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THE POSTMODERN FAIRYTALE: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE- READING ANGELA CARTER'S *THE WEREWOLF*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism with its questioning of traditional mores has sanctioned a matrix to rethink and renegotiate the hitherto rigid ambits of narration. This has allowed a re-examining of fairytales, taking it out from the sphere of children's literature and placing it in the broader context of literary studies. The present paper uses Bacchilega's seminal work "Postmodern Fairy Tales" to look at Angela Carter's "The Werewolf" from the vantage point of gender. It would indeed be specious to think that fairy tales should remain outside the compass of postmodern 'rewrite'. The paper will look at the classical versions of Red Riding Hood and the postmodern rereading by Carter while stressing on the need of the multivalence such intertexts provide. The paper further argues the necessity of this subversion and the implications of such an act.

Keywords: Master- Narrative, Postmodern rereadings, intertextuality, plurality

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Postmodernist thought has bought with it an interrogation of narrative strategies and ways of looking at myths, history and even fairytales. Postmodernism, as Hutcheon suggests works through parody to both legitimize and subvert that which it parodies.¹ Postmodernism does not just offer to shed light on new critical capacities but also to rethink history and to signal present representations from past ones. Postmodern fairytale narratives thus offer, if not a counter-mandate, often a "reading-into" the "classic" fairytale. These revisits offer a space, especially for women to question and redefine gender roles. The "rewritings" offer images of woman, an underpinning of the Other, normalised as part of culture. Since they rhetorically and literally "incorporate that which they aim to contest"² —

modernism, history, the humanistic subject, other narrative texts and genre— they often sublate as complicated metaphors of human situation.

Postmodern fairytales seek to understand the 'fairytale', not as children's literature but within the broader context of folklore and literary studies. Cristina Bacchilega in her seminal work "Postmodern Fairy Tales" that focuses on the narrative strategies through which women are portrayed in four classic stories: "Snow White," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Bluebeard" says: "As folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies

the power of transformation.”³ The subversion of the fairly regular tale helps to render the insignificant Other visible, locating the Othered roles itself vis-à-vis the mainstream while resonating the “rewriting” with the contemporary socio-cultural conscience. A narrative has to be understood in its socio-historical context. A tale told in the Elizabethan era does not hold the same ‘values’ or ‘resonance’ now. It is only natural then that a fairy tale ‘now’ would acquire resemblance to the dominant ideology at play. Even a fairy tale cannot be buffeted against this changing function. The fairytale idiomatically largely remains the same but interpretation has undergone a sea change. A gendered rewriting, not only has to buffer against the changing functionality of narration but also render it plural. The rewriting/ retelling helps to overcome the one-dimensionality of a text. The hero of a classic fairytale is generally the fearless, unrelenting pursuer of his mission which might take days, months or years, decades to achieve it. To achieve the impossible he might forego human company (as deemed unavoidable), might converse with animals (as seems fit) or experience miraculous transformations (isn’t he the hero!). The woman in the tale (might be an etymological error to call her the heroine, as the fairy tale often has only one ‘male’-protagonist) is the one as characteristically shown, close to Nature than to culture. It is of course the task of the hero to go outside the ambit of culture to bring back the errant transgressive woman into the fold of culture thereby restoring order to the otherwise skewed order of the world. Even in fairytales that can be termed ‘heroine-centric’, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, the women exist in ‘Nature’ and have to be brought back into the fold of ‘Culture’. “By showcasing “women” and making them disappear at the same time, the fairytale thus transforms us/them into manmade constructs of “Woman” ”⁴ Thus fairy tales have been seen as a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender and have been deconstructed or reconstructed over the years. An interpretation of the fairy tale precisely tends to question this ‘naturalisation’ while allowing the author to present

alternative world-views. In its multiple retelling the fairytale becomes the sight of historically and socially framed desire. The fairytale now is the site of intertextuality resonant with world-views. The ‘sign’ remains, but in a complex interplay between the signified and the signifier. The retold fairytale is more cohesive as a ‘tale’ as it has attempted to be encompassing, accommodating, if not ‘complete’ (as text is constantly being written, even after it occupies its space in the narrative realm).

