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Angela Carter'S The Bloody Chamber And The Decolonization Of Feminine Sexuality

Author [1]-Jyoti Singh(Research scholar J.S.UNIVERSITY , SHIKOHABAD DIST.FIROZABAD,U.P. ENGLISH DEPARTMENT)

Author -[2]--Dr.Anurag Agarwal (H.O.D.OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT,J.S.UNIVERSITY SHIKOHABAD DIST.FIROZABAD ,U.P.)

Abstract -----

Decolonizing Feminine Sexuality: Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' as a Postcolonial Feminist Text" Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a seminal work of postcolonial feminist literature that decolonizes feminine sexuality by subverting

centuries-old patriarchal and imperialist narratives. Through her Gothic retellings of classic fairy tales like Bluebeard and Beauty and the Beast, Carter exposes the intertwined legacies of;

Imperialism's eroticization of colonized female bodies, reducing them to exotic objects of desire

Patriarchy's domination of women's sexuality,enforcing silence, shame, and submission Racism's erasure of marginalized female voices, marginalizing their experiences and desires Carter reclaims feminine sexuality as a powerful force of mresistance, autonomy, and self- definition,empowering her female protagonists to wield desire as a weapon against oppressors.

By doing so, "The Bloody Chamber" challenges traditional notions of female passivity, redefining feminine sexuality as active, assertive, and liberated.

Keywords –Angela carter, feminine,sex, bloody, chamber

INTRODUCTION ---

Angela Carter was a trailblazing British writer celebrated for her innovative and provocative fiction that challenged traditional notions of femininity, identity, and power. Through her unique blend of fantasy, mythology, and surrealism, Carter's work, such as "The Bloody Chamber" and "Nights at the Circus", offers a searing critique of patriarchal structures and societal norms. Her writing is characterized by its bold and unflinching portrayal of female experience, exploring themes of desire, agency, and empowerment. As a prominent figure in feminist literature, Carter's influence can be seen in many contemporary writers and artists, and her work continues to be widely read and studied today. you'd ever need to do with an Angela Carter text is to send it on an assertiveness training course. With her death (and no one has spoken more effectively on that than her last novel, Wise *Children*, 'a broken heart is never a tragedy. Only untimely death is a tragedy') the obituaries have started to evoke her as the gentle, wonderful white witch of the north. But far from being gentle, Carter's texts were known for the excessiveness of their violence and, latterly, the almost violent exuberance of their excess. Many a reader has found the savagery with which she can attack cultural stereotypes disturbing, even alienating. Personally I found (and find) it exhilarating — you never knew what was coming next from the avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism.

Margaret Atwood's memorial in the *Observer* opens with Carter's 'intelligence and kindness' and goes on to construct her as a mythical fairy-tale figure: 'The amazing thing about her, for me, was that someone who looked so much like the Fairy Godmother ... should actually *be* so much like the Fairy Godmother. She seemed always on the verge of bestowing something — some talisman,

some magic token ...' Lorna Sage's obituary in the *Guardian* talked of her 'powers of enchantment and hilarity, her generous inventiveness'while the *Eate Slhow'n* memorial on BBC2 had the presenter calling her the 'white witch of English literature', J. G. Ballard a 'friendly witch', and Salman Rushdie claimed 'English literature has lost its high sorcerers, its benevolent witch queen ... deprived of the fairy queen we cannot find the magic that will heal us' and finished by describing her as 'a very good wizard, perhaps the first wizard de-luxe'. But this concurrence of white witcWfairy godmother mythologizing needs watching; it is always the dangerously problematic that are mythologized in order to make them less dangerous. As Carter herself argued strongly in *Sladeian Woman,*'if women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determine lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men).'

