may not be susceptible to the 'conjuring tricks of a cunning landlubber', their world-view is totally determined by the pronouncements of the elders, an ironic commentary on the way that traditional lore is maintained and institutionalised as the prerogative of the male elders of the tribe.

Rivers offer spaces for human self-containment: those who travel them can keep the affairs of land at bay; the ship or river craft becomes a world unto itself uncontaminated by progress or disease.⁴³ The community of Indians living on the river 'in their isolated and entirely self-contained society had developed an absolutely consistent logic which owed little or nothing to the world outside and they sailed from ports to cities to ports as heedlessly as if the waterways were magic carpets of indifference' (*Hoffman* 70). The world of the river people feels most like home for Desiderio, lulling him into a sense of comfort and belonging: 'My life would flow like the river on which I lived. I would become officially an outcaste but, since I had signed my allegiance with the outcastes, I would no longer linger on the margins of life with a delicate sneer on my face...' (80-1). Yet, this idyllic, cast-out world is 'a meandering formalization of life' that offers no freedom of choice: 'I sometimes felt an acrid nostalgia for those ugly streets where nobody cared for me and I cared for nothing' (86). Like the pastoral scenes in *Heroes and Villains*, river life is cloistered and constraining, despite its apparent ease and exposed openness to 'those enormous heavens'; this seemingly perfect world is a fabulist myth for, although it is underpinned by 'community spirit' and a 'lack of self' it produces 'a singular incapacity for being, that sad, self-imposed limitation' (87). Finally, Desiderio manages to escape from this semi-somnambulant world, but only after he discovers that his future father-in-law is plotting to kill and cannibalise him in order to imbibe his knowledge. He learns that the world of 'outcastes' has no power to engage transformation if it remains peripheral, uninvolved and disinterested. The power of the margins is precisely in its ability to resist domestication while simultaneously engaging with and having an impact on the centre.

⁴³ The river here evokes Marlowe's journey and Kurtz's domain in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The river is also the setting for Amitav Ghosh's novel about the opium trade in *Sea of Poppies*. Unlike the ocean which marks voyages in a number of Mukherjee's novels, the river meanders, untroubled by tides, contained by its banks.

Carter's creation of other worlds and other lives facilitates a creative and ironic distance from the real world. Gregory Jusdanis points out that from the fictional universe, 'we are also able to gaze back at the actual one, criticise it, see alternatives, or seek to transform it' (3). A differently arranged world instigates a reappraisal of the old, the traditional and the taken-for-granted, and sets up the space for transformation, enabling the creation of what Felman calls a 'new language'.

3.3 Errant Travellers

Voyages open up worlds and visions of unlimited space, providing an array of possibilities for crossing boundaries and enacting difference. They signify being carried across or transported from one place to another, but also being translated from one thing to another.⁴⁴ The term 'voyage' connotes a process: a passing through an interstice or space-in-between, which is neither here nor there, sometimes a no-man's land, sometimes a liminal or threshold space (see Turner 95-7).⁴⁵ The sense of crossing or being carried across, of being translated and transformed, and of passing through a space or over a threshold, occurs through and in the stories of both Mukherjee and Carter. The interstices they describe, like the margins, are seldom in themselves places of power; yet, both writers contend that they can be changed into spaces that impel acts of power.

A sea journey to a distant and foreign land encompasses the difficulties, risks, and even taboos, of moving from a familiar space to a strange one. It entails the crossing over, sometimes the transgression, of accepted boundaries, the complications of creating or adapting to a new life or persona while being entangled in origins. For caste Hindus, the sea voyage evokes particular terror because the crossing of the 'Kala Pani' or the black waters of the oceans implies a moving away from the Ganges, the river of rebirth, and being set adrift from caste and karma or destiny. In a religion where the idea of rebirth is integral, and

⁴⁴ Salman Rushdie coined the phrase 'translated men' to refer to those (Indian writers) who are 'borne across the world': 'It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained' (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). Whereas Rushdie focuses on the emergent product, I am here looking more closely at the process and space of translation.

⁴⁵ The pilgrim occupies a liminal position; in the pilgrimage the threshold crossed provides a 'different order of experience'; people living on the margins are different from pilgrims in that they have 'no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity' (Turner qtd. in Karen Lawrence 22).

issues of caste override personal and individual desires, the crossing of the Kala Pani is a taboo and represents a disavowal of karmic considerations and the negation of cosmic liberation; more so, if that crossing is spurred by individual choice rather than circumstance. Apart from the physical crossing between two geographical points or borders, voyages may also signify a figurative crossing such as happens in translation: here, the borders may be linguistic, political, cultural or technological, and the space between them may describe symbolic interstices that occur between articulated and silenced history or between coloniser and colonised, or even between the illegitimate and the legitimate.

In at least three of Mukherjee's novels, the voyage becomes a category through which to explore various forms of crossing.⁴⁶ In the seventeenth century voyages were undertaken by European trading companies, linking East and West; *Holder of the World* is set in this time when powerful commercial families and 'free-lance' individuals from England and the New World were engaged in trade with the East. *The Tree Bride* chronicles a period more than a hundred years later, when the East India Company had reached its zenith and India had been colonised by the British.

In discussing the meaning of voyages, I refer primarily to *Counterpath*, the work written by Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, who tackle the meta-issues of travel, and especially the nuances of departure and arrival and the jagged outlines of borders or shores, which are apposite to Mukherjee's notion of the voyage and the 'other' and which parallel some ideas of chaos theory. The etymology of the word *deriver* in French, as in English, means 'to stem from'; but it also means to divert, and, in nautical terms, to drift or wander (similar to the English word *depart*, suggesting a deviation from origins). Malabou says the following about the voyage: '[It is] a continuous and ordered trajectory from an origin to an end. [But also a] boat that is *a la derive* is drifting off course, losing its way. Necessity and chance thus cohabit, in a paradoxically complicitous way, within the same verb' (1). Similarly, *arrival* suggests both the idea of completing the journey, reaching the shore, but also points to what happens unexpectedly, what may 'befall'. Despite these double meanings, in an orthodox conception of the voyage, necessity always takes precedence over chance: the principle of 'arriving' always takes priority 'over whatever detours or disconcerts' (Malabou

⁴⁶ Voyage here means a sea voyage, in particular, a long journey to a foreign place, although it is significant, given Mukherjee's interest in cyber-space, that the term 'voyage' usually refers *either* to sea or space travel.

4). And yet, it is the detour or the disconcerting that frequently contrives to offer the most pivotal experiences to the traveller.

Travel always means leaving a known space and setting out for the unknown; thus, apart from the chance of losing one's way, a voyage also sets up an encounter with foreignness and with 'the other': 'A voyage ordinarily implies that one leaves a familiar shore to confront the unknown [...] Within that circle [of *destination*] there can and must be produced what confers on the voyage its sense and allows it to be distinguished from a simple movement or displacement, namely *the event of the foreigner*' (ibid. 2). 'The event of the foreigner' occurs both for those undertaking the voyage and also for those receiving the traveller.

For Derrida, the orthodox understanding of voyage connotes 'too homogeneous a movement that appears to distance itself without fits or starts from a supposed origin, from a shore, a border, an edge with an indivisible outline' (8). Rather, the shore should be divided 'in its very outline' in order to open oneself fully to the encounter with the other/the foreigner. If we disrupt the 'indivisible border' or the 'deriving' we can permit 'the coming of the other without immediately leading it back to the frontier of the same' (ibid.). (The same applies to the shore which *receives* the foreigner). The holes in the place of origin enable receptivity to the foreignness of the other and also the possibility of the traveller's transformation in the 'arrival'. Derrida's analysis points to the paradox inherent in voyaging which articulates itself through the encounter with foreignness – the encounter requires openness to the other but simultaneously struggles with the need to domesticate the other.⁴⁷

Translation, too, grapples with issues of arrival and domestication whereby the foreign is not encountered but rather subsumed. Translation is the figurative crossing from one culture to another. Amy Leggette notes that it 'is meaning *in process*, in transit, as it is conveyed across the separation of national languages, cultural discourses, geographical and temporal locations, and even idiosyncratic worldviews' (1). But the question of how much of

⁴⁷ Colonialism seemed to have had no doubt about its origins and permitted little capacity to encounter the other; as Mukherjee shows in *The Tree Bride*, the British made no space for the other (in the case of India, the domestic or local paradoxically becomes the 'other') except to subjugate it or hold it at a distance. Mukherjee notes that in 1833 'Macaulay set out to define a range of British attitudes towards India that began with liberal, enlightened self-interest, and ended in sheer contempt' (*Tree Bride* 46).

the original remains or should remain is problematic: 'Translation gets meaning across, but it does not necessarily *arrive*. Indeed, whether it should arrive at all is a complicated question' (ibid.). She notes that translation offers 'a potentially rich encounter of difference, but not if it easily assimilates meaning' (ibid.). The paradox of translation centres on what Lawrence Venuti calls the contradiction of retaining the integrity of the original without it becoming tamed in translation (Venuti 9-10).

In the act of translation, Malabou's 'event of the foreigner' is present not only through language but also through physical and symbolic processes, since an encounter with the unknown or the strange is embedded in the idea of being carried across, being transported and transformed. Mukherjee herself has shuttled between continents, experiencing the personal impact of dislocation and translation. In an interview with Bradley Edwards, she stated: 'I've always written my fiction and my essays through the lens of emigration/immigration, uprooting/re-rooting, India/the New World, and have asked readers to view my writings in the contexts of diaspora and transnationalism, and not in the context of India/Britain, Indian national/postcolonial tensions' (170). Her work focuses primarily on the activity and effects of translation on both the domestic and the foreign, stressing that the encounter with the foreign is not uni-directional; that as much as America, for example, transforms the foreign, it is in turn transformed by it (Mukherjee, 'Imagining' 78).

Two of Mukherjee's novels concerning the significance of voyaging, *Jasmine* and *Holder of the World*, which I discuss below, articulate a disruption of origins, enabling their protagonists to open themselves to the encounter with difference when they reach a foreign shore. With *Jasmine*, Mukherjee disturbs her character's derivation, rupturing her location of departure as a way of opening her, ironically, to the 'otherness' of America: Jasmine, the eponymous heroine crosses the Kala Pani, seeking translation of herself in a new country. The narrative depicts a female voyager who voluntarily travels away from the colonised homeland to open up new frontiers for (her own) development, creating a series of innovative identities for herself.

A 'West-centric' paradigm of voyage tends 'to posit the West as the centre' and contextualises it as the discovery of new lands, trade, colonisation and slavery; primarily, it

is represented as a (male) journey of adventure, exploration and expansionism (see Nyman 9-11). In the following discussion, I examine how Mukherjee challenges this 'West-centric' conception by contesting the direction of travel and by casting her protagonists as female voyagers (see Lawrence 1, 113). In *Jasmine* and *Holder of the World*, as well as in *The Tree Bride*, Mukherjee also recasts the Hindu view of voyage, suggesting that rather than being the path to loss and despair, it instead initiates pathways of fluidity, possibility and reinvention, or what she calls 'translation'. This movement away from origins, and from the boundaries of family and religion, can itself be construed as liberating and as a journey towards the discovery of the self, a quest that indeed converges with Western ideals. In this regard, her ideas closely resemble those of Khal Torabully, the Indo-Mauritian poet – whose forebears crossed from India to Mauritius as indentured labourers – who has remarked that the ocean 'represents a nodal moment of migration, a space for destruction of identity, yet also one of regeneration...' (Carter and Torabully 17). Torabully has commented on the centrality of the sea voyage to the experience of indentured labour who risked the taboo of crossing the Kala Pani, sometimes coerced or forced, sometimes voluntarily, yet who refused to be 'petrified' by the experience of their crossing. For Torabully, the crossing could have an entirely liberatory meaning: 'This ocean, I am convinced, should be explored again and again, as it is a space where diversities meet, clash and emerge in new configurations of humanities' ('Letter to Ghosh').

The story line of *Holder of the World* is a complex tale of past and present, divided into a frame tale and an inset tale (See Newman, 'Spaces' 6). The frame tale concerns Beigh Masters, a Yale graduate and an asset hunter whose thesis focuses on the trade between Salem, Massachusetts and India during the Puritan period (17th and early 18th centuries). Beigh is on a search for anything to do with Mughal India and the 'Salem Bibi', a white woman who became the lover of an Indian prince; the centre of the search focuses on a huge diamond called the Emperor's Tear. Beigh's partner, Venn, an IT specialist who 'animates information', is attempting to recreate a complete database of previous times so that anyone can insert themselves on the 'time-space continuum' (*Holder* 5); Venn is from India⁴⁸ – a neat cross-cultural detail signifying the interconnectedness of worlds in today's

⁴⁸ In 2001, the number of Indians in the USA was about 1.6million, many of whom were in IT (see Chekuri and Muppidi, 2003).

global narratives; (the name also refers to the mathematical term for the overlap of different symbolic worlds as in Venn Diagrams).

The inset tale focuses on the story of Hannah Easton and her translation, via her voyages, first to England and then to the Coromandel Coast in India. Hannah is an orphan, an only child and the daughter of Rebecca, a single widowed woman in Puritan 17th century Brookfield, Salem, who lives alone with her daughter and works the farm left her by her late husband. One night, as Hannah watches, she sees her mother swept away by her Nipmuc lover; Rebecca abandons Hannah, escapes her life of unyielding moral propriety and catapults into another life that whispers of unrestrained sexuality and fulfilment of desire. It is an event that presages Hannah's later travels across cultures and countries. The cabin on the farm, on the edge of the forest, Hannah's first home, represents the frontier (literally) that can be breached, an existence which is loose at its moorings, a life beyond the pale which lets in the 'dirt', either in the form of the savage other (the Nipmuc lover) or 'the fecundity of an unfenced world' (*Holder* 27). It is what Camille Paglia refers to as 'chthonian' nature – coming from the bowels of the earth, 'the long slow suck, the murk, the ooze', the abject or disordered (5-6) – that challenges the authority and sway of Puritan values. After her mother has gone away, Hannah is raised by a religious Puritan family and spends the first twenty two years of her life in Salem, obsessively guarding the secret of her mother's illicit love affair and repressing all memories of her mother's 'demonic possession' (*Holder* 30).

Apart from being the notorious place of the witch trials, Salem became one of the biggest ports of trade with East Indies and China during the eighteenth century (Newman, 'Spaces' 72-3). In 1692, the year of the 'witchcraze', Hannah marries the charming Gabriel Legge, 'compulsive seafarer' and the teller of exotic tales. She encounters Gabriel as he is pulling his dead lover, Hester, from the river, and she witnesses Hester exposed in the violence of death. At this moment, Hannah's life vaults from contentment with 'passionate needlework' to exposing 'herself to the possibilities of life' (*Holder* 69-70). Mukherjee's description of the place and circumstance of the meeting resonates as a fictional refrain from Derrida's use of the term '*arriver*' (literally meaning 'to the river'), denoting arriving at one's destination/destiny; but also being surprised by it, 'by what is anticipated as well as what is

not expected' (Malabou and Derrida 2). Mukherjee describes how Hannah, in a sense, begins – but also arrives at – her first voyage, wandering down to the river, reaching her first destination and her destiny (she marries Gabriel and begins her travels), but also being in the way of 'what happens' or what upsets the arrival: Mukherjee writes, 'she walked to the river because it was her time to be in the path of death, to witness grief' and to grasp life (*Holder* 69).

Hannah and Gabriel sail together to England where Hannah figures as the 'waiting Woman' during Gabriel's voyages to the Orient. Karen Lawrence notes that in western stories and myths about travel, journeys of adventure and discovery are encoded as masculine; man is not only the dominant subject of these stories, but his movement is cast as sexual as he 'crosses boundaries and penetrates spaces'; woman, on the other hand, serves as the 'symbolic embodiment of home ... [or] may signify the foreign itself' and the terrain to be explored (1-2).⁴⁹ According to Barthes, absence (from home) has been always been inscribed in gendered terms: 'Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by Woman [...] woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises).' (*Lover's Discourse* 13-14). In Salem, Hannah narrates her stories through embroidery; but her stitching appears subversive and her step-mother, the good Puritan wife, Susannah Fitch, fears the 'wantonness of spirit' that Hannah's needlework betrays (*Holder* 42). Hannah's presence is always an unsettling reminder of her mother's rebellious ways and the seepage that may 'infect' the community at its borders.

Echoing Penelope, the quintessential waiting woman who weaves her husband's story in the *Odyssey* by day (and unpicks it at night), Hannah has been weaving distant vistas since a small child, but even her woven pictures whisper of far-away places and contravened limits. In England, with Gabriel gone to sea, instead of embroidering, she now writes letters, tends her garden and heals the sick; she covers wounds, sews and patches skin, reconstructs the flesh (just as she has covered over the wound of her lost mother and reconstructed her

⁴⁹ Lawrence discusses the problems of the travel 'plot' for women and cites a number of writers who have dealt with the difficulty of women's travel writing avoiding the 'patriarchal discourse and myth' (17-19). Mary Jacobus considers whether male modes of writing can articulate 'female oppression and desire' (27-8); the same problem confronts Angela Carter in rewriting fairy tales.

story of loss).⁵⁰ Hannah remains the symbol of 'home' and home-making while her husband travels, but the boundaries of home have become unstable and unsettled through her healing work which brings her into contact with the outside world; with her origins in Salem, the exemplary city of witches, and her extraordinary capacity to heal, she evokes a transgressive mystique: 'Some said she possessed uncanny powers, the sort associated with conjurers and devils' (*Holder* 83).

Finally, Hannah refuses the discourse of absence and voyages with Gabriel to Fort St Sebastian on the Coromandel Coast. She becomes the adventuring subject of her designs rather than the mere storyteller. Her own derivation is from a 'jagged outline', born from a wayward mother who flouts convention. Like Penelope who is 'Weaver and unweaver, constructor and deconstructor, the woman as traveler and storyteller might be said to break the law of boundaries', especially when the stories told are those of adventure rather than domesticity (Lawrence 10). Beginning with embroidering/narrating splendid 'uttermost shores' in her samplers (*Holder* 44), Hannah, like Mukherjee, becomes not only the creator of tales of travel, but the traveller herself, disrupting conventions and disturbing the limits.

In a comprehensive critique of *Holder of the World*, Judie Newman argues that Mukherjee manages to stitch together various connections between modern day America and its mercantile past which is steeped in Indian-American trade (see 'Spaces In-Between'). Nathaniel Hawthorne's canonical text, *The Scarlet Letter*, which is the pre-text of *Holder of the World*, is itself immersed in a period of mercantile transactions between Puritan colonial Salem and East India, and Hawthorne's paternal grandfather and his mother's family – the Mannings – were seafarers involved in the Salem trade. ('Manning' is one of the names that Mukherjee 'translates' from *The Scarlet Letter*: in *Holder of the World*, Hester Manning is the name of Hanna Easton's best friend; Hester is also the name of Hawthorne's protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter*). Yet, as Newman points out, Hawthorne 'deliberately distances himself from the mercantile trade of Salem [...] in order to leapfrog the reader over the years of India trade to a tale of Puritans' (Newman 77). She contends that this 'leapfrog' movement leaves 'a space in-between which Mukherjee sets out to fill' (ibid.).

⁵⁰ In a poem titled 'Mending', Ingrid de Kok brings together images of stitching, suturing and storytelling (qtd. in Samuelson 231).

Taking up this 'space in-between', Mukherjee elucidates how the cultural authority of a past India 'translates' into cultural capital in present-day America: Elihu Yale (mentioned in *Holder* 129),⁵¹ after whom Yale College is named, was an employee of the East India Company in the early 1700s; he was also an independent trader and ruthless competitor who did not brook any intervention in his activities, so that the original funding of Yale College – one of the most prestigious academic institutions in present-day USA (and in the world as rankings routinely show) – came from the fortunes of a man who made his money 'by a combination of legitimate trade and more questionable activities' (Newman 80). Beigh Masters, the narrator of *Holder*, is also a graduate of Yale College. And, it seems, Mukherjee, like her narrator, Beigh, has 'a hunger for connectedness, a belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography' (11), a conviction also fundamental to Hinduism which Mukherjee avows. The belief in a connectedness across cultures and continents finds expression in the figure of Hannah.

In 1695, the four-hundred-ton East Indiaman arrives in the Bay of Bengal with Hannah and Gabriel on board. Hannah's wandering (and assumed wayward) nature announces itself almost immediately: ignoring the 'steadying hand' of the Chief Factor, Cephus Prynne, Hannah disembarks from the small boat carrying her from the ship 'to the sandy strip that passed for a beach' (107). As the unpacking of cargo proceeds, she wanders off, strolling away, 'towards clots of fishermen's children', but she is immediately admonished for her waywardness by Prynne, 'Dear Lady, do not stray' (109); the language is deliberately ambiguous and alludes not just to her wandering away but also to her potential promiscuity.⁵² In confirmation of this allusion, the Chief Factor, thinking he is alone with Hannah as he shows her around her lodgings, grabs her and kisses her forcibly, uttering in guttural sounds, 'Saucy wench...' (121-2). Prynne signifies the colony's patriarchal moral code (which also reflects that of the British Empire); in this context, Hannah's wandering away beyond the circle of Company factors and employees, towards the foreign, imparts an air of sexual permissiveness: her straying implies that, while her spirit will need 'curbing' (107), her body is available for the taking. According to Lawrence 'the link between movement and straying from the path is as old as the Bible', but women carry additional

⁵¹ 'Then midway through Elihu Yale's term, in June of 1690 [...] the *Golden Bliss* [...] had docked' (*Holder* 129).

⁵² Stray means to wander off, but also to go in the wrong direction, to journey away from one's true path; 'to wander away, esp. from control, or from the right way' (Chambers English Dictionary, Cambridge, 1988).

baggage: their wanderings connote waywardness and promiscuity, with the 'unrestrained circulation of women [...] cast in sexual terms' (16, 29); such movement is likely to be viewed as not only sexually promiscuous but also transgressive. And Hannah indeed evinces the characteristics of the unruly woman: taking pleasure in the 'world's variety', she 'was still alert to the power of the jungle. She did not fear the unknown or unexplored' (104).⁵³

The voyage by ship⁵⁴ is just the first stage in the travel trajectory for Hannah: beyond the ship lies 'the event of the foreigner' with the interior of the foreign land itself represented as female, also promiscuous, also available for the taking. Sandra Ponzanesi comments that 'colonial ideological discourses effectively coordinated the voyeuristic representations of the black female as both inherently primitive-and-sexually-available and menacing-and-dangerous' (165). As Hannah steps off the ship, she too becomes aligned with the dark interior/black female: her wandering suggests as much. Her friendship with Bhagmati, her Indian servant, later in the novel, is further confirmation of this alignment. Yet Mukherjee appropriates this colonial representation of the interior (passive female/other) waiting to be tamed and vanquished and turns it into the seductive and powerful feminine. The foreign interior, like a wanton woman, may engulf rather than submit to all those who approach it. In Mukherjee's work the 'dark interior' becomes a space that asserts agency rather than passivity, it vanquishes the western traveller rather than being subjugated by him, and it may rebirth him/her in the image of the foreign 'other' – either as the Salem Bibi in the case of Hannah or as John Mist in *The Tree Bride*.⁵⁵ Similarly, Hannah, now aligned with the 'dark interior', refutes a passive and sexually available figuration: she moves beyond the reach of the colony's code and becomes an agent of her own rebirth within her newly adopted culture.

In *The Tree Bride*, Mukherjee again subverts the colonial discourse of the civilising conquest. John Mist (previously known as Jack Snow, 'the Betterman Trust Orphan'), having arrived in

⁵³ Armstrong and Tennenhouse note that in *Jane Eyre* – their model for the assertion of a different kind of power – Jane makes 'something out of nothing' in that each act of violence done to her articulates her sense of self and reinforces her power (2). Hannah experiences a similar sense of subjective power in her expression of her needs and desire.

⁵⁴ In this novel, the voyage itself is dealt with in little detail other than that it took 'eight months aboard a medium-sized cargo ship, around the Cape, dodging pirates, weathering storms, eating third mate's rations' (103).

⁵⁵ It is interesting to compare this with Carter's *Passion of New Eve* where the male character, Evelyn, is rebirthed as Eve also by entering another zone or space; but Evelyn's re-birth cuts across gender rather than race or class, and deals more explicitly with issues of gender and violence.

India as the Captain's assistant on an East Indiaman ship, murders his nemesis, Todd-Nugent, an East India Company director, and travels 'into the encroaching forest and the dark Bengali night' (144), vowing never to speak English again nor to wear English clothes: 'He felt reborn [...] the boy he'd been lay buried under a mound of language he no longer spoke' (137). This journey into the engulfing interior becomes his rite of passage not only into manhood but also into the world of the foreign 'other'. Significantly, it is primarily through the abjuring of English, the language of the colonisers (the 'symbolic realm' of the father in Lacanian terms), that Jack Snow literally and figuratively translates himself into a 'British Hindoo', John Mist; he finds himself 'a clearer thinker and better negotiator in his adopted language' (138). After thirty eight years, he re-emerges from 'self-imposed anonymity', transformed by his journeys into the heart of Bengal and across the length and breadth of India, and all that is recorded of him is that 'he traveled' and 'was taken for Indian wherever he went' (148-9). He is re-birthed by the 'dark interior' and becomes an iconic freedom fighter and resister to British rule, a nabob, who even has an Indian village named after him: Mishtigunj in the Sunderbans.

