

**Demythologising Patriarchal Structures in Angela Carter's  
*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman***

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**Abstract**

This paper to scrutinise the various social structures in Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). Carter who has always tried to overthrow the concept of patriarchal societies is critical of matriarchal societies too in this novel. It also has a science-fiction milieu and a picaresque mode of narration. The study of this novel uncovers the perils ramified in providing a free strap to one's dreams and desires. The novel also probes the questions of gender identity. The portrayals of the societies that the protagonist enters become means in Carter's hand to display the disadvantages of diverse social structures. She authenticates the reality that myths are created in order to control people in the biased confines of patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Patriarchy, Mythology, Gender, Science-Fiction, Fantasy

Angela Carter is an imaginative, visionary and prophetic angel who literally totes us from an illusory world of dreams and fantasy to the bitter realities of life. A genuine understanding of her novels will assuredly grant her a permanent place among the glorious stars in the heaven of feminist novelists. Carter's most famous novel, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, is a magical and satirical adventure, greatly inspired by the picaresque legacy. The novel draws on the Gothic, anthropological idylls, fairytales, horror films, pornography, boy's adventure tales and the dreams of the features of the quest narrative. In "The Dangerous Edge," Elaine Jordan observes, it is "the deliberate construction of communal myths" (207).

In "The Hoffmann Connection: Demystification in Angela Carter's *The infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*," Peter Christensen writes,

the German Romantic fairy tale, as practiced by Hoffmann and others, continues the progressive ideals of the French Revolutionary period Hoffman who came the latest, is perhaps the best example for demonstrating how revolutionary and utopian the fairy tale could become. (64)

Even though some scholars have perceived in Carter's novel as an effort to build a feminist mythology, that Carter herself believes that she is attempting to reveal how imagination could falsify reality and myth-making jeopardize social criticism. For her, language must mirror social reality; it is the very least one can expect language to do. Recurrently she criticises the male language of muse worship. She is demythologizer, marking her interest as a feminist with the social novels that regulate our lives. She devotes herself to a materialism that agrees the reality that this world is all there is. For Carter, myths are phenomenal lies constructed to make people enslaved.

In the novel Desiderio names his story a picaresque venture. The tale is narrated regularly as Desiderio goes from one strange world to another. Desiderio enters into different society while maintaining a sense of suspicion, and this is often all he has to keep himself out of danger. The novel starts with Desiderio's identification of himself as the narrator. A national hero for his task is ending the Reality War; he is now an old man writing his memoirs in preparation for death. In his younger days, he was an assistant to the Minister of Determination in an unknown South American city whose wealth and safety were threatened by Doctor Hoffman's attack on reality. Young Desiderio's part in ending this attack is the substance of old Desiderio's memoirs. Looking back on this story with tiredness and the accumulated unhappiness of a lifetime, Old Desiderio infuses his tale with cynicism. This is also a narrative of lost love, and Desiderio narrates the circumstances leading up to and away from his beloved Albertina in minute detail. Although he questions his failing memory, the detail highlights the compulsive nature of his love and the lovable self-torture it is to remember her.

Doctor Hoffman produces spectres that are the hard base of the entire city's unconscious fantasies, and soon no one is able to tell the difference between reality and imitation. Watches become flowers, people see dead relatives walking down the street, sugar tastes like salt, and nothing is as it seems. In fact, the Reality War is a war against empiricism, because none of the senses can be relied upon. After three years, the city has deteriorated into a state of dissipation precisely because the senses are so unreliable that life cannot continue as it has done. There is no method of distinguishing reality from the projection of one's own or others' fantasy lives, although the Minister tries to treat the problem scientifically. Anything that enters his laboratory and dies as a result of his tests must have been real. Calling to mind the techniques used in Salem witch trials, the Minister's labs prove reality by killing it. In desperation, the Minister and Desiderio meet with the Doctor's ambassador, who promises an escalation of the siege. As a last resort, the Minister sends Desiderio on a top-secret mission, complete with forged papers and identity, to assassinate Doctor Hoffman.