Clearly, Angela Carter was best known for her feminist re-writing of fairy-tales; the memorials blurring stories with story-teller stand testimony to that. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories,* published in 1979, is also midway between the disquietingly savage analyses of patriarchy of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Z'fie 3fagic *Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, Passion of New Eue,* and the exuberant novels of the 1980s and early 1990s, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children.* This is not to argue that the latter novels are not also feminist, but their strategy is different. The violence in the events depicted in the earlier novels (the rapes, the physical and mental abuse of women) and the aggression implicit in the representations, are no longer foregrounded. While similar events may occur in these two last texts, the focus is on mocking and exploding the constrictive cultural stereotypes and in celebrating the sheer ability of the female protagonists to survive, unscathed by the sexist ideologies. The tales in *The Bloody Chamber* still foreground the violence and the abuse, but the narrative itself provides an exuberant re-writing of the fairy- tales that actively engages the reader in a feminist deconstruction. I am therefore focusing my discussion on Carter's fairy-tales to allow a specific analysis of Carter's textual uses of violence as a feminist strategy, alongside a case study assessing the relationship of such a strategy to an assessment of her readership.

Fairy-tale elements had been present in Carter's work as early as *The Magic Toyshop* in 1967, but she didn't come to consider them as a specific genre of European literature until the late seventies. In 1977 she translated for Gollancz a series of Perrault's seventeenth- century tales, and in 1979 published *The Blood y Chamber,* her re-writing of the fairy-tales of Perrault and Madame Leprince de Beaumont. In 1982 she translated another edition, which included the two extra stories by Madame de Beaumont, 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Sweetheart'. Three of the stories from *Blood y Chamber* were rewritten for Radio 3,' and she took part in adapting one of them, 'Company of Wolves', into the film by Neil Jordan (1984). Finally, she edited the *Virago Book ofFairy- Tales* in 1990, and the *lsecond Virago Book o[Fairy-Tales* for **1992.**

Feminist critics who have written on *Blood y Chamber* argue that the old fairy-tales were a reactionary form that inscribed a misogynistic ideology, without questioning whether women readers would always and necessarily identify with the female figures (an assumption that Carter too shares in). They argue that Carter, in using the form, gets locked into the conservative sexism, despite her good intentions. Patricia Duncker uses Angela Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* to argue that Carter is 're-writing the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures' and therefore reproducing the 'rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic.'Avis Lewallen agrees, Carter has been unable adequately to revision the conservative form for a feminist politics, and so her attempts at constructing an active female erotic are badly compromised — if not a reproduction of male pornography.

I would argue that, conversely, it is the critics who cannot see beyond the sexist binary opposition. In order to do this, two issues need to be addressed: whether a 'reactionary' form can be re-written; and the potential perversity of women's sexuality. The discussion of the first issue will lead to an argument for a feminist strategy of writing and also of reading, and hence throw some light on Carter's potential audiences. Firstly, the question of the form of the fairy- tale: is it some universal, unchangeable given or does it change according to its specific historic rendition? Narrative genres clearly do inscribe ideologies (though that can never fix the readings), but later re-writings that take the genre and adapt it will not necessarily encode the same ideological assumptions. Otherwise, one would have to argue that the African

novels that have sought to decolonize the European cultural stereo- types of themselves, must always fail. One would need to argue that Ngugi's or Achebe's novels, for example, reinforce the colonial legacy because they use the novel format. This is clearly not true. When the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology, I would argue, then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions. Carter argued that *Bloody Chamber* was 'a book of stories *about* fairy stories' (my emphasis) and this ironic strategy needs to be acknowledged. Lewallen complains that Duncker is insensitive to the irony in Carter's tales, but then agrees with her assessment of the patriarchal inscrip- tions, seeing the irony as merely 'blurring the boundaries' of binary thinking. Now I want to push the claim for irony a lot further than Lewallen, and argue that rather than a blurring, it enacts an oscil- lation that is itself deconstructive.