In *Holder of the World*, Hannah as a white colonial woman traveller has a complicated relationship with 'colonialism's other' (Lawrence 18) – she is a representative of the colonising power but subjected to patriarchal constraints and therefore the 'other' of masculine control. It is through this character that Mukherjee succeeds in re-writing not only the story of cultural and racial confrontation, but also the story of gender conflicts within and across different cultures. Hannah begins to change on her first voyage from America to England when she travels with Gabriel; by dint of circumstance she is left there to lead an independent life in his long absence, working with injuries and healing of the community. Her voyage and arrival in India occasion further alteration. But her real transformation – her transgressive crossing – occurs *in* India itself some time later. She misses her passage back to England because she feels terror at the 'premise of her return' (*Holder* 215) and she then weathers the eye of a tempestuous storm: the smashing of ships, the drowning of sailors and the loss of her husband. She is literally thrown downstream in the midst of a cyclone and cast adrift — at the mercy of a foreign country and a foreign people – and set down in an alien place and unfamiliar life. Together with her servant, she is saved from drowning by the Hindu prince, Rajah Jadav Singh, and she begins a new life in

Panpur Palace (215-8). While the storm that casts Hannah into this other life is both literal and figurative, her commitment to India is evident earlier: when Gabriel sails back to England on a trade voyage, Hannah remains behind since '[s]he was not ready to entomb herself in Morpeth or London. [...] The Coromandel had started something as immense as a cyclone deep inside her body and mind. To let Gabriel go was also to let herself expand' (163).

In the colonies, the open friendship between a factor's wife and her servant, and ultimately their equalisation of rank, was at odds with the realities of colonial life; in the case of Hannah and Bhagmati, Mukherjee consciously reframes the relationship, pointing to the possibility of a friendship between women which cuts across race and class. But she also sketches the ambivalent status that white women in the colonies occupied and the difficulties they faced: many of the men employed by the East India Company took Indian women as mistresses or bibis – oftentimes these were servants in the household – and the bibis frequently bore the factors' children and were shown more affection than the wives. The Company wives dealt with this issue through 'the code of female accommodation' (that is, appearing to please as a way of holding control) and rendering the bibis both invisible and satanic: 'Bibis were simultaneously beneath notice, no more than cute little pets [...], and devious temptresses...' (131).⁵⁶ The passionate romance between Gabriel Legge, Hannah's husband, and Zeb-un-nissa,⁵⁷ 'his black bibi', depicts the humiliation of the colonial wives: 'It was she [Zeb-un-nissa] who had put on her fine cream-colored silks – gift of Gabriel on the occasion of their first son's birth – and visited Gabriel's home, to test the fortifications of servant defense and white wife against her, and found them laughably weak' (195-6). Hannah's discovery of her husband's fervent affair with Zeb-un-nissa throws her into turmoil, resulting in her abandonment of Gabriel and her resolve to sail for London. But 'Destiny was ensnaring her life into Roorconda's larger history', which would lead to her immersion in a Hindu world and her reliance on Bhagmati as friend and guide (197).

As Mukherjee suggests, Hannah's voyage to the Coromandel Coast, unlike Gabriel's, is deeply significant: 'She knew she'd been transported to the other side of the world but the

⁵⁶ In the next chapter I comment on how the Lady of Lucknow, the eponymous protagonist of Mukherjee's story, is viewed as 'a shadow- temptress [...] from a pokey little outpost' by her American lover's wife (*Darkness* 27).

⁵⁷ Zeb-un-Nissa is an historical figure: an intellectual and poet, she was the daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb.

transportation was more than mere “conveyancing” [...] she called the trip and her long residence in India, her “translation” (104). Mukherjee’s deliberate use of the word ‘translation’ announces Hannah’s openness to the other, her capacity to transform from Puritan wife, to wife of a pirate, a renegade outsider, and ultimately to Salem Bibi, an outcast in the Hindu caste system. Yet this last translation, while appearing to demean Hannah, is paradoxically empowering – ‘a bibi had the right, the duty, to live for love [...] a bibi had the power to laugh in the face of a *firangi* wife’ (254) – and she enacts her power in a Judith-like scenario. First she kills Morad Farah – ‘most ruthless commander [...] a mercenary Moor from the Barbary coast’ (235) in order to save her lover, the Rajah; then, like Judith,⁵⁸ who entered the enemy camp to save her people, she enters the camp of Emperor Aurangzeb in order to bargain for an end to the siege of the Rajah’s fort. Unlike Judith, Hannah does not succeed in her mission; however, although the emperor destroys the Raja and his kingdom, he grants Hannah a repeated audience and spares her life.

In the figure of Hannah, Mukherjee refutes and dismisses the colonial paradigm: ‘With Jadav Singh, she’d finally accepted how inappropriate it was in India – how fatal – to cling to Europe’s rules’ (234). But for Hannah’s translation to be adept she must retain something of her origins. According to Venuti, translation should not erase the difference of the source text and make it appear ‘untranslated’ because then it has become totally assimilated, producing a conservative effect (9). Walter Benjamin points to the predicament of the original ‘living on’: while the original depends on translation for its dissemination, it also contains something that cannot be carried through in translation (71). When this essence is suppressed, however, the original becomes domesticated to bolster local language and culture (Venuti 9). In this sense, John Mist’s translation in *The Tree Bride* is a failure: there is nothing left of his origins when he re-emerges from his travels. Hannah, however, represents the ‘best’ work of translation: as the ‘Salem Bibi’ she always retains something of her heritage. It is fitting that Mukherjee positions a white woman as the figure of transgressive translatability, precisely because of her dissident beginnings – her ‘foreignness’ – in the eyes of patriarchy and puritanism.

⁵⁸ Judith, a respected and beautiful widow, entered the camp of Holofernes, the Assyrian general, in an attempt to end to the Assyrian siege of the Israelites; she pretends to seduce Holofernes and when he is sufficiently drunk she beheads him. The Book of Judith is excluded from the canonical Bible and marginalised to the Apocrypha, suggesting patriarchy’s difficulty with this story of woman’s power (see Margaret Stocker 13).

In a skillful twist, which engages with the confrontation between gender and colonialism, Mukherjee shows that Hannah is not only aligned with but also seduced by the foreign 'other'; first by Bhagmati, her one-time servant, who teaches her a new language and an acceptance of Destiny (*Holder* 197), and then by Jadav Singh with his 'gentle-looking face [...] the eyes so large and luminous, the smile unforced' (225). With knowing irony, Mukherjee describes Jadav Singh as exemplifying all the stereotypical characteristics that feminise the Orient in the eyes of the West: his skin 'had been massaged and pampered since birth [...]. He walked, and talked, with a kind of softness that belied the deeds of a warrior. [...] He invited her to musical evenings – he played the flute...' (227). Yet, it is he, rather than Gabriel with all his machismo and heroics, who first ignites Hannah's sexual passion, and eventually she comes to pity Gabriel 'for never having known her' (237).

Nonetheless, it is evident that Hannah can neither be domesticated nor seamlessly integrated into the host culture even though she has never distanced herself from it in the way that her compatriots, the 'other Englishwomen', have done. (In fact, in a mordant gesture to the colonisation of India by the British, Hannah continuously points out that she is not English but hails from the New World). In the court of Jadav Singh, Hannah truly encounters and is enriched by the difference of the 'other': she has accepted the role of *bibi* to Jadav Singh and has relinquished 'Europe's rules' (234). Yet, in the heat of the battle between the Hindu prince and the Muslim warlord, she cannot forsake her Western values: she prevents Bhagmati from killing herself and she saves Jadav from death, thereby polluting his caste. She also comes up hard against the power and intransigence of Jadav Singh's mother, the old Queen, who believes that her son's destiny is to avenge his father's death, to lead his people into battle with the Grand Mughal and to die doing so: Hannah 'saw that her native New World forgetfulness would be forever in conflict with Old World blood-memory' (253), that her mind-set would never grasp the significance of karma as superseding the significance of life. (It is also a small pointed reminder from Mukherjee that Asia, not Europe, was at this time the 'Old World').

In this novel, then, Mukherjee manages to re-situate notions of gender, race and class; she alters the statuses of the European woman and her Indian servant and she inscribes Jadav Singh as a prince, warrior and passionate lover of a 'firangi' woman. Hannah, always simmering with a transgressive refusal to obey patriarchal requirements – what some may

term her monstrous waywardness – fully establishes her own power in the fight to save her lover and in her subsequent resettlement in Salem. Bhagmati too has transformed, changing names and positions several times, and in the process has gained a sense of her own potency: as the bibi of Henry Hedges, a Company factor, she had been ‘craved [...] with the urgency of an addiction. [...]. When a man craves you like that, you feel very powerful’ (224). Bhagmati becomes much more than servant to Hannah; she becomes her friend and a symbol of Hannah’s lost mother. In the end, unlike Hannah’s mother, Bhagmati sacrifices her life for Hannah and saves the precious jewel, the largest diamond ever seen, and the ‘one stark symbol of power’ of Emperor Aurangzeb (261).

Both Hannah and Bhagmati refuse fixedness and repudiate gender constraints; this is the key to their potency. Like everything else on the Coromandel coastline, they too were in ‘flux’: ‘The survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules’ (234). In realising that Bhagmati has ‘a vital life, distinct from waiting on *firangi* households’, Hannah has a moment’s sharp awareness of the sense of human equality, which echoes her mother’s choices (222). Crossing the frontier in order to encounter the foreign ‘other’, making this voyage both literally and metaphorically, is what constitutes Hannah’s errant and powerful move; her travel, her translation and her acknowledgement of the equality of the ‘other’ are fundamentally transgressive.⁵⁹

Hannah’s return to Salem with her child who has been fathered by Jadav Singh is not the return of the original Hannah. Mukherjee’s story, which carries the traces and residues of the original, rewrites Hawthorne’s founding text, *The Scarlet Letter*, and reimagines the founding of the American nation in the context of ‘colour’ and miscegenation (the tracing of the descendants of Thomas Jefferson, writer of the American Declaration of Independence and founding father of the American nation, mirrors this ‘colouring’). Megan Obourn notes that *Holder of the World* is a ‘distantiating deconstruction of American national identity’, one that questions the notion of a permanent or coherent national identity and its investment in origins and ‘real history’ (140). Hannah and her daughter Pearl become the true mongrelised mothers of the nation: ‘Pearl Singh, born in 1701 somewhere in the South Atlantic on the long voyage home, saw in her old age the birth of this country, an event she had spent a lifetime advocating, and suffering for’ (*Holder* 284). It is the rebel mother then –

⁵⁹ See Venuti: ‘Translations can have conservative or transgressive effects’ (9).

the one that has travelled and transgressed and intermingled with the foreign other – who advocates for freedom and bears the seed of the new nation.⁶⁰

In the above novel – and in *The Tree Bride* – Mukherjee valorises India and its interior, not just as a place of crossing and transformation, but as a place of possibility for a more exemplary level of existence. Her writing contravenes stereotypical stories of colonial travel by cutting across class and gender and by giving the foreign ‘other’ (place as well as people) agency and power over the male colonial traveller. What sets Mukherjee’s travel writing apart from Western travel writers in these two novels is that, whereas most colonial travellers incorporate return in their conception of voyage, neither Hannah nor John Mist desire or intend to return – thus home for them becomes a vacant term. (In the end, Hannah does make the return voyage to Salem but because of ‘destiny’ rather than desire). In this sense, although the destination of their voyages is reversed, they most resemble the exiles and immigrants whose diasporic condition focuses on travel without return and who tend to journey from the colonised periphery to the colonial centre (see Mohammed Hafizi 10). As Torabully has noted, home was frequently a place from which indentured workers had fled, though often not willingly or happily, and the voyage came to symbolise simultaneously a route of escape and one of pain,⁶¹ so that, in the diaspora, ‘home’ took on the colour of an imaginary ideal. Not so for John Mist and the Salem Bibi who become true immigrants with all the positive connotations that the term has for Mukherjee; for them home merely represents constraints and hardship. The characters of John Mist and the Salem Bibi give Mukherjee the opportunity to show the speciousness of the ‘imaginary home’ and the importance of appropriating the host country as the real home. In their embrace of their new worlds Mukherjee sees liberation; in nostalgia she sees captivity.

The voyage from India across the ocean – the transgression of the taboo of the Kala Pani – is inscribed as an opportunity to be set free, to cast off the old self and rename and reformulate oneself in an image of one’s own making. This is particularly true of Jasmine. Hannah’s travels to India from Puritan Salem and her immersion in Hindu culture constitute

⁶⁰ Compare Samuelson’s citation of the story of Malintzin, the mistress of Hernan Cortes during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, who is ambivalently hailed as ‘traitorous translator’ and ‘first mother’ of the new nation (18-19). Mukherjee reverses this split in regard to the founding of America: as mothers (or wombs), Hannah and her daughter appear traitorous (they carry the ‘taint of voluptuaries’ blood’) but their tongues are ultimately noble (*Holder* 285).

⁶¹ See also Amitav Ghosh: *Sea of Poppies* for a description of the issues that voyagers struggled with.

another form of transgressive crossing; with subversive irony, Mukherjee, the Hindu writer, tells the tale of New World voyaging, suggesting that India (the Old World) too has liberating and restorative possibilities. Indeed, the narrator specifically notes that the 'ocean passage made [Hannah] free of the watchful God who punished every venal sin with droughts, drownings and crippings' (*Holder* 89). In leaving all that is familiar, she is set on a transformative journey to 'a world whose simplest rules about the saintly and the villainous were unknown to her' (225); here 'the old Salem virtues such as duty and compassion' are subsumed in her embrace of a new life (229). These journeys of rupture told by Mukherjee are contrapuntal to the Western masculinist meaning of voyage and to the patriarchal idea of nationhood: the female traveller finds herself in a place that has openings for the discovery of self and other worlds through being open to the encounter with the other; she also has the power to unsettle an existing order and reconstitute it, or even participate in the birth of a new nation.

For Mukherjee and Carter crossings constitute the transgression of settled spaces, whether these are the securities of literary conventions or the comforts of 'home'; crossings represent liberation from what is easy, familiar and domestic. Both authors take risks and break out from stereotypical constraints – whether of narrative form, as in Carter's transgressive rewriting of familiar tales, or of content, as in Mukherjee's revisioning of voyage – in order to release the energy and power inherent in forging new paths. They dare to cross into hazardous territory and uncharted waters to create innovative forms, changed identities and other worlds, as well as female figures who are unusual, edgy and willful, and who may, therefore, be construed as 'monstrous'.

4. MONSTROUS WOMEN

4.1 Monstrosity and Power

Those who are 'other' signal a dread: they represent matter that is out of place, unknown, mysterious and therefore fearful, but also seductive because mystery demands unraveling. The encroachment of the 'other' signals danger, contamination and damage: she therefore becomes not only the harbinger of threat but the thing that is menacing in itself.¹ In this section, I argue that Mukherjee and Carter show how woman is constructed as monstrous through her alignment with certain positions or behaviour that society views as 'other'; by espousing violence and sexual desire and exhibiting behaviour that transgresses codes of normative femininity, she is located as stranger or freak.

The first section of this chapter deals with the way the stranger is framed in the texts, especially in Mukherjee's work; frequently the stranger is constituted as monstrous or as a freak, and woman is aligned with both these positions. In Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, the author parodies the pejorative label by deliberately drafting her boisterous protagonist as a 'freak'. Mukherjee and Carter show that while the labelling of women as monstrous is intended to devalue them, it can in fact present opportunities for empowerment. The female characters in their work evolve in regard to their relationship with hegemony; they and the texts move from ambivalence around how to challenge their subordinate positions to embracing otherness and difference as capacitating. In the second section of this chapter, I discuss how the authors take up particular aspects of female monstrosity in the forms of violence and blatant sexuality – as avenging females and wanton women – to recuperate what Maria Warner has called the patriarchal myth of the 'ungovernable female appetite' in order to overturn patriarchal structures and re-construct their monstrous women as figures of agency and strength (*Managing* 11).

In modernity, Freud articulated the dread of women as based on blood contamination and fear of threshold situations which the sexual acts represents. But Western accounts of

¹ I refer to Mary Jacobus in my introduction who notes that Freud moves from establishing that woman represents 'psychical danger' to becoming an actual source of malignancy (116).

women's monstrosity go back to myths of ancient Greece. In a recent study of Scylla, the ancient Greek sea monster, sketched as monstrous female, Marianne Hopman notes that in some classical texts Scylla embodies 'a triple metaphor of the voracious mouth, threatening genitals, and engulfing straits' (18). In these texts, the three aspects are linked through the visual and literary symbols of the dog, the female and the sea, all of which express either the horror of being consumed or engulfed, and specifically by the untamed nubile wild woman (10, 140). Thus, Hopman notes, the anxiety around the monstrous female in classical texts is primarily about being enticed, losing one's way, being overcome, and ultimately forfeiture of one's very being. The metonymic symbols of engulfment are noteworthy: the voracious mouth (of the dog) represents at its extreme the monstrous female as desirous of flesh for survival; but it also signifies the hungry hole (the lack) that consumes but can never be filled to satiety. This is linked to the image of the *vagina dentata* (the threatening genitals) which represent the castrating power of the feminine.² The symbol of the sea too denotes what is mysterious, unfathomable and fatally overwhelming.

In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter expresses that the womb, 'this place of ultimate privilege', signified by 'the unguessable reaches of the sea', is what men crave and fear: it represents both the place of comfort before birth and the place of coldness after death. She argues that 'the curious resemblance between the womb and the grave lies at the roots of all human ambivalence towards both the womb and its bearer' (108).³ The Hopman study reveals that the intimate relationship between femaleness, monstrosity and power has a long history in Western iconography. But it is also interesting that Mukherjee appropriates the image of the dog from its 'pejorative connotations' in her conceptualisation of mongrelisation as the 'coming together' of different people, generating a creative energy that contributes something new to society (Interview with Edwards 164). Here then, the dog becomes the symbol of regeneration rather than destruction.

That the monstrous can be recuperated as an image of power is implied in the connotations of the demonic, meaning 'evil spirit' in the Latin and 'divine power, guiding spirit' in the

² The myth of the toothed vagina (*vagina dentata*) that can castrate or emasculate is found across Western, Eastern (Hinduism and Shintoism) and African folklore, having some basis in reality because 'every penis is made less in every vagina' (Paglia *Sexual* 47). She also notes Scylla wears a belt of 'voracious dog mouths' symbolising 'a gnawing female appetite' (52).

³ In typical Carter style, however, she quickly undercuts this statement by adding that in non-Western religions, the imagery of the final resting place is not the grave but fire (*Sadeian* 108).

Greek.⁴ The combination of these twinned meanings, that is, the evil spirit and divine power, is historically as well as culturally evident in Western and Eastern religious structures. In the figure of Satan, divine power and its alter ego, the demonic, are inseparable. In tales of Hindu gods, Shiva is the god of sexual power, yet he also wanders around graveyards in abnegation of life, while his consort Parvati (as an emanation of Shakti, meaning power) is life giving and nurturing, but also death dealing and destructive (Kirk 213). The figure of the female monster is echoed in the image of Kali, the Hindu goddess of fertility and death, with her black tongue hanging out her mouth, dripping blood; in Mukherjee's stories of avenging females, the Hindu goddesses are central. In an interesting intersection between the two authors, Carter uses the figure of Kali as the symbol to describe Durand, 'the queen of all androgynes' in *The Sadeian Woman*. She describes Kali as 'the Terrible Mother [...] who stands for both birth and death, and not only destruction but Nature's cruel indifference to suffering' (115). In Greek mythology too there is a clear twinning of power and the demonic in the figure of the Gorgon, the female monster, who is represented as powerful and terrifying. Gorgons, of whom Medusa is one, are of monstrous appearance, with snakes for hair and bloodthirsty tongue hanging out. Their power is literally petrifying: Medusa has the power to kill merely by being looked at (she turns the male Gaze back upon itself, fixing the gazer forever in stone rather than herself being fixed by the male Gaze, as women generally are). In *Nights at the Circus* the manipulation of the gaze becomes one of the key tropes for Fevvers' power.

The etymology of the word 'monstrous' derives from the Latin *monstrum* which gives rise to two verbs, *monstrare* 'to show' and *monere* 'to warn or portend', but also refers to a divine omen or message of the gods (Ng 4). In Western mythology, female demons are always shown in their monstrous appearance; yet a different coding seems to apply to male figures: Satan, for example, is never the subject of such intense visual scrutiny. This tendency to focus on the appearance of the monstrous female continues even in the present day with detailed photographs of transgressive 'monstrous' women splashed across the media and internet sites (see Sjoberg and Gentry 67). The monstrous, as a manifestation of danger, reflects the etymology of the word: it is that which is too hideous to hide and, as Mary Russo claims, it also demonstrates itself overtly and cannot help but show its more than

⁴ See Concise OED (11th ed.2004): 'daemon' from the ancient Greek belief, meaning a divinity.

manifest difference: ‘for the modern spectator/interpreter, woman as the object of critical scrutiny has no longer anything to hide or to reveal’ (6). The ambivalence around ‘woman’ – as a source of the divine, as overwhelming presence and the portent of danger – devolves into her being marked as monstrous as a way of circumscribing her impact.

The monstrous woman appears in many guises, but always as a transgressor of normative images of femininity which assert that women’s femininity (and honour) needs safeguarding, a position which states that women are vulnerable and unable to protect themselves. In short, normative femininity presents woman in her ideal form as the subservient, virginal princess of fairy tales, a myth that Carter and Mukherjee vehemently expose and debunk. Margaret Atwood claims that the notion that femininity needs safeguarding is not only the legacy of patriarchy but also emanates from a strand of feminism which sees women as ‘essentially other, but better: [...] birth-giving rather than death-dealing, gardeners rather than warriors’ (137). Such assertions claim special privileges for women on the basis of their moral superiority, but also because of their ‘lamb-like nature’, their vulnerability and passivity (*ibid.*). Yet these views continue to keep women in their place, deprive them of agency and refute their capacity to assert themselves and to take charge. They are views that are antithetical to the work of Carter and Mukherjee who, in different ways, insist on women’s capacity to be ‘tigerish’, to assert their strength and their psychical and sexual needs and desires. Carter and Mukherjee play with the idea of the monstrous as a figure of power and horror, a figure that is ambiguous and ambivalent and inherently transgressive. The following sections focus precisely on the monstrous woman who is in control of her appearance and behaviour, who turns strangeness into strength and displays violence and sexuality at her own behest rather than in the service of male domination.

4.2 Stranger, Freak, Woman

4.2.1 Signifying Otherness: an Introduction

This section begins with an examination of the categories of stranger and freak from a theoretical perspective, and shows how referents from these categories are embedded in the term ‘woman’. I then focus on certain texts of Carter and Mukherjee to illustrate how the authors reframe and reposition these categories, including the term ‘woman’ within a

discourse of otherness and power. I have grouped together the terms stranger, freak, and woman because each represents a sign of a 'threshold situation', signifying a potential erosion of boundaries, which Freud noted gave rise to 'lurking anxiety' (a discussion of which ensues below). Embedded in the estranged sign of these terms is the sense of being similar yet not the same, and therefore being in between or at a point of crossing or wanting to cross; for example, the stranger is 'almost the same, but not quite'; the 'other' approximates the dominant or the native host but always falls short (cf. Bhabha 122). Likewise, woman is similar to man, but not quite – she is lacking, a 'lack' that can be traced as far back as Aristotle (see De Beauvoir 3) and which is embedded in psychoanalytic theorising (in particular, Freud's notion of penis envy and anxiety of castration)⁵ as well as in public consciousness. A study in 2001, for example, on stereotyping 'showed that housewives, disabled people, blind people, so-called retarded people, and the elderly were all judged as being similarly incompetent', indicating that ultra-normative feminine positions, that is, the ones represented by the 'regular housewife', are viewed no differently to the negative stereotype of disability (Thomson, 'Integrating Disability' 6- 7).

'Woman as Other', existing only in relation to Man, who is primary and original, was first discussed by Simone De Beauvoir in her groundbreaking feminist study, *The Second Sex*: 'Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' (3-4). In rejecting the Freudian notion of women's dependent subjectivity,⁶ Beauvoir maintained that women were normalised to be passive and accepting: 'women's desire to please keeps them from daring to "irritate, explore, explode"' and when they refuse this position, as with the female writer, for instance, they are regarded as 'scandalous' (Gray BR6). Throughout this chapter, I look at the way that 'dissident' women who refuse to be constrained by society's rules are cast as strangers or 'freaks' in the novels of Carter and Mukherjee, and how they reposition this framing to break through barriers, unleash their own power, and thereby shake the very foundations of normative culture.

⁵ See Emily Zakin on 'Psychoanalytic Feminism' for a detailed discussion of Freud and various female psychoanalysts.

⁶ Karen Horney, an early psychoanalyst, broke away from Freud to argue that woman had her own independent existence apart from her relation to man and in particular in the expression of her sexuality.

While Carter continuously sought to expose patriarchy's positioning of woman as 'other', she rejected the notion of woman as victim, arguing that 'no daughter of mine should ever be in a position to be able to write: BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I SAT DOWN AND WEPT, [...]. (BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I TORE OFF HIS BALLS would be more like it, I should hope.)' (qtd. in Sage, *Angela* 32). According to Lorna Sage, Carter 'feared and loathed' the image of the suffering woman and regarded 'any strategy that valorises women as outsiders' as suspect and as a way of legitimising the margins as the place for women (*Flesh*, 32); rather, she figured 'otherness and outsiderhood' in a multiplicity of settings and plots, occupied by both genders, and she spoke a language 'with an interest in power – not only the oppressor's power, but its own, her own' (ibid. 32-34).

