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Sixth International Scientific Conference

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ФИЛОЛОГИЈА, КУЛТУРА И ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ ФИЛОЛОГИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА И ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ PHILOLOGY, CULTURE AND EDUCATION

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ANGELA CARTER'S BLOODY CHAMBER IN RELATION TO THE SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the much debated problematic of postmodernist and feminist ideologies by examining some texts written by Angela Carter. The tendency of the current feminist stylistics focuses mostly on the idea that there is a significant women's writing and style that differs from men's. Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is a collection of re-written traditional fairy tales. Carter, as one of the most radical and stylish fiction authors of the 20th century, expresses her views of feminism through her various novels, fairy tales, and re-writes of fairy tales. The majority of her work goes around a specific time of feminism, radical libertarian feminism and her critique of the patriarchal role that have been placed on women. Her ten stories in the collection handle the topics of marriage, sexuality, gender roles, and female liberty. What Carter did by writing *The Bloody Chamber*, is not just re-writing of some old stories like Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Puss in Boots but she created new stories with new conceptions of the binary oppositions between the male and the female.

Keywords: fairy-tales, radical feminism, feminist stylistic, female liberty

Introduction

This work emerges from the Second-wave Feminism as a subcategory of feminist women dubbed by the radical-libertarian feminists. These women united under the idea that what is personal is political, meaning that if women do not do something about the current patriarchal conditions plaguing them in society, then the fate of all women is the same (Tong, 49). All women will continue to be suppressed by men regardless of the situation. Therefore, these feminists promoted the idea that women need to become "androgynous persons," or women who possess both good masculine traits and good feminine traits (Tong, 50). Radical-libertarian feminists stressed that just because a woman's anatomy deems her female, that does not necessarily means she can only possess the usual characteristics of beauty, ignorance, charm, serenity, and peaceful. They argue that patriarchal society uses rigid gender roles to keep women passive and men active. Society uses these patriarchal guidelines to ensure that women stay affectionate, obedient, responsive to sympathy and approval, cheerful, kind, and friendly and men stay tenacious, aggressive, curious, ambitious, responsible, and competitive. They rallied that women needed to mix and match masculine and feminine traits. The way to do this, they declared was for women to dispel men's wrongful power over women by having both sexes recognize that women are no more destined to be passive then men are to be active (Tong, 50). Thus, by devel-



oping a combination of masculine and feminine traits that best suits ones personality will enable this recognition (Tong, 50). Another main goal of radical-libertarian feminists was to get women to reclaim their sexuality. They claimed that as feminists, they needed to promote the idea that women need to reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives them pleasure and satisfaction (Tong, 49). Female sexual liberation was among radical-libertarian's biggest messages. Radical-libertarian feminists wanted there to no longer be restraints on women's right to choose. Angela Carter revolved her tales around these radical-libertarian goals.

Angela Carter was one of the most original, radical and stylish fiction writers in English of the 20th century, delighting readers with her fierce, witty tales, short stories, novels and essays. Strongly influenced by surrealism, by the Situationist cultural activism of the 1960s, with its stress on theatre and absurdity, and by sexual libertarianism, she unpicked the myths that compose and sustain western social and sexual relationships. In her view, male desire dominated the popular imagination. Her writing, with all of its complexities, "deconstructs the processes that produce social structures and shared meanings" (Peach,1998) and challenges the binary oppositions of male/female, good/evil, dark/light, while at the same time taking us through a painful process of defamiliarization of our beloved childhood fairy tales. Her tales are seen as "materialist, rationalist fables of the politics of experience" (Day, 1998)

This paper focuses on three stories from *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*: *The Bloody Chamber*, *The Tiger's Bride* and *Wolf-Alice*, and all three include either a role reversal, or show up the patriarchal oppression, in which a man is the more powerful gender.

The Bloody Chamber

Carter promotes her radical-libertarian beliefs especially in *The Bloody Chamber*, where the female protagonists are pursuing their sexual desires and redefining their sexual identity as well as fighting for sexual equality with men, which was the biggest goal for radical-libertarian feminists during the feminist movement. Carter promotes sexuality by not letting the male sexual desires take dominance. Instead, Carter pays particular attention to reinforce the equality of the sexual transactions between her male and female characters. *The Bloody Chamber* is based on the story of Bluebeard – a rich, ugly man with a blue beard who entrusts his keys to his wife.