Naomi Schor in an essay on Flaubert's ironic use of Romanticism,[3] states that irony allows the author to reject and at the same time re- appropriate the discourse that s/he is referring to. (i.e., Romanti- cism is both present and simultaneously discredited in Flaubert's texts). Schor historicizes the continuity between nineteenth-century and modernist irony as inherently misogynistic (because linked to the fetishization of women) and calls for a feminist irony that incorporates the destabilizing effects, while rejecting the misogyny. She cites Donna Haraway's opening paragraph from 'A manifesto for cybergs". 'Ironyis a rhetorical strategy and political method,one I would like to see more honoured within socialist feminism'. Utilizing this model of an ironic oscillation, I want to argue that Carter's tales do not simply 'rewrite' the old tales by fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists — they 're-write' them by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version. Look again at the quote from 'Company of Wolves' given earlier. It is not read as a story read for the first time, with a positively imaged heroine. It is read, with the original story encoded within it, so that one reads of f›otfi texts, aware of how the new one refers back to and implicitly critiques the old. We read 'The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat' as referring to the earlier Little Red Riding Hood's passive terror of being eaten, before she is saved by the male woodman. We recognize the author's feminist turning of the tables and, simultaneously, the damage done by the old inscriptions of femininity as passive. 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (Carter **1983: 69).**

What should also not be overlooked, alongside this ironic decon- structive technique, is the role of the reader; the question of *who* is reading these tales. These are late twentieth-century adult fairy- tales conscious of their own fictive status and so questioning the very constructions of roles while asserting them. When a young girl resol- utely chops off the paw of the wolf threatening her, and we read 'the wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob ... wolves are less brave than they seem' — we are participating in the re-writing of a wolfs characteristic

Carter was insistent that her texts were open- ended, written with a space for the reader's activity in mind. She disliked novels that were closed worlds and described most realist novels as etiquette manuals. And she placed Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* in such a category, as well as the novels of Jane Austen. The fact that the former was feminist didn't let it off the protocol hook. Books written to show the reader how she should behave, were not only an insult to the reader but also a bore to write. Carter's own fiction seems always aware of its playful interaction with the reader's assumptions and recognitions.[4] *The Blood y Chamber* is clearly engaging with a reader historically situated in the early 1980s (and beyond) informed by feminism, and raising questions about the cultural constructions of femininity. Rather than carrying the heavy burden of instruction, Carter often explained that for her 'a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms'. And the two things needed for any argument are, something to argue *against* (something to be overturned) and someone to make that argument *to* (a reader).

The question therefore arises of whether this deconstructive irony is activated if the reader is uninformed by feminism. The answer must be, on the whole, no. *Blood y Chamber* draws on a feminist discourse —or at least an awareness that feminism is challenging sexist constructions. Mary Kelly, the feminist artist, when challenged on the same question of the accessibility of her *Post Partum Document* to a wider audience, cogently argued, 'there is no such thing as a homogenous mass- audience. You can't make art for everyone. And if you're enjoyed within a particular movement or organisation, then the work is going to participate in its debates.' Lucy Lippard goes on to suggest that Kelly's art 'extends the level of discourse within the art audience for all those who see the art experience as an *exchange,* a collaboration between artist and audience — the active audience an active art deserves.' (Kelly, 1984: xiii) I would argue that Carter's tales evoke a similar active engagement with feminist discourse.

At first sight, such a conclusion may sound odd, because if anyone has taken feminist fiction into the mainstream, it is Carter. But if a feminist writer is to remain a feminist writer(rather than a writer about women) then the texts must engage, on some level, with feminist thinking. There is a wide constituency of potential readers who satisfy the minimum requirement of having an awareness that feminism challenges sexist constru.ctions. One does not need to be a feminist to read the texts, far from it, but if the reader does not appreciate the attack on the stereotypes then the payback for that level of engagement, the sheer cerebral pleasure and the enjoyment of the iconoclasm, will be missing. And without the humour or the interest in deconstructing cultural gender stereotypes, the textual anger against the abuse of women in previous decades can prove very disquieting, even uncomfort- able, to read. To enjoy the humour — the payback with many of Carter's texts — readers need to position themselves outside phallocentric culture (at least for the process of reading). The last two novels, with their lighter tone and more exuberant construction of interrelation- ships, probably have the widest readership of all. This mellowing of textual aggression is not the only explanation for the increasing popularity of Carter's later texts. Helen Carr notes that the mid-eighties saw the arrival of South American magic realism on the British scene. From that moment, Carter's readers could assign her anarchic fusion of fantasy and realism to an intelligible genre, and so feel more secure.