Both Carter and Mukherjee refuse a mythologised status for women that reinforces passivity or invokes an essentialist feminine nature. Instead, they take the deprecatory associations of the categories 'stranger', 'woman' and 'freak' and reframe them into modes of capacitating resistance and engaging power. In their work, the stranger/woman/freak returns 'from demonised other to challenging presence [...] by appropriating and negotiating, or inverting and displacing, just those terms which relegated him or her to that state in the first place' (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 225-6). Although the figure of the 'other' is ambivalent in Mukherjee's early works, it becomes increasingly positively charged over the development of her oeuvre: at first, it is simultaneously resonant with the demeaning prejudices associated with the 'other' and with the empowering urge to action, often motivated by revenge and therefore leading to self-destructive and violent outbursts (see, for example, *Wife*, *Darkness* and *Leave it to Me*). But as her oeuvre develops so do her female characters, increasingly using their difference as a means to engage and assert their own power (see *Holder of the World*, *The Tree Bride*). In Carter's early works, the figure of the outsider, whether the feminine or the freak – or both – can only avow her own power by turning in on herself (see *Shadow Dance* and *Love*). In her later works, the 'other' unambiguously presents an opportunity for rupture and a capacity for challenging and revisioning dominant structures (see *Heroes and Villains*). This culminates in her last novels where otherness (in the figure of the female freak in *Nights at the Circus* or the 'retired',

aging 'song and dance girls' of *Wise Children*) is celebrated as an affirmation and declaration of female power.⁷

4.2.2 The Anxiety of Minor Differences: Stranger Fear/Foreign Danger

According to Tigor Dessewffy, 'Strangerhood moves us all, making us spit in anger or swallow in desire, but in any case urging us to act...' (353). Discourses on strangers date back to ancient times and the kindly treatment of strangers is repeatedly expressed in Judeo-Christian texts;⁸ Hinduism too promotes strong principles of acceptance and tolerance of difference. The emphasis in these texts on treating strangers magnanimously points to the ambivalence inherent in encounters with those who are different. The psychological antecedents of anxiety around such differences – those occurring between diverse groups of people or between people at various stages of the life cycle – particularly differences that seem minor – were postulated by Freud in his paper on 'The Taboo of Virginity', published in 1918. Here he remarked on the apprehensiveness attending situations 'which involve something new or unexpected, something not understood or uncanny' (270), what Jacobus calls 'the lurking anxiety attending "threshold" situations, such as the first act of sexual intercourse' (115). Freud noted the elaborate rituals that take place in some primitive societies for defloration of the virgin bride prior to her marriage: 'defloration is a significant act; but it has become the subject of a taboo [...]. Instead of reserving it for the girl's bridegroom and future partner in marriage, custom demands that he shall shun the performance of it' (266-7). Freud further proposed that:

Wherever primitive man has set up a taboo he fears some danger and it cannot be disputed that a generalised dread of women is expressed in all these rules of avoidance. Perhaps this dread is based on the fact that woman is different from man, forever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile. The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, becoming infected with her femininity and of then showing himself incapable. (Freud 271)

⁷ See Shirley Peterson who makes a similar point, noting that 'Putting on femininity with a vengeance [...] spotlight(s) the performative function of both freaks and females within patriarchy' (299).

⁸ For a full discussion of the way that strangers and foreigners have been seen throughout history, see Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*.

Freud's misogyny, especially in relation to women's bodies, has been well documented (see earlier discussion; also Stallybrass and White 185): man is set up as the universal norm, while woman is 'mysterious' and 'strange', and her difference is to be feared. This theory of the taboo of virginity also formed the basis for Freud's later understanding of the racist impulse of humanity where he hypothesised that 'it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them' (272); thus, the simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity between men and women produces a syndrome which he referred to as the 'narcissism of minor differences' – hostility in relationships concurrent and conflicting with 'feelings of fellowship' (ibid.).⁹

For Georg Simmel, the German sociologist contemporaneous with Freud, the threat of the stranger emanates from the fact that the stranger is not the wanderer who is 'here today and gone tomorrow' but rather the person who 'comes today and stays tomorrow' (1): 'The stranger, like the poor and like sundry "inner enemies" is an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it' (1). Moreover, 'Although in more intimate relations, he may develop all kinds of charm and significance [...] he is not an "owner of soil."'; instead he is 'the synthesis of nearness and distance' that can be both advantageous (ability to be objective) and dangerous (more likely to be open to attack and victimisation in times of trouble) (1-2). Like the stranger, woman possesses both the charm of distance and the threat of coming too close.

In their Marxist analysis of the 'Other' in terms of the base and exalted, Stallybrass and White argue that the 'double process of colonialism' demands that the 'Other' is transformed into the 'Same', yet always remains outside of the 'Same' because the mimicry required by the 'Other' is regarded as absurd, as a comic or frightening display, and is therefore the occasion for derisive laughter: in order to preserve and consolidate the sense that 'the civilized is always-already given' the 'Other' can never replicate the Same (41). Here, the authors emphasise 'the play with thresholds of culture' that freak acts and displays of exotic others produce. Interestingly they locate their analysis in the fair as the

⁹ In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argued that 'It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness' (1930a [1929]).

‘crucial point of intersection between the imperialist spoils of the nation-state and the European citizen’ (40).

Homi Bhabha extends the postcolonial investigation of the ‘Other’ using Franz Fanon’s work as the basis to discuss the colonial consequences of stereotypes. Like Fanon, he compares the experiences of woman to the black man, contending that colonial discourse demands a form of mimicry, one that produces subjects that are ‘almost the same but not quite’ (106-7, 122). Mimicry is both ‘resemblance’ and ‘menace’: it is infused with ambivalence, a creation of similarity that simultaneously produces its own ‘slippage’ or difference, a kind of mockery or disavowal of *both* resemblance and difference (123). In one of the short stories by Mukherjee, which I discuss further down, the sense of being ‘not-quite’ is openly articulated by the main protagonist who is both darker immigrant and female.

The fear and anxiety attendant on strangers and strangeness remains a subject of enquiry for Sara Ahmed, a feminist post-colonialist, who argues that the stranger is pre-figured – the one we know we do not know – and fetishised, representing the fear of the unknown which must be expelled from the body of the community or domesticated; in an echo of Freud’s thesis, she contests that ‘the stranger is known precisely as the one who is different from “us”, yet also familiar in that difference’ (185).

While these explanations try to explain how the stranger comes to be figured within the context of the psyche, the community or colonialism, Julia Kristeva’s own exilic experience and her theorising of the abject elucidate the fear of strangers and their fascinating pull from a feminist psychoanalytic point of view. Mary Douglas¹⁰ proposed that all taboos represent ways of dealing with the dangers of pollution or contamination of the social and political orders: ‘Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organised. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder. [...]. Ambiguous things can seem very threatening. Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred’ (xi). The stranger is such an ‘ambiguous thing’ and presents a potential pollutant to the group. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva complicates this idea of ‘foreign’ matter by suggesting that the stranger or other is a threat because it seems to denote that projection of the self which is abject – the thing expelled (and horrifying) but not quite separate from

¹⁰ See earlier discussion in Chapter 1.

the self, so that it has the power to evoke the anxiety or narcissism surrounding minor differences. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, written a decade later, Kristeva records her own sense of strangeness at being foreign but also concludes that strangeness exists within each person's own being: while 'the face that is so *other* bears the mark of a crossed threshold' (266), there is also the 'uncanny strangeness' within us which repeats the fear of the other – 'the other of death, the other of woman, the other of uncontrollable drive. The foreigner within us' (290). Thus, Kristeva returns to Freud and goes beyond him, detecting that fear of the foreigner is part of the human psyche which is caught up with fears of its own strangeness.

Mukherjee's *Holder of the World* presents an exposition of the foreigner as stranger and other. In this novel Hannah's journey is the story of counter-travel: Hannah, the Puritan from a strict New England home, makes her way east to the Coromandel Coast, a stranger seeking a new life and new meaning.¹¹ Here she struggles with her sense of foreignness in an alien country as well as her marked difference from the other English expatriates – 'Hannah was tainted because of her long residence in primitive New England' (*Holder* 130). Regardless of her attempts at integration, and her love affair with the Hindu Raja, she is never allowed to forget that her people are the '*angrezi*' and that she has been 'the prostitute of infidels and idolaters' (267). The end of the novel sees her back in her own country – the New World¹² – but as an outsider, even a freak: she is the daughter of an errant mother who had fled years before with her Nipmuc lover, and who has since given birth to 'Indian' progeny. Having herself become the mother of 'a black-eyed, black-haired, lively daughter named Pearl Singh', Hannah returns to Salem where she rescues her mother from a workhouse 'for the mad and indigent' and, together with her family, installs herself in the town. But 'children were warned about the small house jammed with brass and copper items, called by many the House of Enchantment, meaning the place of ultimate

¹¹ Hannah's direction of travel resonates with what was happening in California at the time of Mukherjee's writing – in an ironic reversal of colonial conquest, the 1970s and 80s saw young 'westerners' heading to India for adventure and 'to find themselves', to conquer their personal demons through imbibing foreign culture, rather than traveling to conquer and colonise the native others of foreign lands. Mukherjee makes specific reference to these travellers in her latest novel, *Miss New India*: 'In the second half of the past century young Americans — the disillusioned, the reckless, and the hopeful — began streaming into India' (1).

¹² The New World of the 17th century was America; in the late 20th century, Mukherjee refers to the New World as India; Mukherjee explains that in her novels she is 'writing about mainstream America itself head on and the changes it's going through because of the influx of all these new people from the New World' (Joel Yanofsky).

debauchery' (284-5). Thus, Hannah, her family, and the space they occupy all represent signifiers of 'otherness', to be feared and avoided.

This reference to the Salem house as one of concomitant 'enchantment' and 'debauchery' highlights the anxiety and fascination wielded by those who are different, articulating both the power of difference (the power to mark oneself as different *and* to make a difference, as in the case of Hannah) and its capacity to safeguard boundaries of normality: 'Respectable people expressing such attitudes ['We are Americans to freedom born!'] would have gone immediately to jail. But the women had for so long indulged a liberty of eccentric dissent that their certification of certain extreme positions was considered advantageous to the maintenance of social order' (285). The narrative acknowledges the function of radical deviance and its surrounding taboos that defend the boundaries of the normative.

The story of counter-travel further affirms that, regardless of location, foreignness casts the stranger as 'other', and that even minor differences between people (for example, between Hannah and her other expatriates) can sometimes arouse great animosity. Attempts by an outsider to cross the boundary between 'us' and 'them' in order to become a member of the host group can result in an escalation of enmity and an outpouring of virulent hostility. The Raja's mother in *Holder of the World*, regards Hannah as the *firangi* who 'had brought bad luck', weakened her son, making him unable to fight in battle and therefore useless as a leader of his people (251). The Queen Mother orders her servants to "'Take that away" [...] meaning the white woman's hand, which had already polluted her son's caste' (250). Here Hannah is framed not only as 'Other' but also as a foreign 'witch', a contaminating aberration, who has stripped the Raja of his manhood – 'He has become a woman' – and his people of its power. Another reason for the Queen Mother's bitter acrimony, apart from Hannah's otherness, is that Hannah has usurped her son's role by appearing to don his masculinity; the Queen literally spits out at Hannah: 'She is a better raja than my son? [...] Now she even kills his enemies?' (251). Hannah's actions represent not only a transgression of culture and class, but also gender.

Those that society cannot categorise or contain, who transgress boundaries, become not only 'things' of fear but also of tantalising allure. Moreover, a sense of foreignness may taint even those who typically would be part of the in-group but whose outlandish behaviour

renders them strange, shameful or 'other'. Russo stresses, for example, how a phrase from her childhood – “‘She’ [the other woman] is making a spectacle of herself’ – resonated strongly for her in terms of how ‘normal’ women should behave: ‘Making a spectacle of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger’ implying a ‘loss of boundaries’ and doing the wrong thing (53). Those women who made spectacles of themselves risked ‘the danger of exposure’ and being out of place or unruly (ibid.), a danger that resonates for strangers and freaks.

4.2.3 Freaks: Fears and Fantasies

The freak appears to arouse similar although more intense feelings to that of the stranger. Sue Chaplin explains that abjection is triggered in the individual not only by the strange and unfamiliar but by something ‘so physically repulsive as to elicit an adverse physical response’; within a psychoanalytic paradigm, she argues, therefore, that whereas the uncanny is associated with the spectral, the abject is associated with the monstrous (252-3). Fear aroused by difference of this kind is based not only on the dangers of the unknown but also on the seductive quality of the mysterious which instigates the desire to make it known, to gain access to its world, to take some of the mystery and make it part of ourselves.¹³

Leslie Fiedler articulates this seductive edge of the strange/grotesque in his work on ‘Freaks’: ‘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’ (137).¹⁴ The desire is itself felt as freaky, since it implies not only longing for degradation ‘but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation’ (ibid.). For Diana Arbus, the noted photographer of freaks and freak shows, a freak was a ‘metaphor for estrangement and alienation’ (qtd. in Bogdan 2). The notion of the freak begins as a concept embedded in the corporeal, aligned with the monstrous body which is itself divided by difference (simultaneously male and female, or black and white, or adult and child). But the concept moves beyond the physical to stand for something not only different, but monstrously different, to such an extent that it reinforces the viewer’s own

¹³ Our fascination with aliens is precisely of this order (see Sara Ahmed 2).

¹⁴ Rita Felski refers to this as the ‘linked imperatives between scopophilia and epistophilia (*Gender of Modernity* 194).

sense of normality as oppositional, and also provides enormous relief at the prospect of self-normality.¹⁵ Deviance is always only so by virtue of its historical and socio-cultural contexts.

In her study of freak shows as spectacles of deformity, Nadja Durbach argues that different cultural contexts produce certain bodies as aberrant and discourses of monstrosity attest to strategies 'to cope with larger cultural anxieties'; the freak seems to represent the single body on to which all fears and causes of discomfort can be projected (1, 4). The showing of freaks, which was so popular in Britain from the 17th to 19th centuries, went beyond a voyeuristic form of entertainment to shore up the anxieties of a ruling class who needed to legitimate their sense of superiority. The display of people of colour, for example, alongside 'freakish' bodies 'explicitly configured racial otherness as freakish [...] and thus normalized the white British body' as superior and fit to rule the savage or the ungovernable (30). Freak shows 'helped to articulate the cultural meanings invested in otherness – and thus clarified what it meant to be British – at a moment in which Britain was constructing itself as a modern and imperial, and thus model, nation' (32). Humour and ridicule, the overriding emotions generated by the freak shows, 'defused the tension generated by the fear of the freak' (Lund qtd. in Durbach 4). Fiedler too has noted that 'The ridiculous and the monstrous are not really incompatible' and freaks often incite laughter not only because they are seen as preposterous, but also because they challenge 'the conventional boundaries between [...] self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion' (19, 24).

The display of Sarah Bartmann – significantly proclaimed 'the Hottentot Venus' – as a spectacle of female, foreign freakishness, was precisely the way that the dominant (colonial, male) culture managed the allure and anxiety of otherness within the limits of safety, affirming the boundaries between self and other. Bartmann was first taken to England in 1810 where she was exhibited in Piccadilly Square as a freak of femininity (especially of dangerous and uncontained sexuality) as well as an example of the most primitive human species – since science had located the Hottentots 'on the very edge of humanity, equally human and bestial' (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 71). Despite controversy around her exploitation, and scepticism regarding her 'consent' to her 'contract' (as she could not read

¹⁵ Dianne Arbus was exceptional in not being comforted by her oppositional normality; she disdained her sense of being born 'immune' from adversity, believing that 'Freaks were born with their traumas. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats' (qtd. in Fiedler 318).

or write), she continued to be exhibited, touring England and Ireland.¹⁶ In 1814 she was sold to a Frenchman and was displayed, scrutinised, written about and drawn in what T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting calls a 'collective French obsession', which reached its zenith with her examination by Georges Cuvier and a team of 'zoologists, anatomists, and physiologists' (22).

The 'craze' surrounding the display of Bartmann made her the 'object of prurient and racialized spectacle in theatres throughout Europe' (Gantz 944). While Cuvier's study was ostensibly scientific – 'to discern identity, difference, and progress' concerning the anatomical variance of her body (specifically her enlarged buttocks or steatopygia, and later, by way of dissection after her death, her 'apron' between her thighs) – his gaze was 'tempered with eroticism' (Sharpley-Whiting 24). His pleasure in looking and the desire to know carnally was implicated in his desire to know scientifically.¹⁷ Robin Mitchell confirms how 'science and popular culture work to *mutually* inform and regulate cultural behavior' (33).

In discussing Bartmann as an example of the 'process of enfreakment', Thomson argues that the freak and the female are represented in opposition to the ideal Western self; 'both are owned, managed, silenced, and mediated by men: both are socially defined as deviations from the ideal masculine body; [...] both are appropriated for display as spectacles; both are seen as subjugated by the body' (*Extraordinary Bodies* 70-1). In more general terms, Thomson argues that women, people of colour and the disabled are aligned as representatives of incompetent and 'incapable bodies'; thus, 'Femininity and race are performances of disability', presenting bodies that are either deficient or excessive, and that are 'ungovernable, intemperate, or threatening' ('Integrating Disability' 8). The freak sideshow was by its nature a visual display of these impaired or profligate bodies, an exhibition of otherness which required the participation of the spectator, 'the sense of watching, unwilling but enthralled, the exposed obscenity' of the body; this is what linked it

¹⁶ Robin Mitchell comments that 'it is notable how much effort goes into making Bartmann appear a willing participant in her own exploitation'; if she were proved to be exercising free will, then both her 'owners' and viewers would be absolved (35).

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey, in her paper on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' argues that 'the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly'; thus women's appearance is 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact...' (11).

to pornography (as is evident in the case of Bartmann), like watching ‘a blue movie’ (Fiedler 18).

In his early paper on ‘The Hottentot and the Prostitute’, Sander Gilman observed that ‘Black females do not merely represent the sexualised female, they also represent the female as the source of corruption and disease’ (24). In the case of Bartmann, her enlarged sexual parts and her racial figuration as part of a primitive species from the ‘dark interior’ of Africa rendered her ‘freakish’ and venal, in opposition to the cultured white European body. Within the context of the demonisation of the ‘other’ female body as dis-abled or diseased, the work of Carter and Mukherjee recuperates the ‘freakish female’ as a figure of ability and strength.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers, the ‘winged’ freakish protagonist, is raised in a ‘kindly’ brothel which closes shop after its Madame, Ma Nelson, dies. Having ‘fallen on hard times’, Fevvers is enticed by Madame Schreck to participate in her ‘museum of woman monsters’ by a monetary proposition that she cannot refuse (*Nights* 55). According to Shirley Peterson, ‘Madame Schreck’s museum makes explicit the voyeuristic impulse that links the freak show to the pornographic display. Both exhibitions operate out of a consumer culture that creates its taboos only to turn them into viable commodities’ (295). In the symbol of the museum and its occupants, Carter demonstrates how hegemony protects its domain and keeps the threat of the contaminating ‘other’ at bay while at the same time using the ‘other’ as a lucrative source of wealth.¹⁸

The cast of freaks in Madame Schreck’s museum further provides a humorous opportunity for Carter to comment on the dialectic of white colonial oppression and its relation to the ‘disabled’ other. Toussaint, the butler at Schreck’s brothel, has no mouth and therefore cannot speak. When Fevvers begins to ‘prosper’, she arranges for him to be operated upon. Lizzie, Fevvers’ mother/guardian, opines: ‘consider the dialectic of it, sir, [...] how it was, as it

¹⁸ Robert Bogdan discusses the ‘socially constructed dimension’ of freak shows and argues that ‘freak’ is a ‘way of thinking [...] an institution – not a characteristic of an individual’ (10): ultimately the primary motive of the show was profit – for the owners and, more dubiously, the performers (9).

were, the *white hand* of the *oppressor* who carved open the aperture of speech in the very throat you could say that it had, in the first place, rendered dumb...' (*Nights* 60).¹⁹

4.2.4 Carter and Mukherjee: Out of Place

Carter's sense of strangeness – which seemed to emanate initially from her experience of living in Japan for two years – is present in most of her writing. She retained the feeling of 'being from elsewhere' (Sceats 142) as a mode of apprehending the world; this sense of difference threads through all her work; Carter herself, in humorous and mocking tone, claimed that 'alienated is the only way to be, after all' (*Shaking* 12). Sonya Andermahr affirms this sense of estrangement: 'Carter was an outsider, a socialist and feminist who was writing against mainstream values' (11). For Carter there was also something liberating about being in unfamiliar places and feeling foreign and separate. The narrator in the short story 'Flesh and the Mirror' describes the 'peculiar holes' that are entrances to opportunities for living life in a risky way: 'Random chance operates in relation to these existential lacunae; one tumbles down them when ... [on] the margins of empty space, one is lost ... That is why I like to be a foreigner; I only travel for insecurity' (*Fireworks* 84-5). Apart from her personal preference for adventure and risk taking, she also maintained that a woman's place – if she was to escape the constrictions of gender construction – was precisely *not* in the home but on the road and she wrote all her transgressive female characters into narratives of travel and adventure.²⁰

Carter's experience of being truly 'other' – freakish, even – that she felt in Japan is expressed in her short story 'A Souvenir of Japan' in *Fireworks*. Here, she articulated the fact of feeling totally out of place – too tall, too orange (hair), too white (skin), too pink (cheeks), too blue (eyes). Carter adds a nice reversal though of the colonial racial perspective of the coloured body as 'other': while the narrator (the white British body) in her short story of Japan may be taken for an 'outlandish jewel', or a 'fabulous beast', she also felt as 'gross as

¹⁹ Issues around the effects of colonialism are significant in the work of both Carter and Mukherjee, despite their disparate nationalities and experiences.

²⁰ Where Carter does write of home, it is most often a home of an unusual kind: Carter ironises the meaning of the brothel, turning it into a place of female comradery, as in Fevvers' home of her childhood in *Nights at the Circus* or the home of the twins in *Wise Children*; it is significant, that in this latter novel, written just before Carter died, the primary setting is the house on Bard Street, as though Carter felt it was finally acceptable to be 'at home'.

Glumdalclitch' – a reference to the giant child-nurse in *Gulliver's Travels* whose father shows Gulliver off as a freak and charges for his performance (*Fireworks* 9). In Carter's Japan, it is the Western body that is figured as freakish. Sage says that, 'Feeling a freak [...] was a kind of rehearsal for the invention of her lumpen winged aerialiste Fevvers years later' (*Angela* 26).

Carter recognises that this feeling of freakishness may have a dash of the exotic, a point echoed by Mukherjee in *Jasmine* and in other stories – with their focus on accent, skin colour, and dress. In Canada, Mukherjee writes, 'I was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter, frequently assumed to be a domestic [...]. The society itself, or important elements in that society, routinely made crippling assumptions about me, and about my "kind."' (*Darkness* xiv-xv). This use of the word 'crippling' suggests how the dominant society dis-ables the foreigner, both physically and psychically, and aligns her with the freak. Ato Quayson in his work on 'disability and the crisis of representation' contends that the representation of disability invokes 'subliminal unease and moral panic' which is refracted in literary texts as 'aesthetic nervousness'; in Mukherjee's work the foreigner, figured as disabled, evokes unease and tension for characters and readers. While Carter focuses on owning spectacle as a form of owning power (as is evident in both *Nights* and *Wise Children*), Mukherjee's way of dealing with strangeness is by disavowing spectacle, because it is precisely the experience of being looked at 'strangely' that makes her immigrant characters feel 'less-than', estranged, freakish, and often exoticised as 'black Venuses'. Kristeva cites a similar point in relation to the tug that difference excites: 'Blundering fools never fail to ask – 'And what about your origins? Tell us about them, it must be fascinating' (*Strangers* 29).

Although being different may be an impetus to action, it may also serve to isolate and paralyse – to dis-able; and especially characters in Mukherjee's earlier work regard their spectacle of difference as the site (sight) which sets them apart, displays their outsider status and makes them a visible minority.²¹ According to Joel Yanofsky, Canadian society – where Mukherjee found herself in the 60s and 70s – rejected immigrant caste systems: 'Perhaps because we had our own outdated system in place here -- multiculturalism -- and

²¹ Bhabha portrays the 'seen' as implicated in the 'scene' of the drama of otherness: both senses of the word refer 'to the site of fantasy and desire and to the sight of subjectification and power' (108).

our own rhetoric to justify it: the Canadian mosaic. It was a rhetoric that labelled Mukherjee an outsider, "a visible minority," and then expected her to be grateful for it.' Mukherjee states that Canada 'is a New World country with Old World concepts of a fixed, exclusivist national identity [...] Canadians of color were routinely treated as "not real" Canadian' ('American Dreamer'). Thus, Indian immigrants came to see their 'Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved (or worse, a 'visible' disfigurement to be hidden)' (qtd. in Yanofsky).

In her earlier work, the violence of invisibility/hypervisibility (the stranger who is literally and metaphorically both not seen and 'overseen') leads to an eruption of violence against the self, as in *Wife*, or against others, as in *Leave it to Me*.²² In this latter novel, the text articulates the way that America externalises its fear of the 'contaminating' other, locating its disquiet in its immigrant underclass or in the cast-offs of the Vietnam war (Vietnam itself being a place of contamination). Devi, the disturbed protagonist of the novel, says: 'I am that dark, ghost, *thing*' (239). The word 'thing', italicised and coming at the end of the sentence and line, stands alone and separate, but attenuated by darkness and spectral invisibility. Unable to be articulated, too monstrous to name, it expresses the horror of those who are cast out and who experience being reduced to the 'not-real'. Mukherjee uses the spectral as a way to express the sense of insubstantiality felt by the foreigner or 'other', a sense echoed by Franz Fanon: 'I slip into corners; I keep silent' (96). In an ironic reversal, the hypervisibility of the black skin – or corporeal abnormality in the freak – makes itself fully apparent, but invisibility is either rendered or desired as a way of avoiding the fear and distaste that disfigurement evokes: 'All I want is to be anonymous, to be forgotten' but 'My blackness was there, dense and undeniable' (ibid.) As a black man, Fanon is 'overdetermined from the outside', a slave to his 'appearance' (95). His account presents a searing analysis of the effects of the scopic system on the racialised other which Bhabha elaborates in his analysis of the stereotype (or fetish) in colonial discourse. Bhabha sees the stereotype as providing access to an 'identity' which demands both 'recognition of difference and disavowal of it', but the attempt to disavow difference 'turns the colonial subject into a misfit' (107) – or freak.