The unnamed narrator of this story is a 17-year-old girl from Paris who marries a wealthy Marquis despite her mother's reservations. After the wedding she journeys with him to his secluded castle where, on their honeymoon, he leaves her with the keys to all the doors in the castle but tells her never to use the smallest one. The girl uses the forbidden key and finds the tortured and bloody bodies of the Marquis's former wives. The Marquis returns home and informs her he will punish her by beheading, but her mother arrives just in time to shoot the Marquis dead with her revolver. In the title story, *The Bloody Chamber*, the wives, past and present, are objectified by the Marquis, as he literally puts them on display, 'the opera singer lay, quite naked'. Here the domination over women portrayed by the Marquis allows for a feminist interpretation, because he manipulates and literally molds them in order to satisfy his erotic tastes. This acts as a metaphor for women being purely a model for men to build their lives around, alluding to the idea of socialist feminism, where such feminists believe



in inequality in the social hierarchy. Her initial characterization of her protagonist in The Bloody Chamber, Carter sticks with the traditional role and initially portrays her as femininely passive but the story is narrated by the heroine which enables (different from the original form) readers to watch her feminine power transform her. This first quote in Carter's work shows the formulaic feminine passivity common in old stories:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it [...]. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes, but in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. (p.5)

Here the protagonist is an innocent girl who hides her eyes at the discomfort she feels under his overt 'carnal avarice'. Until now, she typifies her stereotypical gender role that is expected of her. But, in the next line the game has changed:

And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away. (p.5)

Now the heroine is coming alive and into her sexual awakening. There is power in knowing she is desired and she begins to realize this. The protagonist even tells the reader: "My mother[...] had told me what it was that lovers did; I was innocent not naïve" (Carter, 1979, p.8). Here the author uses the moment in front of the mirror to begin the narrator's journey to empowerment and self-discovery. It is here where the novel deviates from the original masculine framework where female sexuality and sensuality was shunned. According to Fox-Genovese: "In traditional female writing, sexuality, like anger, had largely been concealed and displaced" (p. 206).

The protagonist goes on to become worthy of the title heroine as she defies her traditional fate and escapes the Marquis. It is important to note that she manages to escape not under her own power, but with the help of her mother. Carter is not interested in being radical for the sake of radicalism. Her objectives are subtler and more in line with social feminism (with its roots in Marxism) and because of those roots, it is its larger scope that it views oppression through that is important for use in looking at Carter's collection of revised stories. Recently, an unlikely feminist addressed the UN and presented the argument that it is not just women but men who suffer from gender bias and culturally restrictive binary roles; the same roles that drive many of our fictional narratives. Emma Watson (2014) argued:

If men don't have to be aggressive in order to be accepted, women won't feel compelled to be submissive. If men don't have to control, women won't have to be controlled. Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong... It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum not as two opposing sets of ideals (p.20).

Not every character in every story experiences a gender role reversal and the first story of the collection (which is also the title of the whole collection). *The Bloody Chamber* (p.1), a version of Perrault's "Bluebeard," presents some typical stereotypes of conventional fairy tales. It has a female character, who, like females in the typical conventional fairy tales, is submissive and weaker than the powerful male character. However, this story also provides a secondary character, the protagonist's



mother, whose empowerment is portrayed by her being a female hero. This deviates from "Bluebeard" (Perrault), where it is the protagonist's brothers who come to her rescue, and not her mother, so already here a role reversal has actually happened:

My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I? (Carter 2)

According to Enns & Sinacore (2005), the role reversal with a woman as the hero of the story is clearly feministic, and particularly in line with radical feminists who oppose the idea of men as authorities (p. 472)

The Tiger's Bride

The narrator of *The Tiger's Bride* is traveling with her father in Italy when he loses her to Milord, a tiger-man, in a game of cards. Milord takes the girl to his remote palazzo, where she is told if she removes her clothes for him he will return her to her father along with many riches. The girl is too proud to show her naked self and refuses, but later she goes riding with Milord, who takes off his human mask for her. Undone by his animalistic majesty, the girl freely offers him her nudity and lets Milord lick her with his rough tongue until she transforms into a tiger like him. In this work, the audience is prepared to read a story of confinement. The story begins as follows: "My father lost me to The Beast at cards". (p.33) The short and sharp structure of the sentence expresses the feelings of the narrator; this time, not suspicion and melancholy but fury and attack.

