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FROM THE HUNTED TO THE HUNTRESS: ANGELA CARTER'S REINVENTION OF LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD IN 'THE COMPANY OF WOLVES'

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Abstract

For centuries fairy tales have served the purpose of perpetuating patriarchal structures in society by teaching children to behave in certain ways. Fairy tales advocate stereotypical female behaviour and punish attributes that threaten to dismantle the patriarchy. Angela Carter in her short story collection, 'The Bloody Chamber' re-envisions these tales by flipping the traditional gender roles and giving women back the power. She embraces the erotic element in fairy tales as she explores female sexuality which has always been relegated to the background by patriarchy. This research paper focuses on Carter's version of Little Red Riding Hood, 'The Company of Wolves' where Carter makes the young female protagonist seduce the wolf that ate her grandmother. Through her actions the young girl seeks sexual enlightenment and liberation from the conventions and the codes of conduct imposed upon women by society. She is no longer the helpless victim, rather she snatches the power from the beast and owns it. She succeeds in taming the ravenous beast by using her sexuality as a weapon. It is this role reversal and shift in power dynamics that this paper attempts to explore.

Keywords: Feminism, Fairy tales, Wolves, Red Riding Hood, Gender Roles.

Fairy tales have been passed down since generations and continue to be told and read even today. For centuries fairy tales have been adapted and retold for the purpose of inculcating moral values and acceptable codes of conduct in children through their characters and plots. However, the damsel in distress archetype prevalent in these fairy tales make them anti-feminist. These tales objectify women and reward female submissiveness thus, serving the purpose of perpetuating patriarchal structures and exercising power over women in order to maintain the gender hierarchy in society. In the words of Alice Neikirk, "Fairy tales have never

been bedtime stories; in this day in age, they have morphed into a very effective means of exercising power over women and maintaining gender inequality." (Neikirk)

Angela Carter in 1976 accepted a commission to translate the fairy tales of Charles Perrault from their original French. Thereafter, she wrote her own reconceived versions of the classic European fairy tales in her short story collection, 'The Bloody Chamber'. In her reinventions, the stories do not serve as tools of education aimed at imbibing morals in the minds of the young but she makes use of

mature and feminist themes to criticize the sexism rampant in society and champion the cause of women in general. She takes the fairy tales and uses them to write new ones. In Carter's own words, "My intention was to not do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book, said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from traditional stories and to use it as beginnings of new stories" and that the latent content of these children's bedtime stories "is violently sexual."

Angela Carter authored three lupine themed tales in her collection, namely 'The Werewolf', 'The Company of Wolves' and 'Wolf Alice'. All three stories are Carter's modern take on the traditional fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood. In the original version of the fairy tale by Charles Perrault, the eponymous heroine is an innocent and carefree little girl on her way to visit her ailing grandmother through the deep forest with a basket of fruits. Her mother had warned her against straying from the path but the innocent damsel falls into the trap of a deceitful wolf who not only devours the little girl but her poor grandmother as well. Little Red Riding Hood was oblivious to the malicious intent of the cunning wolf and her learning experience was an agonizing one. Implanted in this story is a warning to young girls about the perils of seduction or the unfortunate consequences that will ensue if they do not adhere to the stereotypical female behaviours set up by patriarchy. The classic fairy tales which act as cautionary fables vehemently imply that a 'good' child must observe obedience. And this is something that prevails into adulthood as well where a 'good' woman must be passive and compliant. If a woman digresses from the traditional patterns of behaviour she is not considered to be a righteous member of society. It is expected of a woman to keep a closed mind and blindly perpetuate the stereotypical behavioural patterns.