²² Being 'overseen' has an added connotation of surveillance and dominance. According to Bhabha, 'the *surveillance* of colonial power' functions in relation 'to the regime of the *scopic drive*' (109).

Leave it to Me, which I discuss more fully in the section on avenging females, expresses the anger of being invisible and belonging nowhere, and the violence that ensues in order to invigorate a sense of self by making an impression on the world. However, in *Jasmine* and in her later novels, Mukherjee finds a way to revision difference/otherness as a mode of power that can move beyond violence: through the appropriation of the American dream – added to the sense of ‘mongrelisation’ and the capacity to create and celebrate ‘fluid’ selves – her characters are propelled to seize independence and inhabit a space of authority and significance.

4.2.5 Mukherjee’s Strangers

Here, I explore two short stories that deal with the sense of being a stranger in a new world. The first portrays the invisibility experienced by those who feel that they are always less-than, ‘not-quite’ Western enough/good enough for mainstream American society; the second shows how foreignness can become a tool for enabling power.

‘The Lady of Lucknow’, a short story from the collection *Darkness*, tells of an Indian Muslim woman, Nafeesa, married to an IBM employee, who has travelled abroad and ‘made homes’ in many places; now the family live in Atlanta, Georgia, ‘in a wide, new house with a deck and a backyard’. They have a ‘good, decent life’ which they hope to pass on to their children who ‘are ashamed of the dingy cities where we got our start’ (17). Out of boredom and a desire for passion, Nafeesa embarks on an affair with James Beamish, an immunologist at the ‘Centre for Disease Control’, her lover’s occupation gesturing ironically towards the American desire to immunise itself against contamination of the ‘other’.

Through her affair with this paragon of academic American respectability, Nafeesa hopes to access ‘love and freedom’ (23) – iconic symbols of Western culture that will connect her with America and with her romantic ideals so that she will feel ‘beautiful, exotic, responsive’ (18). She also craves passion, to have her heart ruptured by love: ‘[a] torn heart remains the standard of perfect love’ (17); as a child she had seen the girl next door beaten for falling in love across the religious bar and dying from a broken heart – or so it was said. Six months into her affair, Nafeesa is invited to go to her lover’s house while his wife is away: ‘Real intimacy at last. The lust of the winter months had been merely foreplay. I felt at home in

his house ...' (24). Finally, she feels she has access to the inner sanctum where she is sanctioned; this invitation represents being 'at home' in America. But her lover's wife returns unexpectedly and surprises Nafeesa naked in the marital bed. Usually submissive, now Nafeesa attempts to assert herself as mistress; she refuses to be seen as the 'sordid dalliance with a not-quite's wife' by taking ownership of herself-as-spectacle (23). Hoping to evoke a scene of passion by lounging naked on the bed, all she provokes is a disdainful, mocking laugh – 'I might have stabbed you if I could take you more seriously. But you are quite ridiculous lounging like a Goya nude on my bed' – and then a look that renders her invisible, turning her into 'a shadow without depth or color' (26, 27).²³

Nafeesa does not even merit 'a stab wound through the heart'. She is insignificant, neither sacred nor profane, 'just another involvement of a white man in a pokey little outpost, something that "men do" and then come to their senses while the *memsahibs* drink gin and tonic and fan their faces' (27). Mrs. Beamish represents a double oppression for Nafeesa: she is both legitimate wife and legitimate American citizen, the 'normative' subject produced and consolidated by the presence of the 'other'. Nafeesa's current status in the 'New World', despite her possession of the symbols of American values (the house with the 'deck', the husband with the 'right' job), is transitory and unequal, and Mrs. Beamish is determined to make her know her place: whereas Nafeesa tries to assume significance by openly displaying herself, she is 'expected to stay in line and make [her]self scarce', to be amputated and rendered invisible (Fanon 94). By metonymic extension, the subjugation of India (the 'other') by Western colonial rule underpins Nafeesa's relationship to James Beamish and his wife. The history of racism and being a member of the oppressed colony cannot be swept away or inverted by the landing of international jobs, taking American lovers or drinking gin and tonic on the decks of golf-estates houses.²⁴

Rather than being a 'creature' whose lover has 'immunized of contamination' (27), and who can lay claim to an American freedom, Nafeesa's 'polluting' difference discloses itself

²³ The encounter also confronts Nafeesa with her exclusion from a whole intellectual culture of western art and ideals. Goya is considered to be the first European artist to present the profane image of a life-size female nude in western painting. In an ironic juxtaposition, Carter writes that Goya 'in his famous despair, in *his* hatred of war and human folly, saw further than most people' (*Shaking a Leg* 44).

²⁴ Echoing Nafeesa's concern with contamination in the context of colonialism, Ponzanesi notes that 'the image of the black Venus became a forceful trope for expressing the contaminated and yet highly asymmetrical relationship between the ruler and the ruled' (166).

unavoidably; she is 'overdetermined from the outside' (Fanon 95). In their first encounter at a 'reception for foreign students', Mrs. Beamish responds to her in condescending tones: "What a musical name." she said. "I hope you'll be very happy here. Is this your first time abroad?" (Darkness 19). Nafeesa feels like a specimen, dissected and fixed by the 'white gaze, the only valid one' (ibid.), the sight and site of her foreignness boxing her 'into suffocating reification' (Fanon 89).²⁵ When Beamish confuses Nafeesa with a student who he and his wife are meant to care-take rather than 'a host', his wife's retorts: "Darling, ours is a Palestinian. [...] This one is obviously not Palestinian, are you, my dear?" (19-20). The foreign student is produced as an object or as 'our creature', akin to a domestic pet. The appearance of the stranger unveils her difference and simultaneously renders her as 'other' and invisible – or not quite human. In this story the foreigner is patronised by liberal values to become someone to be taken care of, at best, or reduced to complete insignificance when she comes threateningly close.

Nafeesa's sense of being 'a shadow-temptress who would float back to a city of teeming millions' (27) identifies her as non-presence, one that makes no impact on the world at all. This theme of the 'insubstantial other' recurs in Mukherjee's work, first appearing in her early novel *Wife* where Dimple, the protagonist, is only capable of making the slightest indentation on any surface (suggested by her name) and where even her identity seems up for grabs, existing only in relation to her husband and family.²⁶ Perhaps this is one motivation for Mukherjee's trope of violence – like Devi, the goddess of creation and destruction, who can wreak havoc on the world, invoking tornadoes, floods and fires, some of Mukherjee's characters resort to violence as a way of emerging from the spectral into substantiality. To counter the facelessness and shadow world of the foreign other, Mukherjee conjures natural and man-made disasters that will create not mere surface indentations but huge ruptures and fissures that shake up the material world.

Yet, in 'The Lady of Lucknow', Mukherjee seems to be suggesting that the threshold of foreign strangeness can never be adequately broached. Although Nafeesa comments that

²⁵ Bhabha notes that 'Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism [...] connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition' (94).

²⁶ Dimple's husband explains that his mother wants to give her another name; Dimple is unhappy (*Wife* 18). But ironically, she sets out to change the destiny that her name implies – she becomes much more than a 'slight indentation' on life's surface.

'[t]he woman caught in mid-shame is a woman who wants to get out', there seems to be no way out (*Darkness* 18). The foreigner is wedged between being unable to escape – being a stranger becomes an identity as the foreign is domesticated and 'fixed' as a member of a 'visible minority' – and being never 'at home', always estranged from the place of homeliness. In addition, the female foreigner bears the extra burden of being estranged both within her home and also beyond it. Nafeesa iterates this trope: 'I am submissive by training. To survive, the Asian wife will usually do as she is told' (25). For the 'Asian wife' gender, caste and class keep her subservient and subjugated in the home. Outside, she fares little better, frequently taken for a domestic worker or prostitute, as Mukherjee herself experienced. As Nafeesa is 'uncovered' in her lover's home, she tries to joke about her status, but it comes out lame, carrying the sting of truth and pain: 'How are you going to explain me away James? Tell her I'm the new cleaning woman?' (ibid.).

If the Lady of Lucknow finds little to remediate her foreignness and her lost dignity, Jasmine, the eponymous protagonist of a short story in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (as opposed to the novel *Jasmine*) uses her foreignness, and its concomitant exoticism, as an occasion for empowerment. In this collection, Mukherjee creates characters that grapple with how to unbridle the power of otherness rather than focusing on its disabling effects. Jasmine is one such character that is determined to make the most of opportunities that come her way. She leaves her home in Trinidad for the USA armed with some dollars, the name of a Trinidad Indian family who run a motel, and assisted by a truck driver who furtively ferries her across the border. 'She'd outsmarted the guys at the border. Now it was up to her to use her wits to do something with her life. As her daddy kept saying, "Girl, is opportunity come only once."' (*Middleman* 128). At first, Jasmine works for the Daboos, learning all she can, although aware that she is being exploited by the couple who 'were nobodies back home. They were lucky, that's all' (ibid). Helping to run the match-up marriage service between illegals and legals, Jasmine quickly learns that Ann Arbor is the place where you can get an education 'and all the barriers come crashing down' (129). Invited by the Daboo daughters to a party in Ann Arbor, she impulsively decides to spend the night on the couch in the Student Union and by the next evening she has a babysitting job looking after the daughter of a biologist and his wife, Lara and Bill Moffitt.

Even though things are ‘topsy-turvy’ in the Moffitt house, Jasmine learns quickly how to make the most of her situation and how to market herself; now, she sees the Daboos as ‘village bumpkins’, but ‘she would break out. Soon. [...] she’d become her own person’ (134-135). Finally, while Lara is away on a road-tour as a performing artist, Jasmine ends up dancing with Bill and then making love to him: ‘She’d never felt this good on the island where men did this all the time, and girls went along with it always for favors’. In Ann Arbor she is a blank slate – ‘No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future’ (138).²⁷ The story pre-empts the longer novel, *Jasmine*, where a young woman from Hasnapur travels to America to ‘reposition the stars’ and make herself into someone significant. In the short story, Jasmine uses her foreignness as capital and her sexuality as a path to grasp opportunities and to create a future of her own design.

Critics have generally been harsh in their reviews of the story, suggesting that it reinforces stereotypes, portraying the female immigrant as the ‘low other’, and reinscribing precisely those positions that keep foreign women outside of mainstream life.²⁸ Yet, Mukherjee suggests here that power comes from transgressing normative expectations and from chasing chances: Jasmine is a go-getter who exploits her situation for erotic pleasure as well as to gain access to status and new prospects. Back on ‘the island’, sex is used as a commodity to win favours (and it is intimated that Jasmine has done the same); here, however, she takes charge of her own sexuality and makes it work for her, giving herself up to the feeling of passion, determined to ‘become her own person’ (135). In an interview with Connell, Grearson and Grimes, Mukherjee commented that for ‘a village girl coming [...] from a nothing place, the audacity to even say “I want” is the biggest rebellion possible. I wanted it to be not simply grabbing, but revolution’ (53).

In this story, transgression occurs on two levels: notions of how a girl should behave are thrown aside; in this sense, Jasmine is not a ‘good girl’ but rather an expedient one who uses her sexuality to get ahead. Alongside this, the pigeon-holing by ‘third world’ critics of

²⁷ Compare with Fevers in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* who is told by Lizzie: ‘You never existed before. There’s nobody to say what you should do or how to do it’ (198).

²⁸ See, for example, Anu Aneja who maintains that Mukherjee’s portrayal of Indian women renders them as ‘Third World’ victims of patriarchal domination, exotic, passive creatures who rely on (white) men to make them feel good (76). Alpana Knippling argues that Mukherjee’s claim to represent the ‘Other’ is unconvincing and denotes her domestication of the other: her fiction ‘tends to uncritically reproduce the imperialist project of “selving the Other”’ (146-7).

how best to represent the postcolonial female is dismissed: Mukherjee herself, like Jasmine, has the audacity to thumb her nose at a stultifying repressive categorisation and critical orthodoxy and unleash the power present in the crossing of boundaries and the breaking of taboos. In the mixed up world of 'helluva confusion' of America, Jasmine (like Mukherjee) learns to 'throw her weight around', and she becomes the 'Flower of Ann Arbor'; still a flower, mind you, so that she retains her beauty and appeal, but not a flower from Trinidad which would hold her back in her past (*Middleman* 135,138). Mukherjee embraces what Ubaraj Katawal calls a 'readiness to adapt relentlessly to the transformative tension between identity and difference', creating a new provisional space for her characters to enact empowerment (3). In this story, as in the novel *Jasmine*, otherness in the form of the foreign female enables a possibility for power.

4.2.6 Carter's Strangers

I discuss two short stories from Carter's oeuvre centring on Lizzie Borden – the alleged axe murderer – at different times of her life, which deal with her sense of estrangement and alienation within her domestic environment, and demonstrate how this strangeness presents with an unusual air of authority. In *Heroes* and *Villains* I examine how the stranger who sets out to explore an unknown community is able to invest herself with power.

In *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, Carter's last collection of short stories, she returns to the sense of feeling out of place (first articulated in *Fireworks*) with the story 'Lizzie's Tiger'. Lizzie, a four-year old, 'stern and square, a squat rectangle of a child' wanders off on her own to the circus, in search of a tiger that she has seen on a poster (*Burning* 321). At the fairground, 'she is a stranger among these strangers' because, when she looks at the multitude of people around her, 'nowhere at all was anyone who looked like she did [...] nowhere that old New England lantern jaw, those ice-blue eyes' (324). In her journalistic piece on 'Bath, Heritage City', Carter makes clear how 'blue-eyed' Englishness marks both charm and madness: 'Charm, the English disease; charm, mask of dementia? The fine-boned, blue-eyed, characteristically English madness' (*Shaking* 161-2). In contrast, the fairground is the melting pot for all those 'with different faces': the mill-hands from Lancashire, the 'Canucks imbibing fun' and the 'Portuguese, who knew how to enjoy themselves', in the place of 'unpremeditated smells and never-before-heard noises'

(*Burning* 324). Here Carter also valorises the popular culture of the fairground as the place of the common people and the foreigner (see Chapter 2).

Little Lizzie's sense of alienation at the fairground seems to herald the madness suffered by the older Lizzie Borden who takes an axe to her father and stepmother in 'The Fall River Axe Murders' (*Burning* 300-317). Although the two stories can be read separately, when taken together, they emphasise the significance of Lizzie's feeling out of place as a corollary of her feeling 'out of sorts' later in life, and hint at her exclusion from a 'certain segment of Fall River society', not only because of her father's eccentricities and his occupation as undertaker, but also because of her own strangeness (313).

In both stories, the sense of estrangement leads to violence, manifesting firstly in the figure of the tiger at the circus who attacks his tamer – 'a whizz of black and red, maw and canines, in the air' (331) – and then in the actions of older Lizzie who 'after breakfast and the performance of a few household duties [...] will murder her parents' (300). Issues of power and control are at the centre of these stories. Little Lizzie is not an affectionate child but she knows to show her father affection if she wants to get her way: 'She knew where the power was and [...] she knew how to court it' (321). Similarly, the older Lizzie still asserts a strong influence over her father, despite her 'strangeness'. Mrs Borden understands that 'her younger stepdaughter is a strange one and could make the plates jump out of sheer spite, if she wanted to. But the old man adores his daughter' (306); 'no extravagance is too excessive for the miser's daughter who is the wild card in his house and, it seems, can have anything she wants' (314). Lizzie's strangeness seems to lend her a kind of demonic power.

When little Lizzie witnesses the tiger's attack on its lecherous tamer, and the tamer's subsequent escape from harm, her impassioned nature expresses itself in violent red flushes and her little face becomes 'mottled all over with a curious reddish-purple', a precursor to her murderous intent later in life (*Burning* 331). Similarly, when the older Lizzie finds out that her beloved turtledoves have been slaughtered – 'At home all was blood and feathers' – 'she changes colour, her face flushes, it goes dark, angry, mottled red' (316). The mottled red flush constitutes Lizzie's alignment with the tiger, with all that is wild and uncontrollable but kept in check by the whip of the tiger-tamer. In later life, the 'whip' manifests in the smug Protestant work ethic of the surrounding society – men who go out in

the midday heat and think it is 'so virtuous to be uncomfortable', stifling in clothing meant for cold winters not 'hot, humid summers' (300). The constraining 'whip' is also signified by 'the house full of locked doors that open only into other rooms with other locked doors [...] like a maze in a bad dream' (304).

Lizzie's early love for the tiger, with which she locks eyes at the circus – 'It was the power of her love that forced it to come to her, on its knees, like a penitent' (328) – foreshadows a tiger of a different kind. The day before the Bordens' murder, Lizzie visits a friend and tells her, 'I haven't felt myself all day, I have felt so strange. So very ... strange.' (310). On the morning of the murder, William Blake's poem, 'Tyger tyger burning bright in the fires of the night', haunts the text: 'the angel of death roosts on the roof-tree' in the 'already burning air' (317).²⁹ But, as Carter noted, Blake, after all, was not talking about tigers in his poetry but rather 'something blind, furious, instinctual, intuitive, savage and *right*' (*Shaking* 306). It is this 'unrepressed subconscious', the 'other' within the self (ibid.), that the child Lizzie intuits and the adult Lizzie enacts. Here then, in these two stories about Lizzie Borden, a sense of being different and estranged is both the cause and result of feeling like an 'outsider', and the only impetus such strangerhood can muster is towards acts of violence rather than liberation.

Heroes and Villains, discussed in chapter 3, examines a different kind of stranger, one who is not estranged from her self but who chooses to settle amidst an unfamiliar tribe; according to Sage, the work is a 'sceptical exploration of the whole mystique of Otherness' (*Angela* 18). In a bold move, Carter critiqued the idea of 'otherness', suggesting that it could be exploited and mythologised as a 'mystique' outside time and history; this was a courageous proposition to make at a time when the 'Other' was at the centre of major philosophical debates, primarily through the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Lacan.³⁰ In this novel, which takes the form of the picaresque and begins with the escape of Marianne from her protected community of professors and soldiers (representing intellectual and military order) into the world of ruins, mutants and Barbarians (wild chaos), the romanticism of the

²⁹ Carter was deeply influenced by the visionary poems and etchings of William Blake (see Sage, *Angela* 39).

³⁰ See Levinas: *Totality and Infinity*; Lacan's *Ecrits* was published in French in 1966. In a journalistic piece on the film maker Bertolucci, published in 1980, Carter indicates her familiarity with Lacan: 'A mirror is propped against the wall in a little homage to Jacques Lacan' (*Shaking* 364).

'savage other' is explored and demystified.³¹ According to Sage, this work marks Carter's 'insistence on thinking her way through the romance of exclusion' (*Angela* 20). Yet, Carter's novel also engages with the sometimes necessary function of otherness as a disruption the normative, in order to escape the 'social fictions that regulate our lives' – Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles' (*Shaking* 38). Carter's title of the outgroup as 'Barbarians' is highly suggestive; for example, Michel Maffesoli, commenting on youth culture of the modern generation, notes that, 'Hard rock in its various forms, decadent styles in painting and dress [...] all reveal the return of the barbarians inside our gates, that is to say, the bursting apart of the civilized universe of modernity...' (322). Beyond presenting images of chaos and the implosion of the 'civilized universe', the novel also critiques current notions of civilisation; in the figure of Marianne, the young woman who sees the civilised world as 'sclerotic and potentially deadly' (Maffesoli *ibid.*), it suggests that there may be a new, maverick way of ordering the world.

While growing up, Marianne constantly conjures the image of the Barbarian who killed her brother, becoming obsessed with him: "'Rousseau spoke of a noble savage but this is a time of ignoble savages. Think of the savage who murdered your brother,'" her father said. "I do," she confessed. "Quite often.'" (*Heroes* 10). Marianne desires difference: 'I could maybe marry a stranger, someone from outside, but nobody here' (11). However, she is quickly disabused of the romantic notion attendant on the charm and allure of the 'ignoble savages'; as she sees them passing through the forest, the 'fearful strangers now revealed their true faces and these faces were sick, sad and worn' (14).

Having made her experimental foray into the outside world, Marianne arrives back home to discover that her senile nurse has murdered her father with an axe (foreshadowing Lizzie Borden). She burns her father's books, buries his clock – all remnants of her civilised world, a world ordered by rationality and time – and cuts her hair which 'made her very ugly and she examined her ugliness in mirrors with a violent pleasure' (15). She becomes her own 'stranger' in the mirror and is seduced by it, just as she is enticed by the savage barbarian, the stranger who is on the outside: 'She was perverse and she turned against her own

³¹ The picaresque is an early form of narrative depicting the adventures of a roguish hero (usually male). According to Sage, it is a 'pre-novelistic narrative [strategy ...] with its wandering serial formula, ideal for picturing movement with no definitive goal or end' (*Angela* 20).

people' (17). At the same she has 'an extraordinary curiosity [...] Some at least of this curiosity sprang from a simple desire to fraternize with the enemy [...] some of it was a simple desire to see the stranger's face close at hand' (ibid.). But as she moves into the world of the Barbarians, she quickly realises that they too have their myths and magic; they are just as unfree as the professors and soldiers. According to Sage, 'The result, for the reader, is a curious double-take: at first sight there is the appeal of romance (wilderness, the demon-lover); on second thoughts there is the more complex but equally exhilarating sensation of recognizing that the binary oppositions [...] are themselves being called into question.' (*Angela* 19).

All the characters in this novel are ambivalent, exemplifying the sense of destabilisation: Marianne is both manipulator and victim; Jewel, her brother's killer, her rapist/lover and then coerced husband, is so breathtakingly beautiful that Marianne would like to preserve him 'in a huge jar on the mantelpiece' (137). Yet he is also vulnerable and, despite his overwhelming physical presence, his very being seems to him to be tenuous: 'Sometimes I dream I am an invention of the Professors' (82). Donally, the chief of the tribe/shaman is a magic maker as well as cruel tormentor; he is also a scientist.³² In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter comments on the dangers of excess: Donally (a precursor of Dr Hoffman in *The Infernal Desire Machines*) is the personification of that moment when 'the Enlightenment returns to pure mythology. Reason overreaches itself and turns into the opposite of reason. Scientific order, ruthlessly applied, reduces the world to chaos' (*Sadeian* 115); thus, the scientist, captivated by the image of his own power turns into a ruthless myth-maker, unable to engage with human feelings and endeavours.

Marianne, the outsider, who initially causes members of the Barbarian tribe to protect themselves against her with ritualistic signs warding off the evil eye, is tentatively and warily tolerated because of her marriage to Jewel: 'She was still a stranger and hence fearful but now she was specifically Jewel's responsibility and evidently they trusted him to control her dubious magics' (*Heroes* 87). But her erotic attraction to Jewel and her sexual desire for him puts her in jeopardy, making her vulnerable to Jewel's control and open to attack from the rest of the tribe; she thus looks for any opportunity to escape. Yet, the real threat to her

³² The name 'Donally' is typical of Carter's humour: an ex-Don (a professor supposedly allied to the professor class), Marianne thinks of him as an ally, but he turns out to be quite the opposite.

safety and to her capacity for effecting ascendancy in the group comes ironically from the person who makes her feel most at home. Donally is a remnant of the professor class, an aberrant, and also the arch manipulator and magician: 'His books were put away [...] but the eternal saucepan still bubbled on the brazier and four candles were alight on the altar' (92). Yet, '[h]ow cool, sweet and pastel-tinted were the voices of the Professors [...] His voice so gentle and familiar she was almost inclined to trust him...' (ibid.). The writing conjures the pull of emotional residue from a familiar past despite the contrary visual information of the present which centres on Donally's chained and abused child and the bubbling potions. Donally's intellectualism (evident in his voice) awakens memories of Marianne's former life, producing feelings of nostalgia for the old order that are so seductive that she can hardly keep her distance and her wits. Being a stranger can open the door to influence and power, but such power is vulnerable: either it can become corrupted and excessive, as in the case of Donally, or it can be destabilised by nostalgic longing.

Marianne refuses to be seduced by the representation of a past that Donally offers and finally she uses her difference, her 'otherness' to launch herself into a role wielding authority and control. Being a stranger gives her an acute advantage; after Jewel dies, she is 'not organically connected through established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation, with any single one' (Simmel 1). She is therefore, 'inherently mobile' and not rooted in the society, and this provides her with the particular status of 'outsider'. In addition, she has the advantage of being 'objective', which, according to Simmel, 'does not simply involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement', a key feature of what it means to be a 'stranger' (2). At the end of the novel, Marianne again sees her reflection in a mirror, but this one is 'misty' and 'cracked' and she is 'unrecognizable to herself' (149). In this moment, she realises that she has transformed: she determines to assert her power over the tribe as the 'tiger lady' and, like Blake's 'tyger', Marianne will do what is 'instinctual', 'savage and *right*' (*Shaking* 306).

The ending of the novel is slightly troubling, however, because there is a sense that Marianne has forsaken every aspect of her 'professor' class, and that her assumption of power will be a reenactment of Barbarian patriarchal leadership, but this time by a woman. It is a sense that Carter articulates in 'Notes from the Frontline' when she says about herself that she was a 'confused young person [...] in the process of becoming radically sceptical,

that is, if not free, then more free than I had been' (*Shaking* 38). What this also indicates is that the trajectory of moving into power is itself a process, beginning with an inversion and usurpation of what has gone before.