Tiger's Bride is yet another version of Beauty and the Beast. In this version, the 'beast' is a tiger and the emphasis is on objectification and less sexual. Using first person narrative allows the reader to peek into Beauty's mind and see how much she hates her father for his gambling addiction. It is apparent that this Beauty is more independent minded and realistic than the previous Beauty. In The Tiger's Bride, Carter makes a reference first to the fear Beauty feels of the animality of sex, but also fills Beauty's head with superstitious beliefs about the act itself. Carter emphasizes the reducing of women to their physical form, but also the objectification of women by having Beauty say:

'You may put me in a windowless room, sir, and I promise you I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face, to hide it; though the sheet must be laid over me so lightly that it will not choke me. So I shall be covered completely from the waist upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only the once. (p.38)

In Angela Carter's *The Tiger's Bride*, the reverse is true—women are the ones who open up to the beast in them in relationship with men, instead of being the civilizing agent" (Basu-Zharku, p.1). As the original formula called women to be sweet, innocent and virginal, it would have been considered obscene for a woman to suddenly turn into an animal for love. Carter felt this trope had played long enough. When exploring Carter's proposal of misuse of power as an attribute of Milord in The Tiger's Bride, it is possible to contend that misogynistic qualities are also included within her criterion for a monster. The tiger's animalistic request to see the body of a



virgin works to stir up an array of emotions. Beauty, initially, was struck by the ridiculousness and almost predictableness of his desire, later commenting how men had never taken her seriously because of her gender. Milord's lusting, almost obsessive desire to deflower a woman with his eyes is successful in evoking the type of reaction Carter insists can be also produced as an effect of a monster—one that is much different from fear.

It can be better understood that the main and final attribute of Milord that classifies him as a monster within this text: his ruthless attempts to erode Beauty's resilience and self-worth, and his eventual success in doing so. If we take into consideration Sigmund Freud's theories of the uncanny and redefine the word 'abject' by describing it as a sort of "limbo"—the middle ground between something that is a part of someone as an individual, and something that is embodied within a separate entity. The abject pushes someone to react with uncertainty and uneasiness by essentially relating the individual to something they do not wish to have a connection with, either because it instills fear within them, or because they have developed a set of negative feelings towards it. Finally, the equality that evolves from the equal sexual transactions between man and woman, as Carter depicts in *The Tiger's Bride* is significant and important in women's fight for freedom from patriarchal roles and sexual oppression.

Wolf-Alice

Wolf-Alice is a mute child who runs on all fours because she was raised by wolves. After being found in a wolf den, she is taken to a convent and then passed on to the Duke, a supernatural creature who robs graveyards for food. Wolf-Alice gets her period and starts wearing human clothes. The townspeople go after the Duke for eating the corpse of a young bride, and they shoot him. While licking the Duke's wound, Wolf-Alice manages to transform him back into a human.

In "Wolf Alice," Carter reworks the sexual politics of the fairy tale and the Gothic to parody the notion of an essential 'feminine'. Carter's strong affinity with the gothic is used in the story to represent women's anxieties about the monstrosities of their bodies and about their gender. The female gothic has a long tradition in women's writing demonstrated in the work of eighteenth and nineteenth- century women writers including Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Mary Braddon, and others. The conventional heroine in this literary tradition is a helpless victim of unexplained threats to her life and ghostly visitations over which she has no control. However, Carter's approach towards this type of women differs completely from the original gothic. While in original Gothic narratives, this model of femininity is honored as the perfect model of femininity, Carter considers this representation of femininity as terrible and wants to free women of it. Carter plays with the Gothic to displace the conventional logic of realism by introducing narrative contradictions.

The communal narrator admits that "we secluded her in animal privacy out of fear of her imperfection because it showed us what we might have been" (p.83). The freak herself is the text of the body. Caught up in the image of abnormality, Carter is saying, how can women express the body? The nature/culture binary suggests that the animal nature associated with women is sexual. Contemporary women writers treat the identification of women with nature and the body in a variety of different ways.