However, a fuller explanation of Carter's popularity needs to take account of marketing and distribution: not just accessibility of ideology, but accessibility of purchase. Is the text on the general bookshop shelves? Is it marketed under a feminist imprint, thus signalling to the potential reader, for feminist eyes only? Nicci Gerrard in her examin- ation of how feminist fiction has impacted on mainstream publishing, argues that Carter along with Toni Morrison and Keri Hulme, have been more widely read because while still remaining explicitly feminist, they have brought feminism out of its 'narrow self-consciousness'. Narrow is always a difficult adjective to quantify. In Britain, Angela Carter — like Morrison and Hulme — has been published by mainstream publishers from the beginning. The publishing history for her hardback fiction runs: Heinemann 1966—70, Hart

So Carter's involvement with feminist publishers came relatively late in the day and seems to have stemmed from Virago's publishing of her first piece of non-fiction, *lsadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979). Her fiction's reputation was made from mainstream publishing houses and was reinforced by the awards of mainstream literary prizes: the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for *Magic Toyshop* -, Somerset Maugham Award for *lseveral Perceptions*,- Cheltenham Festi- val of Literature Award for *Blood y Chamber*-, and the James Tait Black Award for *Nights at the Circus.* The shortlisting *of* the 1984 Booker Prize caused a minor furore when *Nights at the Circus* was not included

(it was won that year by Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lat).* Even many of the individual tales from Tfie *Blood y Chamber* first saw the light of day in small but fairly prestigious literary reviews such as *Bananas, lstand, Northern Arts Reuiew,* and Boro *Reuiew* (the only academic journal), none of them notably feminist in their editorial policy. And 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' was first published in the British edition of Yogite.

Clearly I am arguing that texts that employ a feminist irony, that engage actively with a feminist discourse, do not automatically confine themselves to a feminist ghetto. There is a wide and growing audience for at least some kinds of feminist fiction. But I am also arguing that exuberance sells better than discomfort. The more textually savage books are published by Virago in paperback; the more magical by Penguin; and two celebratory ones by the big-
money bidders, Picador
and Vantage.

But what also sells in this commodified age of ours, as everyone knows, is sex, and Carter's texts have always engaged with eroticism. The quotes included by Penguin on the book covers invariably make reference to 'the stylish erotic prose', 'erotic, exotic and bizarre ro- mance'. And this clearly also has a lot to do with her popularity. In order to counter Lewallen and Duncker's perception of her work as pornogra- phic, I need to examine the feminist strategies of her representations of sexuality, particularly the debate surrounding the construction of sexuality within the *Blood y Chamber* stories. I believe Carter is going some way towards constructing a complex vision of female psycho- sexuality, through her invoking of violence as well as the erotic. But that women can be violent as well as active sexually, that women can choose to be perverse, is clearly not something allowed for in the calculations of such readers as Duncker, Palmer and Lewallen. Carter's strength is precisely in exploding the stereotypes of women as passive, demure cyphers. That she therefore evokes the gamut of violence and perversity is certainly troubling, but to deny their existence is surely to incarcerate women back within a partial, sanitized image only slightly less constricted than the

Victorian angel in the house.

Carter was certainly fascinated by the incidence of'beast marriage' stories, in the original fairy-tales, and she claimed they were inter- national. In discussing how the wolves subtly changed their meaning in the film of the story, she comments that nevertheless they still signified libido. Fairy-tales are often seen as dealing with the 'uncanny', the distorted fictions of the unconscious revisited through homely images — and beasts can easily stand for the projected desires, the drive for pleasure of women. Particularly when such desires are discountenanced by a patriarchal culture concerned to restrict its women to being property (without a libido of their own, let alone a mind or a room).[6]

In all of the tales, not only is femininity constructed as active, sensual, desiring and unruly — but successful sexual transactions are founded on an equality and the transforming powers of recognizing the reciprocal claims of the other. The ten tales divide up into the first, 'The Bloody Chamber', a re-writing of the Bluebeard story; three tales around cats: lion/tiger/puss in boots; three tales of magical beings: erl-king/snow- child/vampire; and finally three tales of werewolves. Each tale takes up the theme of the earlier one and comments on a different aspect of it, to present a complex variation of female desire and sexuality.