4.2.7 Mukherjee's Freaks

Mukherjee's short story 'Loose Ends', from *the Middleman* collection, concerns Jeb, a crazy Vietnam Vet who kills for a living. I discuss this story to demonstrate that Mukherjee's concern with issues of belonging and othering focuses not only on women but on all those who fail and fall out of mainstream America. In a number of her works, she portrays the loners and the cranks who battle their demons of the past and become alienated and estranged. The character of Jeb represents the way that the Vietnam war has scarred the lives of young people, leaving them marginalised, existing in an 'always-Christmas Saigon', a city of 'touts and pimps', amongst the 'locusts', the 'sharks' and the 'pythons', occupying the underbelly of middle-class America; an underbelly which holds up the 'good' Florida of 'trimmed hedges', 'lawn bowlers and blue-haired ladies' (*Middleman* 50). The story examines how people are turned into 'others' and questions how America deals with its own outcasts, not only its 'foreigners': for those living on the margins and feeling excluded, foreigners may seem to be the unfair recipients of all that an idealised America has to offer. Jeb wonders 'Who let these guys in?' and he concludes by counting himself in the category of demeaned racial other: 'We're coolie labor in our own country' (44). The confrontation between foreign 'aliens' and American misfits beggars the question of who is the stranger/freak and who belongs.

Jeb cannot move past his appetite for the kill: 'in Vietnam he was 'the Pit Bull' and, despite the consequences, 'the appetite [for killing] remains, after the easy targets have all been eaten' (45). After a botched 'job', where he has executed a young woman sleeping beside his primary target, he comes home to 'stale tangled sheets' and an absent girlfriend (*ibid.*) and he decides to head out West. On the way he is beaten up by some small-time thugs and is forced to hitch a ride, ending up in a motel which is hosting a family reunion and is full of 'little brown people sitting cross-legged on the floor [...] and eating with their hands [...]. They look at me. A bunch of aliens and they stare like I'm the freak' (52). Jeb, the 'true' American, the 'vet', looks down on the 'brown people' as outsiders, oddities and aliens; yet,

as he waits to be shown a room and they talk amongst themselves – ‘the women jabber, but not in English’ – he feels forgotten, neglected, alienated: ‘I feel left out, left behind. [...] They got their money, their family networks, and their secretive languages’ (53).

The notion of insider/outsider is rendered problematic and poignant by the narrative being told by Jeb in the first person. He believes *he* is the one who should belong and *they* should be the outsiders – ‘Don’t any of you dummies speak American?’ The only way he knows to make himself visible and potent is to use violence: ‘I verbalize a little seething, and when none of the aliens take notice, I dent the prefab wall with my fist (ibid.). For Jeb, all the ‘brown people’ look the same except for the ‘one luscious jailbait in blue jeans’; she volunteers to show him a room. Once there, he catches her look of ‘disgust’: ‘Distaste for the likes of me’ (54).

Jeb’s experience in Vietnam, and its aftermath, and the girl’s look of revulsion, unsettle and unnerve him. Earlier in the story, he considers how America has gone ‘down the rabbit hole’ with Alice – an obvious reference to Alice in Wonderland. Now ‘down the rabbit hole’ means ‘down below’, to the room full of brown people sharing food and conversation which excludes him; his own country is no longer the ‘wonderland’ he knows. Alice, the apparent foreigner – ‘Where were you born, honey? Bombay?’ – now embodies America, a girl with a brown skin born in New Jersey (54). As the girl ‘sashays out of reach’, he grabs her, preventing her from turning into Alice and taking ‘America with her’. Jeb recognises that the ‘natural’ order has been reversed: the ‘brown people’ are no longer aliens but have come to represent America and family values. His scathing dislike of their strangeness is saturated with envy, a desire to be part of their closeness, and he takes his revenge for being cast out of the American family by pouncing on the girl and raping her violently, wanting to consume what he has lost. As he leaves the motel in his new stolen car, he yearns to ‘squeeze this state dry and swallow it whole’; he realises that he has finally turned into the thing he never wanted to be: ‘an inscrutable humanoid python sleeping on a bed of turds’, trying to devour what he feels is rightfully his but which never again will be (49). He himself has become a freak.

In ‘The Tenant’, another of the *Middleman* stories, the focus is on Maya’s provisional status as both woman and displaced foreigner, and on her sense of impotence in trying to shuttle

between worlds. Maya appears to fit in: she is a university lecturer, has had an American husband and has American friends and boyfriends. Yet, the form of the writing points to her provisionality: 'She is an American citizen. But.' (100); and then a new paragraph begins. Each dead-end 'But.' leads to an imaginary elsewhere, an unspoken past or repressed memory, a hiatus, which the text does not resolve. The 'dead space' (110) Maya finds herself in is the limbo between past and present, India and America: 'She has broken with the past. But.' (102). Maya constantly struggles with loss and trying to assimilate but she feels amputated, cut off, as expressed in the amputated writing form. Her attempts to belong make her fling herself into relationships with only Americans: she 'has slept with married men, with nameless men, [...] but never with an Indian man. Never.' (103). But this makes her feel unanchored and unable to hold her 'moral sense'; after sleeping with her first American lover, 'her tidy graduate world became monstrous, lawless' (106). Kristeva articulates precisely Maya's sense of estrangement in her description of the stranger's apparent aloofness: 'Not belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance' (*Strangers* 7).

In her new town in Iowa, where she is to teach comparative literature ('R.K. Narayan and Chinua Achebe'),³³ Maya is invited to the house of the Chatterjis – Dr Rab, a Bengali Brahmin, is a physics lecturer. Upstairs in the house she hears a 'tormented presence': 'The ghost makes its own vehement music. Maya hears in its voice madness, self-hate' (*Middleman* 105). 'Our poor Poltoo wants to marry a Negro Muslim', bemoans the uncle (106). This mad young man in the attic is a deliberate invocation and reversal of *Jane Eyre's* madwoman in the attic. But here the 'crazy, thwarted' student desires the new world; he wants to throw off the shackles of the past and the older generation's nostalgia for the old traditions of an imaginary India. Maya understands the 'confused world of the immigrant – the lostness' – and she knows that once 'you break one small rule' of your caste, as she has done, the whole apparatus collapses (106). She scorns the world of Dr. Chatterji who 'wants to live and work in America but give nothing back except taxes' (*ibid.*). Yet, the day after her visit to the Chatterjis, disturbed by the conflict evident in the house, and by Mrs. Chatterji's devotional Hindu singing, Maya heads for the periodicals room of the library, 'an asylum for homesick aliens', and searches the newspapers of India; here she finds the man of her

³³ An ironic comment on positioning in academia – who gets to teach what?

dreams, the 'one at ease in both worlds' (108-9). Despite her desire to move on, the Chatterjis have unsettled her; she feels that 'She has accomplished nothing. She has changed her citizenship but she hasn't broken through into the light, the vigor, the *hustle* of the New World' (110). The sense of being 'stuck in dead space' (ibid.) makes her reach back to a world of past ease and familiarity; moving forward with an eye turned to the past is impossible.

Waiting for her 'immigrant courtship' with Ashoke Mehta to develop, Maya is given notice by her landlord to vacate her apartment. She finds a new room; the landlord is a man with no arms, but he explains that his 'kids are both normal; he's the only freak in the family' (112). Over the months she develops a companionable relationship with Fred: 'Two wounded people' he tells her. 'It will shock her, this assumed equivalence with a man so strikingly deficient. She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same, she would have thought, as being a freak' (ibid.).

Mukherjee's analogy itself may come as a shock: that the inability to take hold of the opportunities that the new country offers as a fully engaged person *is* indeed equivalent to being a person without arms, a freak, who may compensate adequately for an amputated status but who nonetheless feels disabled and is perceived as such by those around him/her. While society may tolerate and even valorise a small measure of difference, in general the feeling of being a freak is produced by a social world fitted to the able and the normative. Finally, Maya moves out and moves on, but her trajectory is uncertain and possibly, like her name, illusory; she may indeed remain the 'melancholy lover of a vanished space' (Kristeva *Strangers* 9). It is an identity and space that Mukherjee rails against, increasingly pushing her characters to make affirmative choices embracing their new country, becoming 'mongrelised', in contrast to the foreigner described by Kristeva 'who survives with a tearful face turned toward the lost homeland [...] a dreamer making love with absence', and so remaining disabled (ibid. 9-10).

4.2.8 Freaks in Early Carter: Aspects of the *Femme Fatale*

Otherness may be enacted in various ways, sometimes appearing excessive rather than inadequate. The *femme fatale* as an icon or fetish flits across many of Carter's works,

beginning, in a slightly perverted form, with Ghislaine in *Shadow Dance* and reaching its apotheosis in *The Passion of New Eve* in the figure of Leila/Lilith. Rebecca Stott observes that the *femme fatale* comes in many guises but is always 'Other': 'she is always outside, either literally [...] or metaphorically, for as sexually fatal woman she represents chaos, darkness, death...' (qtd. in Tonkin 137-8). According to Melanie Bell, 'Sexuality is the defining feature of the *femme fatale*' (46), a sexuality that is dangerously and flagrantly different.

Joanne Hershfield contends that the *femme fatale* is not just the object of male erotic desire and anxiety, but she is also the '*subject who desires*' (117). A similar point is made by Elisabeth Bronfen who views her as a 'tragic feminine heroine': 'the problem with reading the *femme fatale* as a stereotype of feminine evil' is that it removes any agency from her; 'what if, rather than treating her as a fetish, projection or symptom, one were to treat her instead as the subject of her narrative?' (299). For Bronfen, this means reframing the *femme fatale* into 'a separate subject who has agency' and treating her as a resilient powerful woman who does not avert her gaze and who is aware of her destructive power (ibid.). In this regard, Bronfen suggests that her interpretation of the *femme fatale* exceeds both a feminist interpretation in which the *femme fatale* is viewed as a symptom of 'patriarchal anxiety' about feminism and/or women, and a psychoanalytic interpretation which sees her as the embodiment of the death drive. Instead, Bronfen advocates that she should be viewed as a subject who chooses the consequences of her actions, not a victim 'who is punished for her transgressions or for the desires she elicits' (300). Indeed, courting death – and finding it – can be an exercise of power, 'the mode of salvation' for the *femme fatale* (301).

In Carter's first novel, published in 1966, she begins a flirtation³⁴ with the *femme fatale* in the characters of – ironically – both Ghislaine and Honeybuzzard (the androgynous male protagonist who spins a web of sexual destruction).³⁵ Ghislaine, a beautiful, fragile, young girl, in love with Honeybuzzard, is mutilated and mutated by the red raw scar that streaks her face, the result of Honeybuzzard's bizarre and cruel attack on her. Ghislaine is 'a soft

³⁴ I use the word 'flirtation' advisedly because Carter's take on the *femme fatale* is always slightly parodic or skewed. Both in *Shadow Dance* and *Love*, the tragic 'heroines' finally turn their destructive power on themselves, giving themselves up for sacrifice or taking their own lives.

³⁵ While elements of the *femme fatale* appertain to Honeybuzzard, despite his gender - his dangerous, even fatal, sexual allure, for example – I have confined my discussion here to Ghislaine only.

and dewy young girl [...]. She had such a little face, all pale; and soft, baby cheeks and a half-open mouth [...]. And she was so light and fragile and her bones so birdy fine and little and her skin almost translucent.' (2). The portrait here chimes with Carter's depiction of Marilyn Monroe, the cinematic icon of the fifties, whose 'childlike candour and trust [...] is always absolute and always betrayed' and who, like Justine, sets herself up for martyrdom in trying to protect her virtue (*Sadeian* 63). Carter describes Monroe as the 'living image' of Justine – and it is a portrayal not far from that of Ghislaine : 'their dazzling fair skins are of such a delicate texture that they look as if they will bruise at a touch, carrying the exciting stigmata of sexual violence for a long time' (*Sadeian* 63).

Ghislaine does indeed openly bear the 'stigmata' of both sexual violence and her sexuality. Her beauty is shattered by the knife of Honeybuzzard: 'The scar went all the way down her face [...]. The scar was all red and raw as if, at the slightest exertion, it might open and bleed; and the flesh was marked with purple imprints from the stitches she had had in it. The scar had somehow puckered all the flesh around it [...]. The scar drew her whole face sideways' (*Shadow* 2-3). Carter's repetition of the word 'scar' in these successive paragraphs turns it into a kind of fetish, iterating the horror of its appearance and the act that produced it, and also emphasising the alignment between the female genitals and the red rawness of the 'cut'. Camille Paglia notes that the 'woundlike rawness of female genitals' suggests their inevitable association with 'chthonian nature', the muddy earth and the obscene underworld: they are 'lurid in color, vagrant in contour, and architecturally incoherent (17).³⁶ The scar marks Ghislaine as monstrous; it overwhelms not only her, but also Morris, Honeybuzzard's friend, and the other characters too: 'The bar was full of her friends but none of them would say a word to her because they knew [...] about the scar and why she wore it' (6). The reference to Ghislaine 'wearing' the scar, and the reasons for it, are ambiguous: did she invite the cut because she has 'worn' her sexuality shamelessly and seductively and now 'wears' it brazenly – or does the 'why she wore it' refer to their knowledge of Honeybuzzard's vicious attack and their complicity in it?³⁷

³⁶ According to Freud, every woman bears the mutilation of the 'cut', the mark of castration (See Jacobus 119).

³⁷ Carter seems to insinuate that every woman 'wears her cut' unavoidably but most try to hide it; I think Carter has some admiration for Ghislaine's brazen if immature display.

Ghislaine's former friends and lovers turn their backs on her as a way of distancing themselves from the monstrosity of what has happened to her and their own culpability in the act. According to Sage, Ghislaine 'represents all little girls made of sugar-and-spice and all things nice'; compounding this image is the fact that her father is 'an agent of the Almighty, hence she becomes Honey's sacrificial lamb' (*Angela* 13). But she is not merely a victim; she is also an agent in this process: she invites Honey to be her 'master' and to have him do with her what he likes. For all of her little-girl fragility, Ghislaine is not the suffering, virtuous Justine; this role falls to Edna – Morris's wife – with her downtrodden anguish and overwhelming desire to nurture, her 'great well-springs of tenderness' that would drown a man in compassion (*Shadow* 158). Rather, Ghislaine resembles the *femme fatale* who 'typifies the subversive violence inherent in beauty and a light heart' and whose luminescent transparency 'shows up all the spiritual muck in the corners' (*Shaking* 351). Morris is desperate to get rid of her and the only moment when he feels any human sympathy for her is when he sees her laid out dead: when 'her little-girl giggle' is choked out of her and when her 'voracity' and 'hungry mouth between her thighs' is crammed with death (*Shadow* 178). Morris is overwhelmed by what he sees as the engulfing monstrosity of Ghislaine's femininity (recalling the metaphor of the monstrous Scylla). In terms of a psychoanalytic explanation of the effects of the *femme fatale*, the only way he can free himself of his irrepressible desire and concomitant guilt is by destroying her (see Bronfen 291).

Ghislaine chooses the role of victim in a blatant display of sexuality and vulnerability and she elects to preserve this role in perpetuity by giving herself up eagerly to Honeybuzzard. With a clear nod to Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Honey profanes all that is supposedly holy by murdering her, the daughter of a clergyman, in the presence of a plaster figure of Christ and setting up the room where the murder takes place as a sacrificial chapel with bier surrounded by the flickering flames of candles (see *Shadow* 176-179). Ghislaine finally opts for a form of power that is fatal: in succumbing to Honeybuzzard in a ritualised performance of self-immolation and theatricalised sacrifice, she turns her power on herself rather than on her lover, and self-destructs.

Freakishness in Carter's earlier works (especially the Bristol trilogy)³⁸ is a way for her characters to explore their own neurotic and very sixtyish obsessions with love, masquerade and death. The anarchic sense of liberation that permeated the sixties – sex, drugs and rock 'n roll – and its languor and almost posed disillusionment infuse Carter's early fiction and give it the impetus and freedom to confront death and choices around sanity and madness. R.D.Laing,³⁹ Thomas Szasz and Timothy Leary⁴⁰ provided a context to challenge mainstream notions of normality, and radical populist politics romanticised ideas of the imminent collapse of bourgeois society. Carter's early novels rise to these occasions, exploring and challenging conventions, providing a picture that is complex and not easily divided into 'heroes' and 'villains', and also steeped in the pop culture of the time when 'freak' took on a counter-establishment meaning, and 'freaking out' was a state to pursue.

Carter casts her characters as strangers and freaks as a way of demystifying mythology and critiquing the stranglehold it exerts on the formation of identity and gender. Freaks are transgressive: they breach the borders of convention and normalcy. Sage explains it this way: 'It is one thing, Carter seems to be saying, to demolish the bourgeois security of family and home, and to get out from under the power of the patriarch, but it is quite another to escape the bad magic of mythologies' (*Angela* 18). In the end, Ghislaine's attempt to exert agency through her freakish behavior merely registers as a flutter. Sage rightly points to the agency that Ghislaine demonstrates in courting death, and for Ghislaine, it may be the case, as Bronfen has noted, that 'she comes to discover her freedom precisely in her embrace of the inevitability' of her death (289). Yet, ultimately this is not the route to female empowerment that Carter valorises in her later work. The *femme fatale* is too imbricated in the gaze of male desire to become a true New Age woman. That is left to the powerful and ambiguous freak, Fevvers.

4.2.9 Fevvers as Freak

³⁸ The early novels that appear to be set in Bristol: *Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions* and *Love*.

³⁹ Carter states, 'I was a student when Laing's *The Divided Self* came out to form an instant focus for self-identification for young people away from home for the first time; they had to open a new ward in the local madhouse to deal with the resulting plague'; Laing tapped into a generation where parental control was being ditched and the significance of selfhood was pre-eminent (*Shaking*, 56- 7).

⁴⁰ Sage notes that Donally in *Heroes and Villains* 'is a drop-out Professor in the manner of Timothy Leary' (*Angela* 18).

In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers as the icon of a new era is neither delicate nor neurotic. She is larger than life, over-determined, symbolising the Winged Victory, Helen of Troy, Venus, and even an angel. But she is also a robust, loud, vulgar – and sexually active - woman. Characters like Ghislaine belong to an experimental past. Carter's female characters develop and mature through her novels, traveling from Ghislaine in *Shadow Dance*, through Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* who stands uncertain on the cusp of a changing world order beyond the reaches of her villainous uncle, to Marianne in *Heroes and Villains* who seizes power for herself and is ruthless in her avoidance of victimhood, although not in her ability to avoid replaying the myth of power. But in Fevvers, Carter produces an empowered winged woman – 'a new kind of being' – who can laugh at herself and the world, and fly out of a few mean tricks too. In the following section I deal with designated episodes from *Nights at the Circus* that underline the significance of Fevvers as freak. The novel has been comprehensively critiqued and offers itself as an extended canvas for a plethora of interpretations;⁴¹ however, here I restrict myself to merely a few examples of what freakishness can offer to the vision of the New Woman.

Nights at the Circus is the story (many stories) of the winged aerialist Fevvers, the 'Cockney Venus' or 'Helen of the High Wire' who displays her talents in music halls and circuses throughout the world at the *fin de siècle* of the 19th century. Her 'steatopygous perspective' and 'red and purple pinions' (*Nights* 7) are proudly exhibited on a giant French poster in her London dressing room; in the poster, she shoots like a 'preposterous' rocket towards her unseen trapeze, bursting the bounds of her earthly constraints. Over the course of the narrative, together with her guardian/mother, Lizzie, a committed Marxist, Fevvers travels across continents, frequently missing disaster by a feather as she tests her limits. Carter's opening page of the novel alludes to a vast array of signifiers from history and literature: the mention of steatopygia and the 'Cockney Venus' on the French poster is a reference to the display of Saartjie Baartman (or Sarah Bartmann), the 'Hottentot Venus', in England and France in the early 1800s as a spectacle of freakish exoticism and female monstrosity,

⁴¹ See, for example, monographs by Aiden Day, Sarah Gamble, Linden Peach, Lorna Sage and Helen Stoddart; edited collections including Bristow and Broughton, Allison Easton, Rebecca Munford and Sage; book chapters by Mary Russo and Shirley Peterson in particular; and others referred to throughout this thesis.

hovering on the boundary of the exemplary.⁴² The full figure of Fevvers – she was a ‘big girl’ – connotes both the ancient figurines of Venus which were fetishistic icons of fertility and ‘Germany’s Herculean Venus’, Kate Sandwina, whose circus posters (and Barnum and Bailey publicity) billed her as “The Most Beautiful ... The most Skillful ... The Strongest of the World’s Women” (Lindsay 358). In contrast, Fevvers’ ‘blonde’ aspect and her ‘ascent’ to the ‘wooden heavens’ of the *Cirque d’Hiver* suggest the Botticelli Venus rising from the sea on a giant shell, the archetypal image of feminine beauty. Fevvers’ reference to Helen of Troy hints at her own mythical origins – the not-quite human – as well as the ambiguity of Helen as beautiful and seductive, but possibly treacherous.

Whereas *Nights at the Circus* is written as if it were a 19th century novel detailing the adventures of a woman performer at the turn of that century (1899 to be exact), it also seems to allude to a real *fin de siècle* novel of that time: *La Jongleuse*, by the female French writer Rachilde.⁴³ *La Jongleuse* (‘The Juggler’) was published in 1900, distilling the French preoccupation with ‘all things foreign’ (Gantz 944). Rachilde’s protagonist, Eliante, like Fevvers, is exotic, seductive, and indecipherable: she is ‘at once black and white, a collector of foreign treasures, and an evasive sexual prize herself’ (ibid.). She exhibits a decadent exoticism, combining a mysterious beauty ‘with the menace of an unknowable, indeed illegible danger’ (945).⁴⁴ Like Eliante, Fevvers also ‘has the uncanny ability to import the exotic (herself included) into the domestic sphere’, purposefully and spectacularly articulating her difference from those around her (ibid.). Eliante is born in the colonies and celebrates her native roots, refusing assimilation, although mastering the language of the local French bourgeoisie. Similarly, Fevvers extols the (dubious) circumstances of her birth and her early years spent in a brothel, mothered by a multitude of prostitutes. But her final coup of difference is visual, the site of her scopical allure: at puberty she begins to grow feathers, the ‘notorious and much-debated wings, the source of her fame’ (*Nights* 7).

⁴² Numerous references to the display of Sarah Bartmann as ‘Hottentot Venus’ are in circulation: see, for example, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Black Venus*, Sandra Ponzanesi’s ‘Beyond the Black Venus’ and D. Willis (ed.) *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”*; also Meg Samuelson’s chapter on ‘Sarah Bartmann: Recast and Re-covered’, to name but a few.

⁴³ As far as I am aware there have been no critiques dealing directly with Carter’s use of *La Jongleuse* as a major influence on *Nights at the Circus*. While Tonkin refers to Rachilde’s novels in the context of Carter and the decadent, she does not make specific reference to her borrowing; but the character of Eliante and her enigmatic exhibitionist strategies strongly suggest an influence on Carter’s formulation of Fevvers.

⁴⁴ Eliante also seems to be a referent for Carter’s story of ‘Black Venus’ discussed earlier and published a year after *Nights at the Circus*.

Whether Fevvers is a freak of nature or a masterful technological fabulist remains uncertain: Carter never discloses her 'true' story. Her capacity to fly is undercut by her 'lumpen' mannerisms and huge body; she is certainly no Ariel or blithe spirit, and her origins themselves are contested. Fevvers – an unreliable story teller⁴⁵ – tells Walser, the American journalist who has come to write a story on her, that she, like Helen of Troy, did not come through 'normal channels' but was 'hatched'. Carter sets up uncertainty not only about Fevvers' origins but also about her status on the reality continuum: 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' Does 'she' exist? – with the emphasis as much on the question of identity, an interrogation of the possibility of an integrated, coherent 'she', as on the 'fact' of her existence. The uncertainty and ambiguity about who she is and where she comes from – her 'strangeness' – is precisely the appeal of her act. Her alterity articulates the way in which freak shows of the time were dependent upon the principle of consumption (see Gantz 946). In fact, Fevvers is 'rumoured to have started her career in freak shows'; her 'conspicuous deformity' offers her fame but also confirms that she is 'always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye' (*Nights* 14, 19).

But Fevvers turns the tables: in setting herself up as a spectacle of 'otherness' before a mainstream audience, she takes deliberate control of the gaze of the spectators who come to see her perform and who yearn to see her mystery unmasked. (The directness of her gaze is remarked on repeatedly throughout the novel, for example: 'She subjected Walser to a blue bombardment from her eyes, challenge and attack at once' [54]). She displays her high-flying skills⁴⁶ and freakish body at the Alhambra Music Hall, upsetting stereotypes and assumptions about female identity and form, while at the same time emphasising her exotic and erotic status, and capitalising on it. In his early classic text on decadent sensibility, *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz highlighted the connection between the exotic and erotic: 'the

⁴⁵ Reliability is one of the sacred cows of the realist novel which dominated British fiction at the time that Carter began writing (Andermahr 11); the reliability of the narrator is increasingly challenged in her novels. In *Wise Children*, Dora is a notoriously unreliable story teller, the name itself harking back to Freud's patient, from which case study he built his theory of hysteria.

⁴⁶ Rachilde's Eliante has a passion for juggling: her capacity to exhibit her skill in front of a French audience provides her with a sense of power. According to Gantz, 'Her display of often-conflicting visual identifiers allows Eliante the inherent freedom of living as an enigma, one who captivates through a seductive hybridity of cultures and discourses' (945/6).

exotic and erotic ideals go hand in hand [...] a love of the exotic is usually an imaginative projection of a sexual desire' (207).⁴⁷

Fevvers' spectacular exhibition is a star turn not only for her but also for Carter's attack on the male gaze which she portrays as desire masquerading as science: an attempt to pin down and dissect the truth as a cover for hiding the excitement and titillation offered by the mystery of the female body. The character of Fevvers offers Carter the opportunity to expose the fascination with contrariety – a desire to know that is often more erotic than scientific and which confirms Leslie Fiedler's view that the desire to uncover the freak is often carnally driven (137). But more significantly, it enables her to offer freakishness as a counter to normative femininity and as modality of power.