The boundary between the human existence and the animal realm is blurred. The girl's conscious conception of her personal body power is of a hybrid form – one where "animal/human" boundaries are blurred. She felt at one with nature at that stage, as though it was "the emanation of her questing nose and erect ears," now she sees it as "a backdrop for her that [waits] for her arrivals to give it meaning" (p.84). Carter makes plain that women must gain internal, psychic autonomy as a preliminary and essential event before body boundaries can be crossed. When she realizes that the reflection is hers, that she is capable of casting a reflection, she begins to understand that she is separate and has power over her surrounding; "She goes out more often now; the landscape assembles itself about her, she informs it with her presence. She is its significance" (Carter, p.85).

Generally, in Carter's narratives women's sexual and psychological alienation is described and inscribed through the agency of clothing. The discarding of clothing is a general metaphor for the defiance of sex roles in many women's books, since clothing are explicitly associated with the social script of femininity. The very act of putting on a wedding dress in "Wolf-Alice" represents a parody of the socialization of the heroine; she is assimilating the cultural stereotype of what costume is appropriate for her gender. The dress marks her as a woman and separates her from men. When at the end of "Wolf-Alice," as Wolf-Alice wonders into the village, a young bridegroom is scheming retribution against the Duke for his bride's death. She and the Duke run away as the village people throw holy water and bullets. They hit the Duke. When the peasants see Wolf-Alice running after the Duke in her wedding dress, they suppose that she is the Duke's victim, a bride's ghost attempting revenge from the Duck. Then, they ran screaming. Finally, as the wounded Duke lies bleeding in his castle, Wolf-Alice starts leaking the blood off his body. Whereas the mirror enables Alice to cross the border of animal into a new cosmology, the Duke's face begins to appear in the mirror's glass until it is reflected there fully, "as vivid as real life itself." Finally, a mirror of their identification is reflected in the last scene:

The rational glass, the master of the visible, impartially recorded the crooning girl. As she continued her ministrations, this glass, with infinite slowness, yielded to the reflexive strength of its own material construction. Little by little, there appeared within it, like the image of photographic paper that emerges, first, a formless web of tracery, the prey caught in its fishing net, then in firmer yet still shadowed outline until at last vivid as real life itself, as if brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue, the face of the Duke. (p.86)

In essence, Wolf-Alice represents a moral caricature of the untruthful world in traditional fairy tales, which pretends that the integrating of personal and cultural values into a scheme that is shown to be in harmony with the universe is somewhat optimistic and reductive. In contrast to conventional fairy tales which offer an appealing model that they suggest all can follow to some extent; Wolf-Alice recognizes or treats the experiences of those who do not conform.



Conclusion

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* are not just re-write versions of the beloved fairy-tales that we have all grown up with, but most importantly, she helped us to imagine them anew, to re-create them, by including elements which form new conceptions of the binary oppositions which exist primarily between the male and the female, in the context of the oppressive patriarchal society.

Carter manages to prove that there is an alternative to the typical stereotypes to both genders. Gender roles are often blended or reversed in Carter's stories, a result of changing the existing stereotypes about women. For example, the heroes of the stories can be women instead of men in order to show that women can be independent and take care of themselves in Carter's versions of the fairy tales. By reversing the female gender role from being a weak character into a strong, independent female protagonist, Carter thus changes the way conventional fairy tales have been portraying women. Moreover, some women in Carter's fairy tales are also liberated in their own sexuality, while conventional fairy tales are often silent about the subject of women's sexuality or imply that women should be good girls who wait for sex until after marriage.

Feminism has changed over time, as ideas about how to fight for gender equality have changed, as well. In *The Bloody Chamber* collection, the stories in contain several ideas from the Second Wave of Feminism, but mostly from radical feminism as the stories cover patriarchal oppression, and they oppose stereotypes. The stories contain ideas from liberal, social, and cultural feminism as well, but mostly through ideas that radical feminism also agrees with. The stories change the conventional fairy tales they are based on, by mainly changing the typical conventional fairy tale stereotypes, as well as going against patriarchal oppression and objectification to be able to achieve gender equality.

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