In the Finale to *S!adeian Woman* Carter discusses the word flesh in its various meanings:

the pleasures of the flesh are vulgar and unrefined, even with an element of beastliness about them, although flesh tints have the sumptuous succulence of peaches because flesh plus skin equals sensuality.

But, if flesh plus skin equals sensuality, then flesh minus skin equals meat. (Carter, 1979b: 137—8)

This motif of skin and flesh as signifying pleasure, and of meat as signifying economic objectification, recurs throughout the ten tales, and stand as an internal evaluation of the relationship shown. The other recurring motif is that of the gaze, but it is not always simply the objectification of the woman by male desire, as we shall discover.

In each of the first three tales, Carter stresses the relationship between women's subjective sexuality and their objective role as property: young girls get bought by wealth, one way or another. But in the feminist re-write, Bluebeard's victimization of women is overturned and he himself is vanquished by the mother and daughter.

The **puppet** master, **open-mouthed,** wide eyed, **impotent at** the last, saw **his** dolls break free of their **strings, abandon** the rituals **he had ordained** for **them since** time **began** and start to **live** for **themselves. (1979a: 39)**

In the two versions of the beauty-and-the- beast theme, the lion and the tiger signify something other than man. 'For a lion is a lion and a man is a man' argues the first tale. In the first, Beauty is adored by her father, in the second, gambled away by a profligate drunkard. The felines signify otherness, a savage and magnificent power, outside of humanity. In one story, women are pampered, in the other treated as property, but in both cases the protagonists chose to explore the dangerous, exhilarat- ing change that comes from choosing the beast. Both stories are careful to show a reciprocal awe and fear in the beasts, as well as in the beauty, and the reversal theme reinforces the equality of the transactions: lion kisses Beauty's hand, Beauty kisses lion's; tiger strips naked and so Beauty chooses to show him 'the fleshly nature of women'. In both cases the beasts signify a sensuality that the women have been taught might devour them, but which, when embraced, gives them power, strength and a new awareness of both self and other. The tiger's bride has her 'skins of a life in the world' licked off to reveal her own magnificent fur beneath the surface.

Each of the three adolescent protagonists has been progressively stronger and more aggressive, and each has embraced a sensuality both sumptuous and unrefined. With the fourth story, 'Puss in Boots', the cynical puss viewing human love and desire in a lighthearted *commedia dell'arte* rendition, demythologizes sex with humour and gusto.

Ifthe wildfelines have signified the sensual desires that women need to acknowledge within themselves, the three fictive figures signify the problematics of desire itself. 'Erl-king' is a complex rendering of a subjective collusion with objectivity and entrapment within the male gaze. The woman narrator both fears and desires entrapment within the birdcage. The erl-king, we are told, does notexistinnature, but in avoid of her own making (hence his calling her 'mother' at the end). The disquieting shifts between the two voices of the narrator, first and third person, represent the twocompeting desires forfreedom andengulfment, in a tale that delineates the very ambivalence of desire. 'Snowchild' presents the unattainability of desire, which will always melt away before possession. No real person can ever satisfy desire's constant deferral. 'Lady of the House of Love', with its lady vampire, inverts the gender roles of Bluebeard, with the woman

constructed as an aggressor with a man as the virgin victim. But with this construction of aggressor, comes the question of whether sadists are trapped within their nature: 'can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?' And, through love and the reciprocal theme — he kisses her bloody finger, rather than her sucking his blood — this aggressor is able to vanquish ancestral desires, but at a cost. In this tale the overwhelming fear of the cat tales, that the protagonist might be consumed by the otherness of desire, is given a new twist.