The narration of the first section of the book is almost entirely shared between Fevvers and Lizzie through their story-telling and conversation, so that the narrator becomes secondary – a device also used by Rachilde (see Gantz 951). This allows for variety not only between voices but within the same voice: Fevvers shifts between Cockney slang and highbrow intellectualism unpredictably. The defamiliarisation of the contrary discourses occurs through their juxtaposition and enables a radical interrogation of both the signifier of 'voice' and the tale being told. The 'truth' of the story itself as well as the contradictory sound of Fevvers' voice and manner of speech is undercut in the opening sentence of the novel: "'Lor' love you, sir!" Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. "As to my place of birth, [...] I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*.'" (*Nights* 7). Here identity, gender, class, voice, and the story itself are all rendered unstable.

With humour and irony, Carter quickly demonstrates the seductive capacity of artifice and enigma.⁴⁸ Walser is captivated by this freakish wonder-woman and her physical incongruities: 'It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife

⁴⁷ Praz notes that for European writers the Oriental space is the one where 'all the most unbridled desires can be indulged' (207). In a nice reversal, Tomi Suzuki, observes that in the novel *Chijin no ai* by the Japanese writer, Tanizaki, the West, in contrast to the Orient, is seen as exoticised space (see *Narratives of the Self*). Carter reviews the same novel under the title 'Naomi', remarking that Naomi 'stands for all the allure of the exotic [...] The power and strangeness of the West has been eroticised' (*Shaking* 268).

⁴⁸ Felski, in her discussion of Rachilde's novels, quotes Jean Baudrillard: "'Seduction never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice'" (*Gender of Modernity* 190).

[...] Her dark, rusty, dipping swooping voice, imperious as a siren's' (*Nights* 43).⁴⁹ The final metaphor suggests the goddess Isis who is often likened to a hawk or kite as she swoops and dips to find the dead Osiris and resurrect him – or at least revitalise his phallus – in order to copulate with him (see Pardes 90-1). Within the multifaceted description of her voice, contradictions abound: Fevvers is both 'celestial' and a 'fishwife', simultaneously queen-like and vulgar, commanding and coarse. The simile of the siren suggests a jangling loud noise but also conjures an alluring, dangerous woman (*femme fatale*) and the Greek mythological winged creatures, the sirens, who lured unsuspecting sailors to meet their death on to the rocks (OED 2004.). Immediately following this description of Walser's inconsistent and unsettling experience, the trustworthiness of Fevvers' voice and her human facticity is undercut: 'Yet such a voice could almost have had its source, not within her throat but in some ingenious mechanism or other behind the canvas screen...' (*Nights* 43). The type of hybridity evoked here in overblown imagery postulates a form of the grotesque advanced by Bakhtin, which is the mingling of incompatible elements that 'unsettles any fixed binaryism' (Stallybrass and White 44). In short, the picture that emerges is of a spectacular freak or an extraordinary, undecipherable female.

In the second and third sections of the novel, Fevvers and Lizzie embark on a series of journeys which sees them as the intrepid explorers of far-off places as they travel across the frontiers of the world, having adventures that are marvellous and outrageous. The idea of two women as explorers of the vast interior – first in St Petersburg and then Siberia – is Carter's parody of the colonial male adventurer on two levels: firstly, Russia (rather than Africa) is figured as the unknown foreign land (behind the Iron Curtain, as it were); and secondly, Lizzie and Fevvers subvert the patriarchal paradigm of the male colonial 'desire to illuminate the dark continent of black femaleness, of racial and sexual alterity' (Ponsanezi, 'Beyond' 171). The two women travel to the 'dark continent' of a land that evokes twentieth century Western anxiety: they not only explore and enter the virgin's 'curtain' but also uncover the one that hides the future communist menace. In contrast to the colonial adventurer who aims to penetrate, colonise and transform other lands and other people,

⁴⁹ Fevvers' fantastical tale of her childhood takes control of the story as, ironically, she leads Walser on a dance of seemingly endless discoveries, including a re-evaluation and re-modelling of himself.

their explorations result in encounters that are transformative of *themselves*, leading to unexpected and frequently liberating outcomes.

Fevvers' configuration as freak occurs throughout the novel; but as her 'freakishness' is challenged, she must relinquish some of her masculine traits in order to encode a more self-accepting aspect of femininity. In the second section of the novel, Fevvers, Lizzie and Walser (now in the role of embedded journalist as circus clown) find themselves in Petersburg for the grand circus tour of the great capitals of the world. Walser is mauled by one of the circus tigers – according to Fevvers, a "'Tigress. Female of the species. Deadlier than the male, and all that.'" (113-4) – and Fevvers must nurse him (reluctantly although efficiently) back to health. Walser's brush with the tiger also implies an encounter with his 'unrepressed subconscious' symbolised by the tiger (*Shaking* 306): that is, he has been put in touch with his feminine energy. Walser will descend further into himself, via the magic and irrationality of the Shaman, to whom he is apprenticed, in order to become 'not the man he had been or would ever be again; some other hen had hatched him out' (291). He too is rebirthed, suggesting that he has become not like other men (under patriarchy) but totally altered, a 'new age' man.

Fevvers also undergoes a transformation. Her first mishap is her near-fall on the flying trapeze. The Charivaris, who compete with her to be the best act on the high wire, begrudge her popularity; their revenge is to cut her safety rope: 'Her wings quivered and the little feathers round the edges nervously whipped the air. But she showed no fear, even if she felt it' (159). Whether she had been in 'real danger' is unclear and Walser wonders at the paradox: if she is a freak of a nature – 'a *lusus naturae*' – then she is no longer a wonder, no longer 'an extraordinary woman [...] but – a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster [...] always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged' (161). Walser can see that such a creature is no longer 'woman'; but he feels she *must* be a woman in order to mean something: 'As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none' (ibid.). As an anomaly she will become – like all other 'freaks' of the time – 'an exhibit in a museum of curiosities'. This then is the conundrum – how to be fully a woman and retain her uniqueness?

Soon after, Fevvers nearly comes 'unstuck' again. In the Grand Duke's palace in Petersburg she greedily covets his diamonds and jewels. But while viewing the jewelled eggs in his display cabinet, she begins to feel an 'increasing sense of diminishment' and 'deadly danger', which is accompanied by the audible melting of the life-size ice-sculpture of her (190). Allowing the Duke to nuzzle her feathers – 'he deserved something for going to so much trouble' (191) – she realises that she has been ushered into a room with no windows; at the same time, the Duke uncovers her emblematic Nelson's sword from within her corset, snaps it in two and hurtles it away. The sword is Fevvers' own phallic property, her access to masculinity and a power which is now undermined. Marianne Hopman notes that early portrayals of the *femme fatale* in Greek and Roman mythology show her appropriating masculine characteristics (123).⁵⁰ Fevvers is a parody of the *femme fatale*, but she is similarly an unstable and unknowable figure who uses her charms to seduce men while withholding herself and refusing to be dominated by them (see Bronfen 298).

As the duke breaks *her* sword, Fevvers masturbates him; his ejaculation results in *his* diminished power (his broken sword) which enables Fevvers to escape in a moment of magic: the last bejewelled egg that Fevvers opens reveals the *Trans-Siberian Express* train. Fevvers senses that the 'Grand Duke's time was nigh' and, as he ejaculates, she 'dropped the toy train on the Isfahan runner [...] ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first class compartment and clambered aboard' (192). In 'those few seconds' of the Duke's lapsed consciousness, Fevvers escapes, and the reader is left gasping at the audacity of the sleight of hand: the toy train encloses both Lizzie – 'Look what a mess he's made of your dress, the pig' (ibid.) – and Walser. Within one line of text all the characters are back to life-size within a fictional reality as the train hurtles on to the next adventure. But the experience with the Grand Duke occasions a major re-evaluation for Fevvers of her power and vulnerability: greed and hubris find their own limits.

The final section of the book – 'Siberia' – begins with a humorous and ironic exchange between Fevvers and Lizzie: Lizzie first accuses Fevvers of 'acting more and more *like* yourself' (197) and then adds in contradiction, 'What I mean is, you grow more and more like your own publicity' (198). This opening, together with the fact that the narration of the

⁵⁰ Hopman comments that the sword is a weapon to ward off the threat of castration, used by Odysseus, for example, but also by Clytemnestra and Medea (120-23).

story moves backward and forward between the first person in the voice of Fevvers and the third person narrator, indicates a change in the way that Fevvers is perceived, by herself, by her company, and by extension, the reader: her spectacle and spectacular display diminish as she comes to inhabit her persona – but the contradiction put forward by Lizzie, that she is growing more like her publicity, hints that Carter might still be playing with the fact/fiction paradigm. The changing narrative voice, the train travelling ‘in the middle of nowhere’, Fevvers’ sense that ‘we have no right to be here, in all this *gemutlich* comfort, stuck on our fat bums down this straight track from which we never deviate’ (199) suggest that the stability and reliability of the place and the narrative may be derailed at any moment – as indeed it is: the train is blown apart and Fevvers fractures a wing. And then the whole circus troupe is abducted.

In a clear reference to her own Year One where ‘all that was holy was in the process of being profaned and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings’ (*Shaking* 37), Carter has Lizzie acknowledge that Fevvers is truly the emblem of the New Woman about to begin a new age. When Fevvers retorts, ‘Well who *am* I supposed to be like, then, if not meself’, Lizzie answers: ‘You never existed before. There’s nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One. You haven’t any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create’ (*Nights* 197-8). This is the coda for the creation of a new reality where woman is free – although to get rid of the ‘colonialisation of the mind’, to move from ‘freak’ to ‘woman’, Fevvers must still undergo a number of transformative rituals, while always retaining her ‘singularity’. Becoming the New Woman means resisting being constructed by the particular gaze of others: this possibility represents the ‘worst crisis of her life’, a colonisation of self, and equivalent to Fanon’s moment of being ‘fixed’ by the ‘white gaze’: ‘Look! A Negro!’ (*Black* 95, 91). Fevvers begins to shiver with fear and horror when she senses that others come ‘to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself’ (289). When she sees herself ‘trapped forever in the reflection of Walser’s eyes’, in the Shaman’s hut, she begins to waver, to doubt herself. As she begins to spread her feathers – on the instruction of Lizzie – she feels she may fail to reestablish her power: she spreads one wing in ‘partial and shabby splendor! No Venus, or Helen, or Angel [...] only a poor freak down on her luck’ (290). But as she senses the awe and

wonder of her new audience and reframes the lamps in the hut as footlights, her spirits return, she is again the star of her show: 'She would be the blonde of blondes, again [...] And of course her wing would mend' (290). 'Monstrosity' recuperated from its patriarchal encoding is the key to Fevvers' uniqueness and power.

Fevvers does not retreat into what Carter called 'culs-de-sac of infantile mysticism' [sic] – here represented by the Shaman – which Carter sees as attempts to escape from asking questions about the nature of reality (*Shaking* 37). Fevvers reclaims those aspects of artifice that make her what she is – she embraces them and uses them to stake her singularity. She is proud of her freakishness as long as it is bold, brazen and life giving: 'She batted her lashes at him, beaming, exuberant, newly armed. Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut, all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner plates' (*Nights* 291). Her need for exhibitionism together with her affirmation of uniqueness – her freakishness – in order to feel powerful again complicates the issue of the encoding of female display in a patriarchal paradigm, and it is a complexity with which Carter engages fully in the character of Fevvers. On the one hand, Fevvers refuses to be trapped as a reflection of what others want to make of her; on the other, she needs an audience of her choosing to make her feel powerful again – she needs theatre and spectacle. She chooses to exhibit her oddity and her larger-than-life body so that she can control the gaze rather than be controlled by it. This is a counter-response not only to Laura Mulvey's proposition that only men are the 'active "bearers" of the look, while women are the passive objects of it' (Stoddart 26); it is also a challenge to a dominant ideology that stigmatises bodily difference as freakishness or monstrosity.

Carter seems to be suggesting here that it is not the gaze per se that generates the problem of determined femininity (or freakishness in a culture of spectacle); in fact, the experience of subject-hood is dependent on our relation to others. But it is the ability to control the gaze, and make it reciprocal, that informs how the self is perceived and encoded; when control of the gaze is in the hands of the subject – as it is when Fevvers is 'herself' again – it grants agency and power to the subject, and the power can be precisely in terms that construct the female figure as erotic. If the woman takes charge of her exhibition and displays herself knowingly, then she also takes charge of her eroticism, her '*looked-at-ness*', in the words of Mulvey (11); she determines how she is seen and how she looks back.

Returning to Russo's 'danger of exposure' in regard to women who transgress boundaries, I propose that Fevvers' excessive exposure of herself recuperates the transgressive danger of appearing monstrous and turns it into power. When Fevvers takes charge of the gaze – and purposefully gives her audience something outrageous to gaze at – she rids herself of the mythological interpretations that others try to place on her, represented by the Shaman's chants and magic potions, and she recovers her potency: 'Hubris, imagination, desire! The blood sang in her veins. Their eyes restored her soul. [...] she put on a brilliant artificial smile, extending her arms as if to enfold all present in a vast embrace' (291).

The lesson that Fevvers comes to learn through all her adventures and travels is that while she may be 'Year One' and she may feel, as Carter did, 'the sense of limitless freedom [...] of a new kind of being' (*Shaking* 40), such freedom comes from a 'strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality' (38). In the first section of the novel, Fevvers explains to Walser her feeling on realising that she could fly: 'I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes; I only knew my body was the abode of limitless freedom' (*Nights* 41); by the end of the novel, that limitless freedom has been tested and she understands that there are indeed limits. There is a sense, by the end of the narrative, that Fevvers has grown up, and breaking a wing – understanding the parameters imposed partly by history and place – is part of that process.

Ultimately, what it means to be a New Woman does not mean relinquishing singularity (in the case of Fevvers, a singularity figured as freakishness and enigma) but understanding that singularity involves choices as to how to be in the world; being unafraid to take risks while simultaneously being rooted in history and material conditions. The novel ends with Fevvers still looking freakish – the 'size of a house' – lecturing Walser on socio-political issues (influenced by Marx) and maintaining her enigmatic proposition of whether she is 'fact or fiction'. Her infectious laughter which moves across the world gives nothing away: as she crouches over Walser lying naked beneath her, with him puzzling over her reputed virginity, she bellows with laughter, marvelling: 'To think I really fooled you! [...] It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence' (295). And the reader too is left wondering and marvelling ... But it is an ending that fits with Carter's entire oeuvre and her life; it suggests that it is precisely the confidence to go out on a limb and to be seen as singular – to be fearless and

extraordinary – that capacitates transgression, enabling a sense of liberation and power – for the stranger, the freak, and woman.

4.3 Avenging Females and Wanton Women

Mukherjee and Carter have flouted convention and risked damnation by creating female characters who engage in violent or ‘bad’ behaviour that is characteristically ‘unfeminine’, unexpected and unapologetic. From Carter’s depiction of a reformulated and sexually charged Red Riding Hood who laughs in the face of fear in ‘The Company of Wolves’ and Mother, the four-breasted rapist and castrator in *Passion of New Eve*, to Mukherjee’s Devi Dee who pillages and murders in *Leave it to Me*, both writers have crafted a cast of characters who repudiate prescribed gender roles and who refuse to acquiesce in a patriarchal order that demands female passivity. Their behaviour, whether overtly sexual or violent or vengeful, is neither mythologised nor excused.⁵¹

4.3.1 Female Violence and its Representation

In Western representations, women who commit acts of violence tend to be demonised to a far greater extent than their male counterparts both in real life and in fiction; such women, regardless of the provocation, are considered transgressive, unfeminine, anti-social and ungovernable. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, in their study on the depiction of violent women in global politics, make the point that violent women present an image that is counter-normative: ‘*women* are not supposed to be violent. This is one tenet on which various understandings of gender seem to converge’ (2); the belief that ‘violence is a man’s domain’ is commonly held, even amongst groups of feminists (226). When women are violent, not just their acts are demonised but their gender is at stake: they are regarded as perverse and perverting of their femininity.⁵² When the violence of the act is unpacked, it is

⁵¹ More recently, some women writers have been trying to break out of the mold of the ‘Unawoman’s taunting presence’ to celebrate ‘the odd, the witchy, the talented’, and to use carnival, humour and blasphemy to ‘disrupt the rigid order of social conditioning’ (Berens and Sharp x). However, such attempts at resistance still remain scattered.

⁵² See Sjoberg and Gentry for a discussion of the presentation in the media of women torturers in Abu Ghraib, for example, as evidence of the marginalisation and demonisation of women, while appearing to foreground their interests (81-87).

the female as the agent of violence that represents the real horror, referencing Karen Horney's contention that man's 'dread of woman' elides into 'woman as "malignant, capable of any crime"' (qtd. in Jacobus 116). Accordingly, narratives that attempt to explain women's violence counter its horror by minimising women's agency, ascribing their behaviour to craziness or malevolence (monstrosity), sexual deviance or a fierce mothering instinct (5, 13). This stripping of female agency holds true both in real life and in representations of female violence.

Yet stories from Judeo-Christian and Hindu mythologies seem to contradict the above; female Hindu deities that deal in both death and love, violent destruction and nurturing revival, provide a rich cultural reservoir for Mukherjee's characterisations of female avengers.⁵³ Jasmine, for example, transforms into Kali to avenge her brutal rape. The Old Testament too tells of women defeating armies through their violent acts.⁵⁴ Both Carter and Mukherjee cross over in their cultural referencing, drawing from multiple contexts. Carter, for example, invokes the Hindu goddess Kali, showing how images of her intersect with the classical depictions of the monstrous female, in particular Scylla and Medusa; she describes Durand in *The Sadeian Woman* as a 'version of the Terrible Mother' Kali who 'dances upon severed heads, juggles with limbs, wears necklaces of skulls and copulates with corpses. Snakes issue from her vulva' (*Sadeian* 115).⁵⁵ On the other hand, The Book of Judith from the Judeo-Christian tradition (referred to in the previous chapter) is particularly relevant to Mukherjee's *Holder of the World*: Hannah, the protagonist, mirrors its portrayal of woman as avenger and redeemer.

Despite her heroic act of redemption, Judith's story is excluded from the canonical Jewish and Protestant texts, attesting to the fact that violent acts committed by women, even in the context of saving the nation, are ultimately not valorised in a patriarchal context.⁵⁶ Rita Felski contends that the revolutionary subject is traditionally coded as hyper-masculine, and women involved in radical political acts – such as Judith and Hannah – are regarded

⁵³ Badri Narayan highlights that Hindu culture provides scope for the image-making of powerful women leaders in contemporary politics 'since women in Hinduism have a dominating role as Durga, the savior' (160); the cover of Narayan's book shows a woman with outstretched sword riding a rearing horse.

⁵⁴ Yael drives a tent peg into the head of Sisera, commander of the Canaanites (Book of Judges).

⁵⁵ Images of Scylla show her with a waistband of dog heads, for example.

⁵⁶ According to Margaret Stocker, 'The Book of Judith' is marginalised to the Apocrypha, indicative of patriarchy's difficulty with this story of woman's power (13).

contemptuously, often by women as well as men (*Gender* 163).⁵⁷ As the avenging female, Judith not only preys on Holofernes' desire (rather than have his desire prey on her) but she vanquishes him. In so doing she evokes the male anxiety of castration and engulfment: she becomes the usurper of masculinity as she cuts off the enemy's head (his phallus) with her phallic sword and returns victorious with her spoils of war, represented by Holofernes' head in her victuals bag.⁵⁸ (Significantly, Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* also keeps her magic sword for times of trouble, but when it is broken by the Grand Duke she has to resort to more feminine methods of saving herself). Hannah too is registered as hyper-masculine: her attempts to save Jadav Singh from being killed by the enemy not only result in her being vilified by his mother for belittling her son's masculinity, but also result in the prince himself casting her out for overstepping her boundaries by arrogating his male privilege and bringing his rule into disrepute.

Hinduism and its cultural and religious repertoire enable Mukherjee to write the figure of the avenging female as the destroyer of evil and oppression and the creator of a new world order. It also allows her to explain the implications of violent female protagonists to a Western audience. In an interview with Tina Chen and SX Goudie she speaks about the significance of violence in her work and the fact that most Hindu Bengalis worship the Godhead as Kali: 'You can see for yourself that Kali isn't one bit passive. She has strung herself a garland of severed heads, and She's hefting Her blood-stained weapons to decapitate more evil men' (95). She relates that, '[t]he cosmology that my characters and I inhabit derives very much from the Puranic tales [...] that every Hindu child is told' (ibid. 79). The translation of violent goddesses into avenging females who also appropriate the ideology of the American dream and are driven by individual desires is, however, the nub of Mukherjee's transgressive imagining. Her mongrelisation of Hindu and Western iconography and mythology, the yoking of Eastern traditions with modern Western science and particularly American idealism is where the energy of her avenging females converges.

⁵⁷ Phoolan Devi, the Dalit 'Bandit Queen', committed to avenging crimes against women, spent years on the run and in jail, before being elected to parliament where she held office for two years before being assassinated.

⁵⁸ Judith's action recalls the voracious mouth of Scylla and the vagina dentata that can bite off a man's phallus.

4.3.2 Transgressing Gendered Taboos

The value of shock in literature is not ‘a blithe herald of future freedom from all tyrannies and oppressions’ but rather a wake-up call, drawing attention to the obstacles that block the path to such freedoms and facilitating a new way of envisioning a future (Felski, *Uses* 110). For women, transgressing gendered taboos, such as violence and pornography, enables a modality of seizing power. According to Makinen, Carter’s work helped to critique the idea of men as aggressors and women as victims by putting forward ‘affirmative representations of sexually violent women’ (150); in particular, *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, both published in the seventies, had the effect of unsettling an essentialist feminist viewpoint represented by the anti-pornographic feminists, such as Angela Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. The representation of pornography and violence as a way of transgressing gender-stereotypes explodes the idea of how ‘feminine’ women should behave. In arguing for opening up the debate on taboo subjects, Harriet Gilbert suggested that women have a need for literature that wrestles with issues of ‘sex and violence, love and death’ (228). Loretta Loach also comments that while pornography ‘may reinforce traditional sexuality, [...] it apparently overturns it too’; women interviewed about the effects of pornography said that ‘it gave them power [...] by releasing themselves from what they described as taboos’ (270). According to Carter, in Sade’s pornography the combination of sex and violence, traditionally embedded in the world of men thrusting themselves upon women (as the weaker sex), presents women with the right to thrust themselves upon men, ‘to fuck their way into history’ and to use their sexuality as a means to agency and to changing the world (*Sadeian* 27).

In her introduction to *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, Carter comments that, in general, women’s waywardness refers primarily to sexual profligacy in a patriarchal world.⁵⁹ Her advocacy of women’s wantonness – suggested by her *Bloody Chamber* stories and *The Sadeian Woman* – revolves around the promotion of egalitarianism; it is about making a space for women who ‘share a certain cussedness, a bloodymindedness’ and a determination ‘to evade the victim’s role by the judicious use of their wits’ (xi). While I have focused primarily on female avengers in the following discussions, it is important to bear in

⁵⁹ See earlier discussion on Hannah’s arrival on foreign shores in *Holder of the World* and her wayward nature.

mind that Carter was intent on pulling apart the myths that hold women 'in place' and which resist giving them equality in both personal and public forums; these myths are particularly strong in areas of sexuality and violence.

4.3.3 Mukherjee: The Avenging Female

The following analyses focus on Mukherjee's sketching of female avengers in three novels. The work follows a trajectory, moving from the female avenger in *Wife* who resorts to violence as she grapples with the violence of relocation and the stultification of expectations, to Jasmine who avenges her rape and seizes agency to transform her life, and finally to Debi/Devi who seeks out the parents who have abandoned her, embarking on a killing spree in the process that perhaps takes her too far.

Wife, an early novel written in the 70s, deals with a young woman who, according to Mukherjee, is 'the embodiment of the transitional figure', caught between traditional cultural values and a sovereign India that has 'newly established women's rights' (Interview with Clark). The story deals with the psychological unravelling of the protagonist, ending in her committing murder. While Mukherjee anticipated that the novel would be read as ironic and amusing, her reading public did not see it that way; instead they were immersed in a story of violence and revenge portrayed in graphic detail. Dimple, the wife, does not have the tools to negotiate a blending of the old and the new, and she suffers the effects of unfulfilled desires, unrealistic dreams and dislocation produced by the encounter with a changing world and a new country. The humour of the writing, achieved through bathos and an amused, wry depiction of the protagonist, is undercut by allusions to insidious seams and cracks which bubble through the narrative.

Dimple's first night of marriage constitutes her obliteration: she faces the reality of becoming an Indian wife and forfeiting her name to a mother-in-law who demands she be called something different. She is not prepared for immigration; in the USA she will become a woman with no name. Increasingly, she struggles with the conflict between striving to be Sita – 'the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband's request' (6) – and her own longings to be loved like a Hollywood starlet. In moments of self-assertion, she begins to do crazy things: providing tea for two acquaintances, she continues

pouring even when the cup is overflowing: ‘She had not expected protest to be so enjoyable’ (153). She becomes increasingly obsessed with violence and death, expressed in Mukherjee’s florid, shocking imagery: ‘she thought of two more ways to die. One was to stand under a warm shower and slice open the jugular [...]. She could see pretty jet sprays of pinkish blood. They flared toward the ceiling of the bathroom, then fell backward and ran down her breasts and shoulders. She would like to make one extravagant gesture in her life’ (153-4). Violent death seems to be the only way to make herself substantial and significant; alive, Dimple feels like she only has ‘borrowed disguises. She felt like a shadow without feelings’ (200). Her sense of estrangement and entrapment is the consequence of being caught between foreignness and wifely duty in a place that is not home and can never be home.⁶⁰ She has no sense of her own being in the world except by invoking excess, reflected in her baroque visualisations, and by taking back her name with a vengeance: through violence she believes she can become substantial.