Desiderio's first stop is a small town in which his cover is that he has been sent to investigate the mayor's disappearance. Here he meets the peep show owner, who was once Doctor Hoffman's professor but is now old and blind and the warden of a peculiar museum. The images in the peep show are Doctor Hoffman's samples of psychic possibilities, and they involve surreal scenes of sexuality, death and cruelty. Desiderio spends the night in the mayor's house being seduced by the mayor's somnambulist daughter, Mary Anne. The next day, her body is discovered washed up on the shore, and Desiderio is charged with her murder, not just because he is not who he says he is. This latter is almost as suspicious a crime as murder, although Desiderio is not the murderer. Escaping his captors, he finds himself among the River People, who take him in, tend to his injuries and treat him as one of their own. Only when he discovers that they intend to kill and eat him, he escapes and

meets once more with the warden of the peep show. Together, Desiderio and the warden travel with a carnival, and although Desiderio finds affection among some of his companions, he is savagely raped by the Acrobats of Desire, and afterward he stumbles to a cliff and takes refuge in a small cave. While he is recovering, a landslide obliterates the town, the carnival, and the peep show, and Desiderio emerges from his cave to find himself alone.

His next encounter is with the Erotic Traveller, a count that's sexual and other appetites recall both Dracula and the Marquis de Sade. The Count is an extraordinary narcissist, excessive in all of his desires because he feels that his are the only ones that matter. The Count's Valet, LaFleur, is syphilitic, as though his body has taken on the consequences of all the Count's lusts. Although the samples in the peep show have been buried, the Count seems to enact all of their savage sexual imagery. Nowhere is this exemplified more clearly than in the horrific brothel, where the women are "sinister, abominable, inverted mutations" (132). In this nightmarish setting, Desiderio finally meets Albertina, Doctor Hoffman's daughter. Although Desiderio has already met her in dreams and in innumerable disguises, she appears to him in the brothel as the object of all his passions. The moment of recognition is short-lived, however, because the Determination Police are still hunting for Mary Anne's murderer and have traced Desiderio to the brothel. He flees with the count and LaFleur to the coast, where all three board in a ship. Attacked by pirates whose celebratory drinking bout leaves the ship to founder and sink, the travelers are washed up on the shore of Africa, where a band of cannibals boils the Count for soup. As they drag LaFleur to the same fate, however, Desiderio sees that he is Albertina in disguise, and stabs LaFleur's captors, embrace Albertina, and shoots the cannibal king.

In *The infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*, the hero's gender fits with the gender of the mythical hero. Desiderio is a subject gendered male, but not in the falsely universal sense. Carter's revision of the oedipal quest narrative foregrounds, rather than transcends gender, de-universalizing the male subject by engendering him. The novel chronicles a revolution in the relationship between reason and unreason in which Dr. Hoffman a renegade philosopher, whose theoretical framework echoes Nietzsche, Derrida, and others have declared a war on reality, in order to liberate desire; he is intent on exploring and materializing the obscure and controversial borderline between the thinkable and the unthinkable. Eschewing binary and linear logic, Hoffman attempts to find the "loopholes in metaphysics" (212), rewriting the cogito to read: "I desire, therefore I exist" (211). Against the law of the city fathers represented by the Minister of Determination who is not a man but a theorem, clear, hard, unified and harmonious Hoffman is "disseminating" "lawless images" (12). The Doctor is attractive in his ability to think beyond binary oppositions, to read the world in ways not wholly dependent on a logic, which would repress the unconscious in a domination of logo- centricism. But, early in the novel, something sinister enters into the textual mapping of the Doctor's effects. In an absurd confrontation between Hoffman's Ambassador and the Minister, the former speaks for seduction and the latter for compulsion; however, the two figures come closer together as the Ambassador describes the Doctor's terms for surrender: he wants absolute authority to establish a regime of total liberation. The language here foregrounds the idea that the Doctor's libratory scheme is complicit in the same will to power that the Minister clings to. The Minister, a representative of "logical positivism" (194) speaks for a humanist epistemology that cannot countenance contradiction in its systems. The Doctor speaks for a post-humanist epistemology where contradiction rules and

where rationality has been put radically into question. Yet, the two systems are quickly seen to be complicit in the same ideological agenda: they both position Man as an imperialist subject whose desire gives free reign to exploitation and domination.