The three wolf stories also deal with women's relationship to the unruly libido, but the werewolf signifies a stranger, more alienated otherness than the cats, despite the half-human manifestations. Old Granny is the werewolfinthefirsttale, and the girl's vanquishing of heris seen as a triumph of the complaisant society (the symbolic) that hounds the uncanny. The tiger's bride had been a rebellious child and chooses desire over conventional wealth; now we have a'good'child who sacrifices the uncanny for bourgeois prosperity. In the second tale, 'Company of Wolves', the list of manifestations of werewolves, the amalgam of human and wolf; symbolic and imaginary, concludes with the second Red Riding Hood story. This time the wolf does consume the granny, but is outfaced by Red RidingHood's awareness that infreely meeting his sensuality, the libido will transform 'meat' into 'flesh'. After the fulfilment of their mutual desire, he is transformed into a 'tender' wolf, and she sleeps safe between his paws. Thefinal tale isofa girlraised by wolves, outside of the social training of the symbolic. Alluding to Truffaut's *L'Enfant sausage,* Lewis Carroll and Lacan, the young girl grows up outside the cultural inscriptions and learns a new sense of self from her encounters with the mirror and from the rhythms of her body. She learns a sense of time and routine. Finally her pity begins to transform the werewolf Duke into the world of the rational, where he too can be symbolized.

Reading Carter's fairy-tales as her female protagonists' confron- tations with desire, in all its unruly 'animalness', yields rich rewards.

However, Patricia Duncker simplistically reads the tales as 'all men are beasts to women' and so sees the female protagonists as inevitably enacting the roles of victims of male violence. Red Riding Hood of the twice mentioned quotation, according to her 'sees that rape is inevitable

. and decides to strip off, lie back and enjoy it. She wants it really, they all do.' Reading 'The Tiger's Bride' Duncker claims the stripping of the girl's skin 'beautifully packaged and unveiled, is the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography'. Because she reads the beasts as men in furry clothing, Duncker argues Carter has been unable to paint an 'alternative anti-sexist language of the erotic' because there is no conception of women as having autonomous desire. But Carter is doing that. Read the beasts as the projections of a feminine libido, and they become exactly that autonomous desire which the female characters need to recognize and reappropriate as a part of themselves (denied by the phallocentric culture). Isn't that why at the end of'Tiger's Bride' the tiger's licking reveals the tiger in the woman protagonist, beneath the cultural construction of the demure? Looked at again, this is not read as woman re-enacting pornography for the male gaze, but as woman reappropriating libido: And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (Carter 1979a: 67)

Lewallen does read the beasts as female desire, but argues that the female protagonists are still locked within a binary prescription of either 'fuck or be fucked'. However, I would argue she too brings this binary division into the discussion with her, when she asserts 'Sade's dualism is simple: sadist or masochist, fuck or be fucked, victim or aggressor'. She uses a reading of Carter's reading of Sade, in *lsadeian Woman* to inform the stories and argues, wrongly I think, that Carter is putting forward woman as sexual aggressor (Sade's Juliette), rather than victim (Sade's Justine). I would suggest that Carter is using de Sade to argue for a wider incorporation of female sexuality, to argue that it too contains a whole gamut of'perversions' alongside 'normal' sex. My main problem with Lewallen's dualism is that it incorporates no sense of the dangerous pleasures of sexuality and that is not necessarily simply a choice between being aggressor or victim. Her 'fuck or be fucked' interpretation ignores the notion of consent within the sado- masochistic transaction, and the question of who is fucking whom. Pat Califia's novel of lesbian S&M illustrates how it is usually the masochist who has the real control, who has the power to call 'enough'. While asking for a more mutual sexual transaction, Lewallen dismisses the masochism in 'The Bloody Chamber', as too disturbing, 'my unease at being manipulated by the narrative to sympathise with masochism'.

Now I don't deny that it is disturbing (except, perhaps, for the reader who is a masochist).And if it was the only representation of the bloody chamber female sexuality, I would be up in arms against its reinforcement of Freudian views. But it is only one of ten tales, ten variant represen- tations. Moreover, the protagonist retracts her consent halfway through the narrative, when she realizes her husband, Bluebeard, is planning to involve her in real torture and a 'snuff' denouement. Up until then, the adolescent protagonist has not denied her own interest in the sado- masochist transaction:

I caught 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. (Carter, 1979a: 11)

Throughout the narrative, this 'queasy craving' for the sexual encoun- ters ('like the cravings of pregnant women for the taste of coal or chalk or tainted food') is admitted by the narrator, until she discovers the torture chamber and the three dead previous wives. Then she removes her consent and, with the help of an ineffectual blind piano- tuner[7] and her avenging mother, Bluebeard is defeated. Ofcourse I would not deny that the tale, through its oscillation with the original fable, also comments on male sexual objectification and denigration of women. Clearly much of its representation draws on this —but the male violator is also portrayed as captured within the construction of masculinity (just as the female vampire was trapped within hers). The protagonist can recognize his 'stench of absolute despair ... the atrocious loneliness of that monster'. Carter's representations of sexuality are more complex than many of her critics have allowed.