History like any other master-narrative is de-naturalised and re-evaluated in the present as another made up story and post-modernism activates this informing paradox of narrative. Angela Crater’s interpretative text *The Bloody Chamber*, provides a more unofficial, unapologetic and hence entertaining version of the official, nation-building, humanistic tone of Perrault’s fairytale, which seems to have inspired her. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a collection of short fiction and was first published in the United Kingdom in 1979 and won the Cheltenham Festival Literary Prize. All of the stories share a common theme of being closely based upon fairytales or folk tales. However, Angela Carter has stated:

“My intention was not to do ‘versions’ or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, ‘adult’ fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories.”⁵

The anthology contains ten stories: "The Bloody Chamber", "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", "The Tiger's Bride", "Puss-in-Boots", "The Erl-King", "The Snow Child", "The Lady of the House of Love", "The Werewolf", "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice". Out of these, "The Bloody Chamber" is based on Bluebeard, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" on Beauty and the Beast, "Puss-in-Boots" on Puss in Boots, "The Erl-King" on an adaptation of folklore Erlking, "The Snow Child" on various folklores mostly Snow-Child, "The Lady of the House of Love" on radioplay Vampirella, "The Werewolf", "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice" on Little Red Riding Hood.

Charles Perrault’s ‘classic’ version of fairy tale became the standard one and through translation and

continuous reprinting and retellings entered back into the oral tradition of most European countries. In Perrault's version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, little Red Riding Hood (named so because of the hood her mother had made for her) is sent to visit her ailing grandmother. The girl meets a wolf on her way, talks to him (her first transgression), tells him everything about her grandmother and where she stays (her second transgression) and then wastes her time in the forest, gathering nuts and flowers and taking a longer route to her grandmother's (her third transgression). The girl has committed these transgressions and must be punished for the same. It is impossible to bring her back to the fold of culture because in her transgressive role she has also put her grandmother's life in danger. And true to say, the wolf rushes to the grandmother's house, eats her up, waits for red riding hood in her grandmother's bed. When she arrives, Red Riding Hood is asked to get into bed with her and she is surprised to see her grandmother much transformed. But the innocent, unsuspecting girl recites the familiar litany- arms, legs, ears, eyes so big and is eaten up when she says the same for the masquerading wolf's teeth. The moral is driven home at the end that "Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf". Since there are also the unassuming, sweet, beguiling wolves, girls are warned off "wolves in lambs overcoat"; the warning not just being against strangers but the underlying implication being, to lay-off men. The story while stressing on the innate innocence expected of girls underlies the need to eschew gullibility.

The Grimms' version is slightly different and has a happy ending. Red Riding Hood and her grandmother in this version are saved by a hunter. The hunter slits open the wolf's belly and manages to save the distressed women. Riding hood after being rescued by the hunter immediately resolves never to "stray away from her path" when her "mother has forbidden me (her) to do so". Thus the girl has been saved from herself, nature has been subdued and order restored by the male-figure in the patriarchal structure/order.