Angela Carter in her reinventions of the fairy tale tries to retrieve the female protagonists from male dominated traditions of literature. She brings to the fore the primal and bloody core of the old folk tale by delving deep into the hidden corners of the human mind and exploring what is regarded often as taboo. In her book 'Little Red Riding Hood

Uncloned: Sex, Morality and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale', Catherine Orenstein writes: "In the second half of the twentieth century, a proliferation of revisions of "Little Red Riding Hood" turned the tale around to teach a new lesson. Storytellers from the women's movement and beyond reclaimed the heroine and her grandmother from male-dominated literary traditions, recasting the women as brave and resourceful, turning Red Riding Hood into the physical or sexual aggressive, and questioning the machismo of the wolf. Their new heroines dominate the plot, sometimes with humour or strength and frequently with a libido more than equal to the wolf's." (Orenstein)

In 'The Company of Wolves', we are provided with a spine chilling start – "One beast and only one howls in the woods by night." Carter's beasts are the wolves of the forests who are predatory and dangerous, "grey members of a congregation of nightmare" who "cannot listen to reason." But a while later she introduces an even worse, deadlier beast with their "phosphorescent eyes" and "irremediable appetites" – the werewolves who the natives are convinced make a pact with the Devil himself. They are metamorphic creatures caught between beastliness and humaneness. Unlike traditional fairy tales, Carter highlights the plight of these creatures by evoking a sense of suffering in them – the "inherent sadness" in their howls, the "vast melancholy in the canticles of the wolf", the "ghastly sadness". These beasts, despite their ferociousness, seek redemption and a saviour in the form of "an external mediator".

Carter sets the scene of her story in an unnamed "region of mountain and forest" where the natives believe in the supernatural. The 'grave-eyed children' always carry sharp knives 'half as big as they are'. In this cold, famished land the locals still rely on primitive remedies – "Seven years is a werewolf's natural span but if you burn his human clothing you condemn him to wolfishness for the rest of his life, so old wives hereabouts think it some protection to throw a hat or an apron at the werewolf, as if clothes made the man." (Carter)

In Carter's works the most fearsome creatures a woman could encounter in the dark forests are not animals but men. In the vivid anecdote of the young bride, she is equally abused by both her husbands. Her werewolf husband on his return upon seeing her with another man gets furious, calls her a 'whore' and tears off her son's limb whereas her human husband beats her up when she cries over the dead body of her former husband. The woman is always the victim in a marriage. It is impossible for a woman to break free from the shackles of patriarchal judgement. A woman simply cannot escape male violence.

Carter's Red Riding Hood is a slightly more mature girl. We see her on her way to her reclusive grandmother's cottage through the dark, sinister forest in the dead of winter. Her scarlet cloak is described as having "the brilliant look of blood on snow" symbolising that she is virginal, nearly menstruating. Her flaxen hair, swelling breasts and pale cheeks are further indicative of that. Having her virginity intact "she does not know how to shiver". Her virginity is her source of empowerment; it lends her both ignorance and power. The girl is "well-warned" and well adept at tackling the wild beasts in the dark forests and she is carrying a carving knife in her basket.

"Children do not stay young for long in this savage country", Carter had warned at the onset. The author does not portray her protagonist as weak or meek. Rather she is remodelled as brave and daring as she is bestowed with a certain intrepid confidence. "The forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws" but she is "quite sure that the wild beasts cannot harm her." She is unafraid not because she is naive but simply because "she had been too much loved ever to feel scared." Her confidence stems from emotional security and inner strength. When she encounters a werewolf disguised as a handsome, young huntsman she unquestioningly befriends him. The "fine fellow", bedecked in the green of the forest, has a "comic yet flattering manner" and the two soon begin "laughing and joking like old friends". He had a "remarkable object in his pocket...a compass". The hunter makes a bet with the girl that by using his compass he can

navigate the perilous forest and arrive at the cottage of her grandmother before her. When the hunter decides that his prize, provided he wins, would be a kiss from her, the young girl willingly agrees to his proposition. Enticed as she is, she even gives away her basket which carried her knife to the hunter. It is as if she "forgot to be afraid of the beasts". And as she slowly makes her way to her grandmother's cottage she secretly wishes the young man would win his wager. Thus begins a game of "rustic seduction". We do not see her doubting the hunter's intentions for once. Rather she is pleased in indulging the charming man. We cannot help but wonder if the young girl is really that gullible because so far we see her as resourceful and well aware of all possibilities of danger in the woods. Moreover, Carter consciously accessorizes the jovial hunter with multiple signs of violence – his rifle, his flashing wet teeth, the dead birds - but to our surprise, the wolf man evokes no tinge of doubt or suspicion in the mind of the young girl.