Maggie Anwell, in an excellent analysis of how the film *The Company o[*)Yofues was unable to get past the binary divide of victim/aggressor, does argue for a more complex psychic reading of female sexuality represented in the tale. She suggests that the confrontation between 'repressed desire' (wolf) and the 'ego' (Red Riding Hood) ends with the ego's ability to accept the pleasurable aspects of desire, while controlling its less pleasurable aspects.

The story, with its subversion of the familiar and its structure of story-telling within a story, suggests an ambiguity and plurality of interpretations which reminds us of our own capacity to dream . .
Not only does the material world shift its laws; we experience our own capacity for abnormal behaviour (Anwell, 1988: 82).

Are we to call only for constructions of sexuality with which we feel at ease, at this point in time, still within a phallocentric society? Especially when all we have to inscribe our own sexual identities from are cultural constructions? I would argue that just as it is the debates around the marginalized and pathologized 'perversities' that are breaking up the phallocentric construction of sexuality, so Carter's texts are beginning

to sketch the polymorphous potentialities of female desire. These new representations may not fit into comfortable notions of sisterhood, but they may well prove liberating all the same. And Carter clearly knew what she was doing. In her foreword to her edition of the Perrault stories, she caricatures the seventeenth-century nationalistic response:

The wolf consumes Red Riding Hood; what else can you expect if you talk to strange men, comments Perrault briskly. Let's not bother our heads with the mysteries of sado-masochistic attraction. (Carter, 1977: 17—8)

Until we can take on board the disturbing and even violent elements of female sexuality, we will not be able to decode the full feminist agenda of these fairy-tales. We will be unable to recognize the representations of drives so far suppressed by our culture.

Yet this, of course, is why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women — it is part of the slow process of decolonising our language and our basic habits of thought. I really do believe this ... it has to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed. (Carter,1983: 75)

With the death of Angela Carter we have lost an important feminist writer who was able to critique phallocentrism with ironic gusto and to develop a wider and more complex representation

of femininity. Neither the mystification of her gentleness, nor the assumption that represen- tations of sexuality are locked into pornography, should blind us to Carter's works' attempts to decolonize our habits of thought. If we need to expand our criteria to encompass her achievements, then so much the better

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a seminal work of feminist fiction that masterfully subverts traditional fairy tales, reclaiming and reimagining the narratives of classic stories like "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast." Through her unique blend of gothic horror, surrealism, and feminist critique, Carter challenges the patriarchal ideologies that underpin these tales, instead presenting complex, multifaceted female characters who embody agency, desire, and empowerment. By blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, Carter's stories expose the dark underbelly of traditional narratives, revealing the ways in which women have been objectified, marginalized, and silenced. As a result, "The Bloody Chamber" is a powerful exploration of the intersections between feminism, identity, and narrative, offering a searing critique of patriarchal structures and a celebration of female creativity and resilience.

SUMMARY ---

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a groundbreaking collection of short stories that reimagines traditional fairy tales from a feminist perspective, exploring themes of decolonization, female empowerment, and the subversion of patriarchal narratives. Through her playful and subversive use of language, Carter challenges traditional notions of femininity, identity, and narrative, presenting complex and multifaceted female characters who embody female agency and desire. The stories in "The Bloody Chamber" blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, highlighting the instability of narrative and identity, and offering a powerful critique of patriarchal structures. As a work of postmodern feminism, "The Bloody Chamber" continues to be widely read and studied today, influencing contemporary writers and remaining a relevant and powerful exploration of feminist themes.

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