Desiderio is literally fatherless: his mother, a prostitute, conceived him through her work in the Indian slums of the city. Not only has his mother deprived him of a present father, but also forced him to carry the “genetic imprint” (16) of this lost father on his face. And, while he disclaims his Indian heritage in his life before Hoffman’s revolution, this repressed material gets released once the desire machines start their work. Thus it is that Desiderio finds himself ‘adopted’ by a family of ‘River People’ in an adventure that plays out his ambivalence toward his mother’s actions and his father’s race. During his time with the River People, Desiderio’s colonialist imagination is given full scope, as he constructs this isolated society as ‘ex-centric’ primitive, naive, living with a complex, hesitant but absolute immediacy. Their society is theoretically matrilineal though in practice all decisions devolved upon the father. Because everything that happens to Desiderio is an emanation of his desires, we can read in this episode a nostalgic return to the ‘feminine’, to his absent mother and the threat that this return evokes.

That threat, of course, is castration, and Desiderio’s adventure with the river family replays the Freudian family romance in a new, although still recognizable, way. It is assumed that he will become the husband of one of the clan’s daughter, Aoi, whom Desiderio consistently refers to as an “erotic toy” (86). In preparation for her marriage, Aoi’s grandmother has manipulated her clitoris over the years, until it approximates a penis. Desiderio cannot help approving this practice, it was the custom for mothers of young girls to manipulate their daughters’ private parts for a regulation hour a day from babyhood upwards, coaxing the sensitive little projection until it attained lengths the river people considered both aesthetically and sexually desirable. What is important here is not so much this practice itself, but Desiderio’s interpretation of it; from his male-centred frame of reference, the women are aspiring to masculinity. His desire to masculinise the women amounts to a fetishistic desire to endow his ‘erotic toy’ with a penis. He leaves the River People, reluctantly, after it becomes clear that the father is about to make good on the threat of castration but not, however, until he succeeds in sleeping with the mother. It is this experience, which prompts Desiderio to remark, “Indeed, I was growing almost reconciled to mothers,” (85). Desiderio’s desire constructs women as phallic in order to alleviate his anxieties over his own masculinity, evoked by the absence of his father.

The quest plot that structures *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is a contorted version of oedipal narrative that Carter uses to foreground the ideological stakes in this kind of story. Because Desiderio’s adventures represent a direct expression of his desire both conscious and unconscious, the text serves as a commentary on the gendering of that desire as masculine. This novel is an in-depth exploration of male subjectivity in narrative, and the construction of sexual difference along binary and often violent lines; as such, it foregrounds the problematics in reading as a woman. Yet Carter systematically disrupts the pleasure of the text by foregrounding the enunciative apparatus behind its inscriptions of desire. If the pleasure of the text is dependent on identification with Desiderio who, after all, has been produced as a “war hero” by History, that pleasure is continuously disrupted by Carter’s insistence on what that official History leaves

unspoken: the complicities between desire and domination. Desire, in this text, ultimately destroys both its subjects and its object. For, although Desiderio emerges intact from his adventures, Carter deprives him, at the last minutes, of his climax: he fails, after all, to find either a worthy master-father, since Hoffman turns out to be a hypocrite, a totalitarian of the unconscious; or the object of desire, since Albertina must be killed in order for Desiderio to fulfil his mission and become a hero. Desiderio, in turn, deprives his imagined reader of that climax, as well, breaking the pattern of narrative denouement which would ensure the pleasure of the text through the release of tension, modelled, "See. I have ruined all the suspense. I have quite spoiled my climax. But why do you deserve a climax, anyway?" (208).

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