Angela Carter's retelling of the tale offers a multivalent look at the fairy tale. First, the title of the story is "The Werewolf" as against Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" which gives us an indication of what's in store, for, in Perrault's version, the victim populates the title. The beginning of the tale is in keeping with what's expected of a fairytale- brevity. But the hyphenated sentences ("It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts. Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life.") stress more on the elisions and the omissions. Life in the northern country is difficult and that difficult life has predictably made the northerners cold of heart. The "crude icon" the Virgin is relegated to a place behind "guttering candle" while it is accepted that devils "hold picnics" in the graveyards to which the witches are invited. This sets the tone to the narration and we realize the paradox of the "innocent" girl set in dire circumstances. The mother perfunctorily orders her daughter to go visit her grandmother and gives her, her father's hunting knife and any pretensions to her frailness at belonging to the weaker sex, is lost when she says "you know how to use it". The girl's attire is a scabby sheepskin (reminiscent but contradictory of Grimms' Red Riding Hood in its starkness) and though she doesn't fear the forest, she is on guard and prepared when the wolf attacks her. Carter doesn't allow her heroine to enter into a dialogue with the wolf at all. She lops off the paw of the wolf who only "gulps" and runs away. The narration, up till this point, seems to follow the familiar rhetoric of an empowered woman in its employment of a feminist lens. But at this point of narration, a forking occurs, as the girl neatly wraps up the severed paw in a cloth and keeps it with her. Carter's subversion, working at many levels while neatly slicing through set mores, awakens the curiosity of the reader. The reader wonders at the necessity of this but moves ahead all the same. Seeing her grandmother burning up with fever when she reaches her place, she takes out the cloth in which the paw has been wrapped to apply a cold compress. But the paw has transformed into a hand which resemble her grandmother's. The grandmother has a bloody stump

where her right hand should have been. The girl is traumatized, screams out for help and is rescued by the villagers who rush in, recognise the grandmother for a witch and stone her to death. The story ends ominously with the lines "Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered." The reader is left with a sense of disquiet, wondering whether the girl was really innocent. The entire plot seems to have been carefully planned by the girl (Does the mother too have a role?) right from severing and keeping the wolf's paw to crying out and drawing the neighbours' attention (when she perfectly was able to overpower her grandmother), to drawing their attention to the wart on her grandmother's hand and getting them to stone her to death while at the same time earning the respectability so that she could continue living in her grandmother's place. The author also informs the reader that the girl continues to prosper at her grandmother's, casting doubts whether she herself might not be a witch. As the narrative comes to a close, the ambiguous implications of the girl's possession of her grandmother's house allow for no easy moral judgement or unmediated explanation. It also lends the text to multivalent complex interpretations.

Here the girl's ability to survive is clearly attributed to her cunning. She must prey on her grandmother in order to survive and she has moved away from the feminine role attributed to her kind when she cuts off the paw of the wolf in the forest. Now she is free to follow it up with victimizing her grandmother as in the struggle to survive the poor, inhuman cold conditions of the north. And survive she does. Thus while subverting the gender prescribed roles, Carter's protagonist also eschews familial ties. She becomes the perpetrator, the shape-shifter herself though she continues to thrive. It is easy to read into the ambiguity at the close of the narrative. Is Carter in a less-overtly, reverse-moralistic way warning off over-reaching girls (you turn into monsters!) or is she trying to make a case for the self-sufficient girl who is not Perrault's naïve girl or Grimm's innocent blush but a girl who knows what she wants also how to get it. The version is definitely the

answer to a modern child who would ask "Why can't she save herself?" Thus Carter is not just taking a patriarchal form like the fairytale and rewriting it, she is also presenting a vision of what she sees in her gendered role. She presents a woman-centred reciprocal dynamics in her narrative. The girl, in killing her grandmother, also shows herself capable of transgressing the moral codes of the society and emerging none the stronger from it as she continues to thrive having successfully hoodwinked the entire village.

While not being subversive, the postmodern fairytale (or rewriting) allows the exploration of the lacunae in the 'Classics' while generating unexplored possibilities or providing new readings. The postmodern fairytale, thus, might not be 'fair' to the original (which in itself was a socio-cultural construct) but its dissemination of multiple tales (versions) is strangely powerful. The postmodern fairytale retells history, values and gendered figurations. The truth perhaps (if there is a non-changing One) exists in the complex dialogic machinations between the Classic and the Postmodern.

Notes:

¹ See Hutcheon, especially chapter 2, for an insightful analysis of link between postmodernism, parody and politics.

² Bacchilega, Cristina. "Performing Wonders: Postmodern Revisions of Fairy Tales" *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. p. 20.

³ Ibid. p. 7.

⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

⁵ Haffenden, John (1985), "Angela Carter", *Novelists in Interview*, New York: Methuen Press, p. 80, ISBN 978-0-416-37600-5.

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