As the hunter arrives at the grandmother's cottage before the girl, he takes off his disguise and strips stark naked revealing his "matted hair", lice covered body and skin that is "the colour and texture of vellum". His dual nature and bestial intentions are unveiled as he converts into his lycanthropic alter ego and devours the helpless, old woman until she is reduced to "the inedible hair" and "the bones". He is the "carnivore incarnate" as he tosses the grandmother's clothes in the fire, hides blood stained bed sheet and stacks the bones under the bed. He wears the grandmother's nightcap, just like in the original tale and lies in the dead woman's bed, waiting "patiently, deceitfully" for his next prey. Angela Carter's vicious, diabolical werewolf is a symbol of danger and desire, an emblem of sexual appetite. He is a sexual hunter who is not satiated by consuming the old lady; only "immaculate flesh" of the pubescent girl will "appease him".

When the young girl arrives at the cottage, the observant girl quickly notices the things amiss at the cottage – "there was not even the indentation of a head on the smooth cheek of the pillow" and how for the first time "the Bible lay closed on the table". There was no trace of the old woman except for "a

tuft of white hair” stuck to an unburned log in the fireplace. Though she is shocked at the death of her grandmother she is not overwhelmed by it. She realizes that “she was in danger of death”. But she is not as afraid as she is expected to be, rather she makes a conscious decision to be brave. As she realises the reality of the huntsman her need to save herself gets complicated with her desire for the charming werewolf. In this final, dramatic encounter with the wolf man, the fiery maiden exhibits a certain maturity, a strength of character that is unknown to the werewolf’s previous helpless victims. She trusts her own powerful sexuality for her protection from the ravenous carnivore. We see her acting out her sexual desire as she coyly asks for instructions and throws her clothes in the fire and approaches the wolf man. Along with her clothes she discards her fear since it serves her no purpose. Carter purposefully uses the original exclamations here, “What big arms you have, All the better to hug you with”, “What big teeth you have!”, “All the better to eat you with” - but the girl laughs in the face of her enemy as she knows “she is nobody’s meat”. She is aware of the “blood she must spill”. She slowly disrobes him herself. Claiming her sexuality, she gives the werewolf a kiss and more. She gives him her “immaculate flesh” and takes of him rather than allowing him to violate her. She seeks sexual liberation as she gives in to her animalistic instincts and carnal desires thus becoming an agent in her own journey of sexual enlightenment. A girl thoroughly aware of her sexual prowess and the power it yields, she goes to bed with the werewolf she ignores the “terrible clattering” of her dead grandmother’s bones from under the bed. Her act is one of rebellion against the traditions and the close mindedness that are forced upon women. Carter emphasises that the brave girl “never flinched”. It is evident that she is the one who takes the lead in their “savage marriage ceremony”. In the end, instead of being assaulted and butchered we find her lying in post-coital bliss “between the paws of the tender wolf”.

“If there’s a beast in men, it meets its match in women too,” states Carter and indeed the bold girl succeeds in disarming and taming the ferocious creature by using her sexuality. However this taming

of the ravenous beast who “cannot listen to reason” would have been quite impossible but Carter tells us that the howls of the wolves have “some inherent sadness” and if given a chance “the beasts would love to be less beastly.”

Thomas C. Foster in ‘How to Read Literature like a Professor’ calls Carter “the queen of sexual subversiveness.” He continues, “...Carter can write a very convincing sex scene... she almost never lets it be only about sex. Carter nearly always intends to upset the patriarchal apple cart. To call her writing women’s liberation is to largely miss the point; Carter attempts to discover paths by which women can attain the standing in the world that male-dominated society has largely denied them, and in doing so she will liberate all of us, men and women, alike. In her world, sex can be wildly disruptive.” (Foster)