Despite the dark undercurrents of the text and the focus on killing, when Dimple finally murders her husband, it is unexpected. While Mukherjee asserts that ‘In India unhappy wives commit suicide’ (Interview with Clark 2), here, after months of ruminating on all the variations of suicide, Dimple turns the knife on her husband in what Mukherjee suggests is ‘her misguided act of self-assertion’ (Interview with Hancock 24).⁶¹ Dimple’s life has become so caught up in spectacle that she can no longer distinguish between what she sees on the television screen from real life; in the end she is not sure whether Amit’s severed head is really detached from his body – ‘still with its eyes averted from her face’ – or whether she is seeing it on TV or in her imagination (*Wife* 213). The novel’s end is brutal and banal: Amit’s head sits on the kitchen counter (aligned with the ‘chopped chicken and mutton’) and Dimple ruminates out loud whether her acquaintance Leni ‘could make a base for it; she’s supposed to be very clever with her fingers’ (ibid.). In her imagination, the trivial and the dramatic share equal space.

⁶⁰ This sense of feeling estranged and disembodied is similar to the way Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* feels when she is dislocated from her own family and home and forced to live in a place that is alien: Melanie was ‘forever grey, a shadow. [...] All this was taking place in an empty space at the end of the world’ (77).

⁶¹ According to Chakraborty, Dimple’s act of stabbing her husband seven times ‘repudiates the seven ritual steps taken to seal the Hindu marriage bond’ (7).

Mukherjee captures Dimple's mental disintegration with acuity: her vacillating between preoccupations with violent death on the one hand and mundanities on the other; her uncertainty about what is real and what is imaginary or virtual. Psychologically, Dimple's behaviour can be understood in terms of her complete self-estrangement; her self-inflicted pain (her refusal to eat, her abortion) is both an attempt to control her environment and to register the materiality of her own being in the world. But whether her murder of Amit can be construed as an act of liberated self-assertion is questionable. Despite the parodic style, the characterisation of Dimple reinforces the stereotype of the trapped woman whose only way out is through madness, whose only method of escape from the conflict between traditional mores and the requirements of adapting to the new world is through fantasies of romance and violence. The final sentence of the novel, 'Women on television got away with murder' (213) indicates Dimple's disorientation and dislocation from reality: ultimately she sees herself as an actor in a television 'soapie', so that her agency is completely stripped away.

While Dimple's unravelling seems to chime with the 'female' monstrosity discussed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the angel/madwoman binary has been critiqued as reductionist and simplistic.⁶² bell hooks calls it 'a false dichotomy which depoliticizes feminism and ignores the reality of women's lives, particularly poor and working-class women, as well as women of color' (qtd. in Maglin and Perry 6). Mukherjee too claims that Dimple must be seen in context – as a young Indian woman struggling to assert herself in a new environment. She has reacted against feminist prescriptions (particularly from the 70s) on how women should resist power, believing that these do not take account of political and cultural differences of women outside of the American feminist rhetoric. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see how Dimple's 'monstrous' act can be recuperated to assert women's power. In reply, Mukherjee asserts that there is no 'right' way to fight domination, that her female characters resist by 'utilizing the tools at hand': for example, 'fasting is a way of exercising that power' (Interview with Connell, et al 49), just as for Aunt

⁶² Carter disdained 'the mystification of female virtue and victimhood' promoted by Gilbert and Gubar; Sage notes that 'feminist literary history habitually attributes to "madness" and marginality a rather suspect status' (*Women* 168).

Margaret, in Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, withholding her voice is a way of resisting her husband's patriarchal oppression.⁶³

Yet, it is in the writing itself that Mukherjee boldly defies convention: her descriptions of Dimple's reveries on the ways to kill herself are shocking and transgressive in the graphic detail of the violence; the representation of violence, even if not the characterisation of Dimple, exceeds all boundaries of propriety and functions as a sardonic and biting commentary on what happens to 'nice' girls when they are torn apart by the competing demands of tradition and accommodation.

The novel *Jasmine* presents the evolution of the female avenger in Mukherjee's work: now the protagonist owns and discards many names and reinvents and asserts her identities many times over. Unlike Dimple, Jasmine is not torn apart by competing demands; instead, she becomes the tornado that tears apart worlds in order to cut her own swathe in the universe. Born Jyoti, she is nearly strangled at birth by her mother 'to spare her the pain of a dowryless bride' (40). At seven years old she has her fortune told by an astrologer in Hasnapur: 'widowhood and exile' (3). But Jyoti is feisty and determined to 'reposition the stars'. And indeed, to some extent, she does just that: within the framework of the original Hindu prophecy, she becomes a fast-tracking American girl. She charts the Hindu pattern of destruction and rebirthing, using her fluid outsider status to reinvent herself repeatedly; but she also follows the American dream, continually moving westwards, pushing her frontiers, refusing to get stuck in a dead end place. This fusion of Hindu and American world views enables Jasmine to engage with both her destiny and her destination, creating new lives out of violent destruction; it also signifies Mukherjee's positive spin on the notion of 'mongrelisation', the active and energising engagement with and fusion of different cultures.

Jyoti, who at first cannot even bring herself to call her husband by his first name, allows him to change her name to 'Jasmine' in order 'To break off the past' (77); soon after, she witnesses his death at the hands of sectarian assassins. In deep mourning she travels in his imagined footsteps, leaving behind her country and social networks – as the prophecy has foretold, she is widowed and exiled. 'I phantom my way through three continents' (101),

⁶³ Passive or non-violent resistance intersects with the idea of withholding, not using brute force to oppress the oppressor, according to Mahatma Gandhi.

and finally she crosses the seas to the land of 'freedom' (the crossing of the Kala Pani is only inferred by the great changes effected in her life and in her deprivation of status). Once there, she is helped ashore by Half-Face and duped into believing his offer of help. When the 'help' turns into abuse and rape, her first thought is to kill herself: 'to balance my defilement with my death' (117), but the misted mirror from the steaming shower in the motel bathroom means she cannot see herself clearly: she cannot make a clean cut to her neck. Suddenly she confronts the realisation that her 'sense of mission' is incomplete: to bring her dead husband's suit to America and burn it at the school where they had intended to live. Realising that 'Lord Yama' (god of death) has not yet embraced her, she casts off the attempt by her rapist to brutalise and diminish her and becomes coldly ferocious as she transmutes into the avenging, powerful Kali, Hindu goddess of destruction and redemption. First she slices her tongue so that it drips 'hot blood' into the sink; then, enacting the image of Kali standing over the corpse of her consort Shiva, she hangs over Half-Face, 'red tongue out' and 'pouring blood', and with a quick sharp action she pushes the blade of her knife deep into his throat, 'while blood, ribbons of bright blood, rushed between his fingers' (118). Here, again, the writing is full of lurid and graphic detail; but in this novel the story is narrated in the first-person by Jasmine and has the effect of affirming her agency. As the blood congeals on her body, she reflects: 'What a monstrous thing, what an infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human life' (119). And yet, she remains calm and indifferent, and begins her journey, 'traveling light' (121), her monstrosity turned into an image of power.

Jasmine's act of murder announces her agency and launches her into a series of transformations, first as 'Jazzy', the girl trying to make it as an American, looking like one of those 'Trinidad Indian girls, all thrust and cheekiness' (133. Cf. 'Jasmine', the short story). Determined not to be pulled back into the world of ancient traditions (148), she becomes a child-minder, Jase 'the day-mummy', to the daughter of Taylor and Duff, academics living in New York. She then moves to Iowa as Jane, pregnant lover and help-meet of Bud, a newly-wheelchaired farmer, and step-mother of Du, a Vietnamese orphan. Finally, she leaves Iowa's flat land and the safety of 'In Here' (21). Although she has 'seen death up close' and survived, her departure from Iowa makes her weep: 'I cry [...] through all the lives I've given birth to, cry for all my dead' (241). Now she is determined to go 'somewhere', to escape from 'old-world dutifulness', to grab the 'promise of America [...]. Adventure, risk,

transformation' (240). In so doing, she becomes a potent force – the result of what Marina Warner calls a '*force majeure*' in referring to Angela Carter's transgressive women who 'produce themselves' through the coupling of 'power and pleasure' ('Bottle Blond' 258). In stark contrast to Dimple, the force that is Jasmine/Jase is full of energy and vitality, chasing hopes and dreams; it may leave in its wake the debris of shattered lives but it is nonetheless one that embraces life and opportunity. The exuberance of Jasmine recalls Bataille's notion of sovereignty: the refusal 'to live servilely' and the choice to make 'the transition from compression to explosion' involves 'violence which is constant', signifying the transgression of taboos and the thrill of life (*Erotism* 145).⁶⁴

Mukherjee recognises that 'Jasmine isn't necessarily a good person. She's a blackmailer, she's forced into becoming a murderer. She dumps a good, crippled man who loves her....' (Interview with Connell et al 52). But she is also someone who has learned to make the most of her breaks. She cannot go backward; she is a woman on the make, 'an activist', who according to Mukherjee, 'ends up being far more feminist than the women on Claremont Avenue who talk about feminism' (ibid. 53). In my interview with Mukherjee, she revealed that she had intended to end the novel with Jasmine staying with Bud because of guilt and wanting to do the right thing. But it suddenly dawned on her: 'I can't end it this way – this is going backwards, it's a regression; it's like my mother would have wanted. She has to be reckless and make something of her life'.

Of all Mukherjee's work, *Jasmine* has garnered the most attention from critics. It reveals the possibility of turning life around, of grabbing hold of destiny and appropriating the monstrous as an image of power, putting it to work for self-transformation and self-fulfillment. The figure of Jasmine as a powerful female transgressor is crafted from various cultural milieus; she partakes of American mythology, which Deepika Bahri stresses is itself multivalent and fluid (142), reflecting Jasmine's own fluid and unfixed identities, and Hindu cosmology, intertwined with canonical literary texts like Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. It may be one reason that the text provokes wide-ranging and

⁶⁴ Bataille comments: 'Human life cannot follow the movement which draws it towards death without a shudder and without trying to cheat' (*Erotism* 146).

often controversial views.⁶⁵ Mukherjee believes that Jasmine is a 'love goddess' who seduces her readers: and indeed, Jasmine best expresses the liberatory impulse of the female avenger.

Recklessness, liberation and individualism are at the core of Mukherjee's most violent novel, *Leave it to Me*, which tells the story of Debby/Devi, a serial killer who, like the Indian goddess Devi, becomes the Warrior Goddess that 'wipes demon blood off weapons and puts them away for the next time they are needed.' (6). As a baby Debby is abandoned in India 'like a carcass in the mangy shade' by her mother, a traveling hippy, and her father, a 'no-good Eurasian' (10). She is saved from death by Catholic nuns and sent to America where she is adopted by the Di Martino family, decent Italian-Americans. But Debby feels she has 'no weight, no substance' (ibid.); like Dimple, she feels amputated from her past, haunted by the 'unclaimable part' of herself, her genetic origins, and 'the monstrous cravings of other Debby's hiding inside' (18). After she murders her boss-turned lover who has spurned her for another (his mother's choice), she finds 'the tiger balls' within her – the tiger as a metaphor for female power is one she shares with Carter – to make up for the loss of her pride (53). From inner peace after the first murder, she graduates to celebration as she closes in on tracking down 'Mother'. One of the key themes here is obsession: a compulsive need to trace her roots (an American fixation) which is also tied to sexual desire and pursuit (mirroring the Biblical Eve whose desire for knowledge is intimately tied to sexual knowledge).

As she ferrets out facts and moves westward, Debby changes from dutiful fun-loving American girl into Devi, a violent force of nature and the archetypal avenger. Her journey is attended by a rising body count as she accumulates the 'grief and outrage' of other peoples' stories, (Sage 'Wrath').⁶⁶ In the final build up to her murderous revenge on 'bio-dad', on a house-boat in Sausalito Bay, she watches him strangle her lover Ham and then hack off his head, 'cursing as he worked to ease the blade out of the bone [...] Then the thump of Ham's severed head falling to the floor' (*Leave* 234). Devi claims her 'violent propensities' as a

⁶⁵ These range from accusations that Mukherjee has looted American culture (Drake) to arguments that say she has exoticised her origins (Verhoeven) or expressed the 'colonialist fantasy' (Carter-Sanborn) or misinterpreted or misrepresented one or both cultures (Bahri).

⁶⁶ Lorna Sage's encouraging review appeared in the *New York Times* on July 20, 1997. Sage presents another moment of confluence between Mukherjee and Carter: she is the foremost critical exponent of Carter's work.

huge wave catches bio-Dad off-guard and she plunges the meat cleaver into him: 'The cleaver fuses to my arm. It soars and plunges, soars and plunges'; her last screaming words are "Monster!" as she cradles Ham's 'tormented face' to her bosom. As in *Wife*, the novel ends with a decapitated head cleaved off its base and the protagonist waiting for the police. But the repeated image opens up new possibilities: here Devi 'musters the full power of vengeance' to fight the demon buffalo and vanquish him (6); yet she is still capable of feeling the pain of human loss, with her own agency remaining intact. Her act is accompanied by the force of natural disasters which save her from the law: an earthquake, the eruption of fire and the 'sky hissing into sea' (239). She has become the vengeful goddess with the 'will to save and the strength to kill' (5); she is also the American girl who has fulfilled her mission.

Leave it to Me was first published in 1997. At the time, reviews of the book ranged from lukewarm to scathing. One critic regarded the novel as veering towards becoming 'a parody of a Bharati Mukherjee novel [...] in which her favorite themes have warped into didactic obsessions' (Kakutani qtd. in Burton 94-5).⁶⁷ When I mentioned to Mukherjee that *Leave it to Me* had evoked a 'difficult' audience response; she replied, 'Well, at the time, I think it was too much for readers. She really is transgressive. They couldn't deal with a serial female killer' (Personal Interview). While some critics seek to project Devi as the all-American rebel, an example of overbearing individualism (see Vandana Singh), absolving South Asian cultural iconography from any connection with a character so obviously 'monstrous', it is patently clear that her character is based on the Hindu goddess Devi whose story is outlined in Mukherjee's prologue. Yet, she is indeed also the product of American culture and socialisation in her search for her identity and her determined quest for resolution of her roots. In the mingling of worlds, Mukherjee brings together Hindu 'cosmology' and the Greek myth of Electra, placed within the context of how the Vietnam War affected young Americans (evident in the description of the Haight district and its legacy of drop-out veterans). According to Andrea Daska, 'The daughter who pays for the sins of her parents and initiates the inevitable cycle of revenge and guilt is not only the stuff of Greek tragedy [...] but might come to haunt the narratives of America's future as well' (236). Sage agrees that the novel may be regarded as 'visionary vengeance on American hubris, a triumph of

⁶⁷ See also Michiko Kakutani's review for the *New York Times*, 24 June 1997: C18.

alien genes, Devi as a force of nature. Yet it also seems to contain a mocking attack on the very notion of speaking for outsiders'; through the character of Devi, Sage claims that Mukherjee 'is laying claim to speak for an America that isn't "other" at all.' ('Wrath'). This conundrum seems to be at the centre of the novel; like her earlier story 'Loose Ends', it questions the effects of the past on the present and how outsiders get to be defined – and indeed whether the notion of outsiders is pertinent at all, for the myth of the American 'melting pot' suggests that the terms insider/outsider are themselves contradictory.

And in the end, the question remains: does revenge pay off? In trying to find a space of belonging, can the deadly price exacted by Devi as avenging female be justified? The question of what makes female violence seductive and/or repulsive is of course difficult to deconstruct and even harder to articulate sympathetically in narrative form. While Mukherjee's worship of the Goddess Kali is clearly a great influence on her writing, she articulates her difficulty in trying to 'dramatize the benignity of non-attachment [the Hindu goal] without making characters appear uncaring or grimly stoic' (Interview with Chen and Goudie 96). In *Leave it to Me* she wanted to make the concept of divine justice intelligible for her readers – that sometimes 'divine justice' involves great violence – and the Goddess Devi provided her with that paradigm (Interview with Ron Hogan 118). Yet I found that she was reticent in confronting the violence of her characters in any deep or meaningful way (Personal interview). She shrugged off the question of the violence of so many of her female protagonists, perhaps not because of reluctance but because she had no simple answer. Although she grappled with articulating the possible liberatory and exhilarating rush for female readers when they read about women perpetrating violence, her work belies her reticence: aside from the violence that her characters enact, her writing itself graphically paints the violence in bold and splashy colours.

The first of Mukherjee's three novels featuring female protagonists who have 'violent propensities' (*Leave* 232) begins tentatively with Dimple in *Wife* who is insecure and, until the last, unsure whether to assert her will against herself or her husband. Here, Dimple's weak mimicking of the mythical Judith finale (beheading the oppressor and conceiving of his severed head in culinary terms) may signify some form of liberation for Dimple but it provides little evidence of empowerment. Jasmine, more certain of her desire for transformation and more willing to take risks and act independently, grasps the American

frontier mythology and its concomitant promise of unlimited opportunity. Her journey is grounded in a sense of her own sovereignty and suggests a possibility of future fulfillment. Devi, in a desire to avenge her past and make her own way in the world, takes the frontier myth to excess: her move westwards to hunt for her biological parents ends deep in the fault lines of the San Francisco Bay Area and, like her own, they are split open by the huge earthquake, the 'Big One': in Devi's case the split occurs at the moment of too much information, when it seems that she has finally found the truth about the identities of her mother and father. This truth is overwhelming and brings little resolution, only pain and violent deaths. Having taken 'a god of a special time and place' as a guide, Devi is left drifting out to sea; she has killed her monster father but has she in fact liberated herself from the monster within her? Can she truly rebirth clean, with her sins burned off by 'God's breath'? (*Leave* 9). In her cautionary note on the fairy tale of Bluebeard's Castle, Carter records that curiosity is a dangerous thing. Devi finds out just how dangerous it can be.

4.3.4 Carter's Wanton Women and Avenging Females

The figure of Kali was significant for Carter too: the character of Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* – the monstrous, four-breasted, surgically-enhanced, technologically-crafted self-creator – consciously evokes the four-armed and fearsome black goddess of power and destruction, the goddess of time. Makinen asserts that Carter scorned the romanticising tendency to turn women into nurturing and fructifying all-good mother-goddesses. She understood that the wicked step-mother was as much a part of 'real' mother as anything else, and that Kali 'enshrines the death-dealing indifference of real Nature' (161).

Carter's tales of avenging females are however of a different order to Mukherjee's; her characters are either not human, as in the case of the puppet who comes to life in 'The Loves of lady Purple', or they reflect a sardonic commentary on a populist politics of extremism ('Elegy for a Freelance') or they are polemical (*The Sadeian Woman*); sometimes they represent portraits of historical figures as in the Lizzie Borden pieces, a shift from 'poetry' to 'history' that she made in her later years (Langlois 205). Carter commented that violence, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator, is 'the convulsive form of the active male principle' (*Sadeian* 22) and the 'whip hand is always the hand with the real political

power' (ibid.24).⁶⁸ By writing about women who could wield the whip, her characters are invested with 'monstrosity': they embrace their violent and especially erotic impulses fearlessly. Both Lady Purple and the narrator of 'Elegy', like Juliette, enact this embrace and 'abandon the praxis of femininity' because being a woman 'is to be automatically at a disadvantage in a man's world' (*Sadeian* 78). But in general, Carter's avenging females are less flagrant; they use humour and parody to reveal the structures of domination as they unabashedly pursue their erotic cravings and avenge their objectification by turning men into objects of desire or vengeance, viewing them as 'loopholes' (a nice play on the word that she used frequently) to claim power. They will never exist in the 'passive case' (*Sadeian* 77). The young girl on the cusp of womanhood in the reworked Red Riding Hood tale ('Company of Wolves') enters the forest 'afraid of nothing' (*Bloody* 114). When she encounters the wolf, she laughs in his face as she rips off his shirt and flings it in the fire; 'in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing' she indulges her sexual passion. She is 'nobody's meat' (118).

In 'The Loves of Lady Purple', from the *Fireworks* collection, , the heroine is a puppet who comes alive, kills her docile and adoring puppet master, and marches off to fulfill her rapacious sexual desire. Her 'entire biography as a femme fatale' is man-made; if she destroys her puppet master the moment she comes to life 'then it is his own silly fault' for making her so sexually profligate in the first place (Carter, *Wayward Girls* x). She is 'a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent [...] the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive' (*Fireworks* 31-2). She fulfills every fantasy of the male sexual imagination, from her 'lascivious' voice to her exotic 'unappeasable' appetite (33). In the pursuit of violent carnality, she develops a 'profane mastery of the instruments of power' (*Sadeian* 79): 'she was not a true prostitute for she [...], the sole perpetrator of desire, proliferated malign fantasies all around her and used her lovers as the canvas...' (*Fireworks* 37). She takes to 'murdering her lovers' just for pleasure. Paradoxically, she is the artist, the creator, and her puppet-master only the means for her to exercise her power on her company. She gains entry to the real world by 'a mysterious loophole', sucking the breath and blood from her master (43). Breaking loose

⁶⁸ This is an interesting parallel with Hunterwali, 'the lady with the whip', who became an iconic figure in Indian films of the 1930s and 40s as a symbol of liberatory exhilaration. (Since she was white, the 'virtue' of her adoring public remained unsullied). See You Tube.

from her strings, she is now free to exercise her 'demonic will'; she sets fire to the theatre, makes her way, 'like a homing pigeon' (46) to the single brothel that the town contains, 'as contagious as the plague' and ready to continue her story of irresistible evil (38).

Here, then, is woman made not in the image of virtue but in the image of lust. As the puppet incarnation of male fantasy, her agency and danger are contained; she represents the pornographic display of unthreatening sexuality.⁶⁹ When she frees herself from her master's strings, she first exacts her revenge on him and then on all her subsequent lovers to become the ferocious, insatiable, murderous 'Queen of the Night' (31). The transgression inherent in the violent overturning of power-roles (the transposition of master and victim) may produce some cathartic effect (see Makinen 151), but Lady Purple's ending is itself foreclosed: if she fully enacts her puppet-master's story she will end up 'obliterated' by disaster (*Fireworks* 38). The hole at the end of the text leaves little space for the reader to draw a different conclusion. In 'Black Venus' Carter is more forthright: Jeanne Duval exacts her revenge by infecting her colonial masters back home in the colony with the pox while she walks about in the riches she has garnered from Baudelaire's estate. The ambivalently liberatory effect of 'Lady Purple' is that she avenges her domination by the puppet master and acts out the horror of his imaginary, but *her* rewards are doubtful. On the other hand, Carter seems to be admonishing patriarchy: 'Be careful what you wish for; your desires may consume you'.

In 'Master' (*Fireworks*) Carter suggests that there is no such thing as an innocent victim. The story pays homage to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; here Friday is a female 'noble savage' named as such by her Master whose 'vocation was to kill animals [...] He did not kill for money but for love' (91). Carter's irony is clear: Master's love is an orgiastic, orgasmic love of savagery: 'he would emit a ravished gasp when he saw the final spasm of his prey' (ibid). He wields the whip – or in this instance, the gun, which is both literal and sexual. Master brutalises and rapes the girl continually, inflicting pain on her 'as a sign of mastery' (*Sadeian* 22). Like Defoe's Friday she is reduced to silence, but out of her subjugated position she uses her wiles to 'learn a little of Master's magic', becoming an excellent hunter (*Fireworks* 98). She takes control of the gun, Master's phallic weapon, as he becomes weaker with

⁶⁹ Lady Purple enacts 'the reigning fantasy in male porn [which] is not rape, but women seducing men' (McClintock 113).

‘madness and fever’. Finally, she turns into the tiger-beast who avenges the death of all the others: ‘His prey had shot the hunter’ (102). Yet it is not the murder of Master that surprises, but rather the nonchalant and unexpected ending to the tale: ‘...now she could no longer hold the gun. Her brown and amber dappled sides rippled like water as she trotted across the clearing to worry the clothing of the corpse with her teeth. But soon she grew bored and bounded away.’ (102). As the avenging female, the girl exhibits the indifference of Kali. Her brutalised treatment renders her powerful but disinterested – no liberatory excitement here but rather parodic understatement suggesting that this woman-beast, at least, has no interest in the hunt and the kill beyond the vanquishing of her oppressor.