In patriarchy there is no space for women’s sexuality. Women are never given the opportunity to be the subject of desire. But in Carter’s work, we encounter a role reversal, a marked departure from the traditional patterns as her heroine is seen reversing the binary paradigm of predator-prey wherein the prey becomes the predator. Power is redistributed from the wolf man to the young girl. She transgresses all gender and sexual boundaries by releasing the beast within her and moves from the object of male desire into the agent of her own desire. It symbolises the end of her childhood innocence as she claims her own “bestial” desires. As Margaret Atwood remarks, “As with all of Carter’s would be steaks and chops, this wise child wins the herbivore-carnivore contest by refusing fear, by taking matters into her own hands, by refusing to allow herself to be defined as somebody’s meat, and by ‘freely’ learning too – if not run with the tigers- at least lie down with them. Whether she has become more wolf-like is anybody’s guess.” (Ho)

“Fear and flea the wolf” Carter had warned but her heroine does neither. And in the end her heroine emerges as the triumphant hunter after a successful kill. She has succeeded in overcoming “all the teeming perils of the night”. Helen Simpson in her introduction to ‘The Bloody Chamber’ writes, “

There are myriad such musical echoes in this collection – herbivores and carnivores, death and the maiden, the image of a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another – while certain phrases like ‘pentacle of virginity’ or indeed ‘the bloody chamber’ crop up repeatedly from story to story” (Simpson). In this particular tale, it is the young girl’s virginity that is used as a weapon against the carnivore and it is the old woman’s bedroom that turns into a bloody chamber.

Through her retelling Carter traces the protagonist’s sexual awakening and the blossoming of female sexuality. Unlike in the original fairy tale, Carter’s Red Riding Hood does not become a victim at the hands of the cunning wolf. She is not only a willing participant in the scheme of things as set by the werewolf but her sheer confidence and her fearlessness in the face of adversity is something that is unheard of in the traditional fairy tale mould. To her the werewolf is not a creature to be dreaded but instead she embraces him voluntarily. Catherine Orenstein writes, “In Carter’s ‘Red Riding Hood’ - related tales...the heroine’s wolf is not her oppressor, nor her opponent, nor her ravisher. Rather than besting the beast, the heroine incorporates it. The protagonists — both heroine and villain — move back and forth between the forms of human and beast, and each is by turns tender and aggressive. Their parallel transformations suggest their interrelated identities that encompass darkness and brightness, innocence and evil at once. Her heroine’s bestial side is an acknowledgement not only of her natural sex drive but also of her sexual complexity” (Orenstein).

In submitting to her desires for the wolf man, the brave girl has transcended the fears that little girls are taught and conditioned to internalise since ages. She refuses to bend under the patriarchal codes of conduct imposed on women as she pays no heed to the repeated warnings of her mother, abandons the safe preconceptions taught to her since childhood and takes the power in her hands, and turns the tables on the ferocious beast. In the end, the werewolf loses at his own game and falls prey to the girl’s seduction as we see the young heroine rewriting her entrapment. We come to the

realisation that he is merely a pawn in Red Riding Hood’s journey of sexual awakening. “The wolf acts as the instigator of the girl’s entry into womanhood, as the demise of the shawl symbolizes the destruction of her submission and inferiority, and suggests women’s empowerment and their ability to be their own versions of wolves.” (Langlois)

Carter portrays the reality of societies steeped in misogyny and encourages her readers to rebel against such societal norms to conquer the viciousness of patriarchy. Women’s desires are not relegated to the background by Carter. Passivity, shyness, submissiveness are traits stereotypically attributed to women but she consciously throws them out of the window. The moral we draw from Carter’s fairy tale is that women should embrace their bodies and attain sexual freedom by being comfortable in their skin instead of shying away from their bodies and the power they possess. Their femininity does not make them weak, rather it acts as their strength over men. It is a weapon which can be used when women need it most.

‘In the Company of Wolves’, Angela Carter makes a disturbing attempt to gather some of the nightmares hidden within the original fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood. She takes Red Riding Hood as the starting point for her story before departing from its innocence and bringing its direful sexuality to the forefront. She has taken us to the other side of fairy tales, a side that corresponds with our dark desires and guilt that lay buried deep within our souls.

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