In the finale of the collection, ‘Elegy for a Freelance’, Carter explores the fragility of the binaries of belonging and exclusion, and the way these feed into power and its perversions. The story appears to be Carter’s fictional response to the savagery and sadistic excess of a radical breakaway group of the Japanese Red Army, which nonetheless retained the hierarchical structures and privileges for its central committee. Her journalistic piece, ‘Death in Japan’, published in 1972, registers her shock at the reported events: ‘It is not the scenario for a Godard film; unfortunately, it all happens to be true’ (*Shaking* 254-7). ‘Elegy’ sees the narrator and her lover X, the ‘master of creation’, living high in the attic, whereas the making of bombs takes place down below, in the basement. X is self-contained and in control; his female lover is defined by him: ‘I become your creation. I am your fleshly reflection’ (*Fireworks* 137). X aims to be the perfect assassin by ‘practising indifference’ (133); but when he is allotted to kill a politician, somewhere he ‘encountered an obstacle to indifference’ (141). Rehearsing for the ‘real’ killing, X kills their landlord, and afterwards he breaks down in sobs; full of blood stains, he babbles and spills his guts, as it were. The seepage of his bodily fluids – tears, blood, and finally excrement – literally de-contains him, melts him, but also rescues him from the indifference that he has been cultivating as the ‘authentic assassin’ and returns him to himself (133). Russo remarks that the ‘detritus of the body’ is frequently ‘placed with terror and revulsion [...] on the side of the feminine’ (2). X’s seepage stands on the border between self and not self – it is Kristeva’s abject, signalling the reminder of the feminine or semiotic which is essential to the articulation of humanity. Thus, this moment instantly defines X’s humanness, but also sets the stage for the narrator’s disgust at him and her transposition; she differentiates into independent, indifferent being

and takes on the mantle of her master, becoming what he could not be – ‘the authentic assassin’. After a mock trial, she and her revolutionary comrades arrange X’s execution. As the narrator slips the noose over his neck, X asks if she loved him and she, surprised – ‘It seemed to me so far from the point’ – replies, ‘yes, I *had* loved him and I tested the running knot.’ (150). Power has changed hands; she is now the ‘whip hand’ and he now the powerless victim. Her indifference is chilling in its banality. Love is absent and X has been cast out on the basis of his human frailty, his perceived ‘monstrosity’, his articulation of the feminine. On the other hand, the narrator adopts the pose of X so perfectly that her companion tells her, ‘... you are turning into a tiger lady when I always thought you were such a pussycat’ (151). The matter of fact style and emotional dullness underscore the horror of the violence, suggesting that an inversion of power roles proliferates the violence of patriarchy and entrenches its norms.

Carter’s style rescues the texts from moralising by way of its dark, sardonic humour; after the killing of the landlord, the narrator comments: ‘Then I felt a drop like a heavy raindrop fall on the back of my hand but it was not a raindrop [...] Horror! It was blood; and looking up, I saw the stain on the ceiling where the old man’s blood was leaking through. Soon he would begin to smell’ (*Fireworks* 152). The bathos here emphasises what Hanna Arendt called ‘the banality of evil’.⁷⁰

It is fitting that the *Fireworks* collection ends with this story; it is the climax of all the tales that deal with men being vile and women claiming men’s power, but merely effecting a reversal of gender roles rather than interrogating the consequences of power.⁷¹ Carter questions the logic of inversion at the end of ‘Elegy’: ‘Our illogic began to approach a kind of harsh virtue, although we looked at one another with veiled estranged eyes; who were we, what were we becoming?’ (151). This question underscores Devi’s acts of vengeance too: what are the effects and meaning of violence? Ultimately ‘woman masquerading in a male role is not [...] a particularly feminist strategy’ (Makinen 153). Moreover, such masquerade prevents the recuperation of women’s monstrosity from the patriarchal myth; indeed it may be even more damaging to women in that it suggests that the only way for women to garner

⁷⁰ See Hannah Arendt, ‘*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*’, 1963.

⁷¹ *The Bloody Chamber* which was published 5 years after *Fireworks* represents a more nuanced engagement with the complexities of power, vengeance and violence.

power is through mimicking the strategies of men. Carter suggests that 'male political dominance might be less a matter of moral superiority than crude brute force' (*Sadeian* 22); if women can wrest this force from men, then they can take control and reverse the notion that they were 'born to bleed' (ibid.23). But the danger is that they too can overreach themselves and become like Sade's Juliette, 'the embodiment of that merciless excess, that overreaching will to absolute power' (ibid. 103).

Unlike Mukherjee's characters, Carter's vengeful females exhibit little passion even for their mission. What they emphasise instead is this: 'A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder.' (*Sadeian* 27). These stories of vengeance demonstrate that where the 'victim role' is evaded by the replacement of one kind of tyranny for another, it produces little change to patriarchal structures of dominance; and it entrenches the myth of women's monstrosity. To make a difference women need to set a different course, one that creates an understanding of mutuality and compassion; this she leaves to her next set of short stories to demonstrate.

In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter finds a way to explore the paradoxical power of the 'monstrous' woman. Unlike Mukherjee's stories, here violence doesn't necessarily unleash a liberatory revelation of female power. Rather liberation is expressed in terms of the release of repressed sexuality and the open expression of wantonness, the smashing of imposed moral strictures and the search to accommodate difference and discover equality in relationships (see Atwood 136-7). The title story of the collection acknowledges that desire is beyond reason: 'the queasy craving' for 'the thousand, thousand baroque intersections of flesh upon flesh' (*Bloody* 22). In various ways the stories rework this theme, taking the motifs of fairy tales and reconfiguring them into stories of female sexuality and power. In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Wife' the tale of Beauty and the Beast is reimagined from two perspectives: both play with conventions of beauty and the seductive force of otherness which is signified by the beasts; dangerous and alluring, but also mythic, part of 'nursery fears made flesh and sinew' (*Bloody* 67). In 'Mr Lyon', Beauty repeatedly shrinks from being able to touch Lyon (but not from being touched by him) because he is so intolerably different. But significantly, two words are juxtaposed: monstrous and benign.

Beauty overcomes her fear of Lyon's 'otherness', and in so doing she transforms 'monstrosity' into a possibility of mutual care and respect.

In 'The Tiger's Wife' Beauty is a tougher kind of lady - 'my spite was sharp as broken glass' (55) – and she lets out a 'raucous guffaw' when confronted with the Beast's request to see her naked (58). But it is her father not Tiger who represents patriarchy's insidious control: he is a man in the last stages of debauchery, an addicted gambler, yet he governs her future: 'My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards.' (54). Finally, Beauty chooses to return to the Beast; refusing to be the object of his gaze, she becomes the desiring subject. She acknowledges her 'fear of devourment' by the tiger (an ironic reversal of man's fear of being engulfed by woman's sexuality) but offers herself as 'the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction' (67). Beauty understands that the only way to advance beyond the binary of lambs (women as victims) and tigers (men as beasts) is through fundamental equality in relationships: 'the tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal' (64). In stark contrast to the dénouement of the relationship in 'Elegy', Beauty's 'fearlessness frees them both' to become tigers in love (Jouve 159). In a burst of resounding energy, 'the reverberations of his purring rocked the foundations of the house, the walls began to dance' (*Bloody* 67); it is an ending that pre-figures Fevvers' spreading laughter at the end of *Nights at the Circus*.

The last three stories in this collection reimagine the 'red riding hood' theme, repositioning the girl's relationship to the beast. In 'The Werewolf', the child is a fearsome opponent: she slashes off the forepaw of the huge wolf – 'any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it' (*Bloody* 109) – and kills off the granny/werewolf, continuing to live and prosper in grandmother's house. The ending however is knowingly smug: happy-ever-after – but for whom? Innocence is never quite what it appears to be. 'The Company of Wolves' celebrates the girl's indulgence in 'savage' sexuality and finishes on a note of reciprocal exchange as she sleeps 'sweet and sound in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf' (*Bloody* 118). Finally, the culmination of 'Wolf-Alice' is the climactic representation of women's power to change not only themselves but also their companions: poignantly, 'the face of the Duke' – his human condition – is 'brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue' (126). With the above stories, Carter not only

disavows the idea of the innocent girl who is pulled into something beyond her control but she recognises that the girl also willfully appropriates for herself some of what the beast/wolf represents: she owns her capacity to mete out violence and to express her sexuality, she demands equality and in the process she returns the beast to his humanity.

4.4 Monstrous Women/Female Power

Carter was particularly concerned with the way that women's engagement with eroticism and violence seemed to provide opportunities for men to demonise women as monstrous. If Carter embraced the parodic and anarchic rebellion of the Dadaists (for a time, at any rate), she warned against the tendency to engage in 'erotic anti-feminism' which gave the appearance of women's liberation. After seeing a film by the Japanese director, Oshima, she leaves the theatre wishing that 'men would leave off making films about female sexuality until they stop feeling threatened by it' ('Japanese Erotica', *Shaking* 355). The film is based on a story about a maidservant who runs off with her employer's husband, accidentally strangles him in their sexual games, and then castrates him, using his blood to write on his body. She is found wandering around the city, caressing the decapitated and bloody member, crazed and wild. At the end of the film Carter hears 'some idiot braying', "'That was a liberated lady for you!'" As if erotic anti-feminism wasn't one of the great staples of all romantic art and we hadn't just seen a particularly glittering celebration of it' (ibid.). Her argument centres on the way women in these situations are portrayed – as crazy wild witches, demented and disheveled – hardly the stuff of women's power.

Carter critiques Oshima's film as being puritanical because 'No movie with the central message that the price of gratified desire is madness and death could fail to be puritanical' (357). This of course is where Mukherjee's *Jasmine* differs; in *Jasmine*, the post-coital killing has nothing to do with gratified desire and everything to do with avenging rape. While *Jasmine* stands over her victim with tongue dripping blood like the goddess Kali, her pose suggests power and vengeance. In contrast, when Oshima's maidservant stands over the corpse of her lover, her attitude is one of gloating. Carter's humour invokes and subverts

the standard response: 'I know Kichi-san [the lover] was asking for it; but that doesn't mean a girl has got to give it to him. Need female submission go so far?' (356).

Makinen asserts that textual violence (in women's writing) provides a forum to turn the tables, so to speak, so that 'women wield power and men are vulnerable to violation'; this 'turning the tables' has the capacity to generate catharsis precisely because the gender reversal in these acts is transgressive and places power in the hands of those who are, in general, subordinated and subjugated (151). Nonetheless, Marina Warner argues that it is almost impossible to appropriate the wild woman 'with her ungovernable female appetite' as a liberatory figure because the image feeds into society's notions of insanity and female culpability: 'The bad girl is the heroine of our times, and transgression a staple entertainment [...] But this defiance sometimes results [...] in collusion, it can magnify female demons, rather than lay them to rest, for men and for women' (*Managing Monsters*, 11). This possibility does exist; but I assert that Carter and Mukherjee take the risk, 'grasping the she-beast of demonology for themselves' (ibid.) to invest the monstrous woman with life-affirming power.

Carter and Mukherjee register the monstrous woman in different keys. For Carter, her monstrous female characters over-perform their construction through parody and laughter and engage it as a way to find reciprocity between people and to address the role of power between genders. *Fevvers* is the primary example of this. For Mukherjee, the avenging female breaks free of patriarchal constraints by shattering gendered taboos. Both Carter and Mukherjee express through their writing the enormous threat that such women pose to the patriarchal order. But the question of how women can unsettle hegemony sufficiently to disable and redistribute its power is the critical question for both. Their method of grappling with this is to galvanise their characters into action by enabling them to use what they have and what is thrust upon them, not just to get by, but to make something of themselves which emancipates them and affronts control. In reinscribing the monstrous woman, they liberate her from the stranglehold of domination, writing moments when 'recognition' produces its own sense of celebration and the text itself generates its own sense of power.

5. CONCLUSION

Elaine Jordan in her afterword to *the Infernal Desires of Angela Carter* opines that not enough has been done to examine the intersections between Carter and her contemporaries. Some comparative studies of Mukherjee's work have been undertaken – but primarily in the context of her being a postcolonial or ethnic or 'exotic' writer, categories that I argue keep her contained and prevent her writing from spilling out and engaging more richly with her contemporaries. This study has hoped to address these issues by exploring some of the works of Carter and Mukherjee side by side. In placing these two very different contemporaneous writers in dialogue, I have examined their connections and collisions, tracing the patterns and themes that surface in this process, and how they speak to each other or against each other, or at times, not at all. Despite geographical and cultural differences, dissimilarities of writing style and technique, and themes that appear disconnected, this study has revealed surprising areas of overlap and convergence between the two authors in the ways that they grapple with transgression as a performance of power. My comparative reading has positioned the tropes of carnival and chaos together, for example, to reveal that both paradigms valorise turbulence and disruption and to show how each writer stages these tropes to unsettle and undermine normative codes of conduct and hegemonic structures.

The central obsession for both writers is the question of power, particularly women's power, both sexual and political. They write of the margins and the low domains as places that are socially insignificant but symbolically powerful, and they engage with crossings of one kind or another – travel of texts, translation of characters – which sees their women characters vault across borders that try to keep them in place, creating opportunities for the articulation of female ascendancy. The monstrous woman, whether as foreign other, freak, avenging female or sexual predator, is conceived as a figure that symbolises patriarchal anxiety, and explodes it; it is the figure that both critiques patriarchal power structures and offers liberatory opportunities for reinvention and a re-visioned gender order.

Their narrative styles rupture borders too, disrespecting genre and resisting categorisation of form; as writers they have consistently refused to be labelled, either as a particular kind of feminist or a particular kind of genre writer. And both promote the significance of dissidence and transgression in making an impact on the world around them, as a way of liberating openings for change through discomfit – even if such transgression has set *them* apart and placed them in uncomfortable positions vis-à-vis their intellectual communities.

The fundamental question that this thesis poses is whether Carter and Mukherjee are able to represent fictional women who, despite being socially cast aside, can contest patriarchal domination by staging their marginalisation and monstrosity as sovereignty and so clothe themselves with the mantle of power; or whether they are so excessively ‘other’ and maverick that their difference becomes dysfunctional, to the point that they are dismissed as bad, crazy, or insignificant. At times, the writing of both Carter and Mukherjee has been in danger of falling into the abyss which yawns below the coupled dance of power and transgression – most notably, I think, for Carter with *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* (both texts trying too hard to translate philosophical and political ideas into fiction), and for Mukherjee with *Leave it to Me* (which some regard as overreaching itself in terms of gratuitous violence). Nonetheless, I assert that both authors have succeeded in creating transgressive, powerful women who dare to take risks and who capitalise on their marginal/outsider/freakish status to disrupt and undermine the status quo, often with humour and parody, and to offer new visions of womanhood.

Transgression in writing (and in art) has the power to shock; this power means that the reader or viewer becomes unsettled, potentially beginning a process of re-evaluation of self and reassessment of the status quo. I argue that this ability to initiate a new way of looking is a significant strength of the texts of Carter and Mukherjee. Both generate sufficient discomfort and unease in their textual styles (too ornate, too much detail) and their representations of characters (who spill out and make a spectacle of themselves) to make space for scrutinising and re-examining ready-made and prescribed norms, values and mythologies. In reading these writers together a similar disquiet emerges as their borders rub up against each other and they mismatch: this too opens gaps for new insights around the themes of this thesis.

My arguments suggest that both Carter and Mukherjee focus on powerful women (increasingly powerful and confident as their oeuvres develop) who are marginalised because of gender, age, social class and/or ethnicity and who are seen as monstrous by virtue of their resistance to orthodoxy and their sense of entitlement to positions proscribed by patriarchy. They rewrite monstrosity and their characters perform monstrosity as a way to access power: this is especially true of their later works – Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Hannah in *Holder of the World* and Tara Lata in *The Tree Bride* and Carter's Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and the aged twins in *Wise Children*. Carter's work continuously interrogates the roles that women are cast into and that they create for themselves: women as victims, as passive, as subjects and subjected. She strongly refutes such gender prescriptions and her characters determine to do the same; the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* exemplify her dissident translations and transcriptions. She rejects 'the social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by castration' (*Sadeian* 23), insisting that this is 'an imaginary fact' which forms the basis of men's attitude to women and women's attitude to themselves, and all her work is a countermand of this assumption.

Fevvers is the exemplary figure that discards the notion of the wounded creature 'born to bleed' (*ibid.*): as she prepares with great trepidation for her first flight, she tells Walser, the journalist, that she was seized with a 'great fear' not only of physical harm but 'of the irreparable *difference* with which success in the attempt would mark me. I feared a wound not of the body but the soul, sir, an irreconcilable division between myself and the rest of humankind. I feared the proof of my own singularity' (*Nights* 34). She understands that it is not her *lack* (the missing phallus) that makes her unique – and marvellous – but rather her *excess*: her distinctive capacity to surpass all. It is in this interchange that Walser is suddenly struck by the thought that Fevvers might be a man – Carter's ironic jibe at how an assumption of power (signified by Fevvers' capacity to fly) is always framed in phallic terms. The anxiety Fevvers articulates around her 'singularity' represents precisely the dance between power (generally gendered as male) and transgression: one that requires sufficient courage to take risks but that is not so outrageous as to be alienating.

Carter was exuberantly excessive in the characters she created and the way that she wrote. Through her ornate, glittering, ironic style and her extensive use of intertextuality and crossed genres (magical realism, gothic, fairy tales, fabulist, science fiction, polemical, to

name a few) she thumbed her nose at patriarchy, the prescriptions of a certain kind of feminism, and those critics who insisted that she fit into the mould of 'lady writer'. Lorna Sage remarked that while Carter 'didn't fit easily into the classic outsider role' (*Angela* 31), she had a 'genius for estrangement', for living by her own rules (ibid. 4). She acknowledged that her resistance to categorisation in literary circles gave her a certain power, unstable and uncomfortable though it may have been: she said of herself: 'I became the literary equivalent of a displaced person' (*Shaking* 35) – and she couldn't be otherwise. No wonder then that she was attracted to Swift's other worlds or to the other-worldliness of Japan or places away from home.

Mukherjee's concern with power and the way women interact with it rides a rockier road – one that appears smoother on the surface, using a style underpinned by humour but that is more realist in tone, full of tumult and clamour. Her characters are less complex than Carter's and tend to be archetypal, referencing Hindu mythology, and her themes try to broach a rapprochement between Hinduism and the 'new science' of chaos theory and developments in information technology. Her novels cross continents, time zones and historical/cultural spaces (*Holder of the World* and *Tree Bride*, in particular) producing overflowing narrative threads in one novel that vie with each other for the reader's attention, much like the excess of detail in Mughal miniatures. She dismisses the minimalist style of some American novels, opting for excess and 'maximalism', arguing that '[t]he elaborate border competes with the multiple narratives in the centre [so that ...] the whole is more than the individual stories' (Interview with Edwards 180). Borders are particularly significant for her as places of power: Debby, for example, in *Leave it to Me* changes her name to Devi, the warrior goddess, on the interstate border of California. Mukherjee too has been criticised for not accommodating to a prescribed category of writer, accused of trying to become too American or too 'transnational'. Outsiderness has sometimes been thrust upon her, yet 'cathartic hope' is what she believes her novels offer and 'mongrelisation' is her way of writing and living – meaning using the border to purchase power and not caring about 'preconceived social hierarchies, about racial or class status' (ibid. 164).

Her courage as a transgressive writer resides in her readiness to depict women who are prepared to use violence to get what they want and to rebirth themselves within this

lifetime into 'new' women, as Jasmine, the eponymous heroine, does. Her female characters remake and recast their own lives despite or because of the marginalisation inherent in their past experience, cultural prohibitions and socio-political restraints. Mukherjee is also fearless in portraying violence in graphic detail – Sage writes of her *Leave it to Me* that 'Debby/Devi is a brilliant creation – hilarious, horribly knowing and even more horribly oblivious'; but sometimes this portrayal can be costly. Devi hovers between being the stereotypical monstrous female feeding into patriarchal anxiety and a figure of avenging power. The invocation of the Hindu goddess who rips and storms across the San Francisco Bay to take revenge against the Buffalo Demon does not necessarily produce a coherent example of a woman who can usurp patriarchal power; instead Debby/Devi becomes a victim of her own tornado.

Violence as a way of asserting power is an area of intense ethical debate. However, in a plea for keeping art separate from reality, Merja Makinen writes: 'For if there is one thing we need to agree upon, then it is that textual violence is very different from actual violence' ('Sexual' 151). I contend that textual violence draws attention to the social construction and performance of power and subordination, and it focuses on the capacity of women in these texts to explode traditional roles and to assert agency – a position that engages the reader emotionally and expresses a fantasy and a wish-fulfillment rather than encourages a reality of 'actual men being spattered to bits by gun-fire' (ibid. 152). While I recognise some of the difficulties that the portrayal of violence presents, I regard textual violence in the work of my two chosen authors as transgressive, liberatory and empowering.

Carter explored ideas of femininity and power through the representation of violent sexuality, using Sade, controversially, as her springboard (*Sadeian Woman* and *Bloody Chamber*). Her use of irony just saves her – or does it? – from fetishising that which she fears can be read as patriarchy's desire. Linda Hutcheon states that irony has rewards as well as risks, but is always in danger of being seduced by the convention that it attacks (33-34). Fevvers, as ironised spectacle, for example, exaggerates her spectacle, deliberately playing to the male gaze over which she takes charge; but is irony enough to clarify that Fevvers controls her own representation? Or is irony elitist, only good for those who 'get it'? (see Toril Moi *What is a Woman* 174). I maintain that the kind of excess produced by irony deliberately 'recodes the negative of patriarchal discourse', so that, for example, the

silencing of women's voices becomes a 'willed silence' (Hutcheon 33), a strategy clearly evident in Aunt Margaret's loss of voice on the night of her marriage in *The Magic Toyshop*. Similarly, the aged, over-exuberant twins in Carter's *Wise Children* recode the negative connection between age and sexuality, and in Mukherjee's short story 'Jasmine' the character deliberately plays to stereotype and uses her sexuality in order to gain the upper hand in her relationship with her employer.

In her early work, Carter's resistance to patriarchy found articulation in characters like Marianne in *Heroes and Villains* who appropriate control by inverting the patriarchal order and by assuming a masculinist mantle of power (see Aidan Day, 'Fairy Orientalism' 14). Later, the ascendancy of her female characters is more subtle and inventive. No longer are they breath- and blood-sucking vampires ('The Loves of Lady Purple'), gun-toting mothers ('The Bloody Chamber'), or guerrillas with 'battle-stained hands' (*The Passion of New Eve*). Instead, the women in Carter's later works, while still inhabiting the margins, complicate gender and sexuality and the way that these categories intersect with power: female authority becomes something more multifaceted and sophisticated than an usurpation and inversion of male-dominance.

One way that Mukherjee has resisted patriarchy (and a certain kind of 'othering' nationalism) has been to take charge of her foreignness and turned it into an asset, a vehicle to access power. She acknowledges the difficulty of learning the 'code' of a new country, the showiness and 'rawness and messiness of that cultural transaction' ('Decoding the language' 10). But she is unapologetic about using her origins as the gateway to her own transformation and success, despite sometimes being accused of 'marketing the margins' for gaining access to power.¹ Rather, this is her definition of successful 'mongrelisation': an energetic entry into the host culture without losing who you have been in order to create innovative new communities. She pays scant attention to postcolonial theorists who attack her for being privileged and elitist and accuse her, therefore, of having 'nothing worthwhile to say' as a writer (Interview with Edwards 107). She refutes the notion of the intactness or static nature of cultures (ibid.), nor does she pretend to represent Indian culture or Indian women, rejecting Spivak's attack on a certain type of writer who is 'a postcolonial masquerading as "native informant."' (6). She thus discards the 'anxiety of authenticity in

¹ See Wickramagamage (1996); Koshy (1994; 2006); Ninh (2013).

Indian diasporic literature', concerning herself rather with the way 'people who are in between' recreate their stories of the past and recode the negative in uplifting ways; 'deforming their pasts and reforming their identities' ('Decoding' 10).

For both writers, 'crossing, criss-crossing' worlds² becomes an increasingly fervent search for a way of being in the world which *asserts* power without *usurping* it, a way that proclaims that the periphery has the capacity to shake and shift the foundations of control. The seventy five year old twins, Dora and Nora Chance, in *Wise Children*, exemplify this position. Mukherjee too moves away from violent Hindu goddesses of Durga (Dimple), Kali (Jasmine) and Devi (Debby/Devi) to chart the life of a woman activist, Tara Lata, in *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*. In these later works, power remains the central concern for both, but marginality is more complex and transgression is more subtle. For Mukherjee it is tied to socio-political and historical moments that ripple across generations and over continents, developing ultimately into the 'newly emergent transnational American' (Interview with Edwards 172); for Carter the ripple of transgressive effects are more nuanced, celebratory and nostalgic, full of humour and populist good fun, but with a knowledge of limits. The new woman is the one who usurps power by loving freely and knowingly, and laughs at assumptions of power.

Both Carter and Mukherjee recognise that despite the force of the word, women writers are all too easily sidelined, and turned into muses. Carter's comments on the surrealists illuminate her struggles with and for power:

The surrealists were not good with women. That is why, although I thought they were wonderful, I had to give them up in the end. [...] they told me I was the source of all mystery, beauty, and otherness, because I was a woman – and I knew that was not true. I knew I wanted my fair share of the imagination, too. [...] I had my own rights to liberty and love and vision as an autonomous being, not as a projected image. (*Shaking* 512)

Her later works, like *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* finally found a way of shaking up patriarchy and ruffling its feathers on her own terms as well as producing a riotous share of

² A quote from Carter's *Wise Children* (19) and referred to by Kate Webb as applicable not only to Carter's characters but also to her writing style which cuts across many genres but remains somehow 'her own' (287).

imagination. For both Carter and Mukherjee, the way to a new gender order is not finally through the overthrow or discarding of men, or through woman going off to 'live in a shack by herself on some remote beach'; rather it is through the ability of women to have 'a relationship with men without feeling that [they are] betraying [their] gender or yielding power' (Mukherjee, Interview with Edwards 160). For Carter too the 'holy terror of love' is the 'source of all opposition to the emancipation of women' (*Sadeian* 150). And for both, autonomy of being and the democratising of domestic relationships – the most transgressive strategy of all – provide the key to a transformed gender order. How fitting, then, that the tornado that is Devi in *Leave it to Me* can be seen as morphing into the 'spiralling tornado' of Fevvers' laughter at the end of *Nights at the Circus* with Fevvers 'crouched above' her lover. Humour was Carter's final weapon: global mirth overcoming the 'weapons of mass destruction'.

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