

BREAKING THE NARRATIVE MANACLE: A FEMINISTIC INQUEST ON ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to highlight the predicaments of feminism in giving voice to the voiceless through retelling the classical fairytales. The classical fairytales known for its patriarchal domination deprives the female characters their voice by confining them within the narrative manacle through devious manipulations. Retold fairytales distorts the traditional narrative pattern by giving voice to the marginalized that advocates an alternative perception. The retold fairytales through its narrative innovation and ingenious experimentation breaks the prevalent stereotypes instilled by patriarchal hegemony. One such retold narrative is Angela carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, a collection of ten traditional fairytales retold with a profound insight and revolutionary sensibility. This paper attempts to elucidate different strategies employed by the classical narrative to prevent women from voicing out and the counter strategies used by the retold narrative to break the gendered construction. The paper also hinges on the effectual functioning of these counter strategies in enabling the empowered portrayal of women and instilling a renewed consciousness with contemporary sensibility.

Key Words: Fairytales, Gender, Feminism, Retold Fairytales, Voice, Angela Carter.

INTRODUCTION

Fairytale is a traditional narrative that inscribes our deep rooted tradition and our intrinsic ideologies that constitutes the rudimentary statues of our life and our society. The tales sculpts our lives and lays out certain percepts that cuts deep into our conscious and regulates our day-to-day existence. Fairytales through its narrative manipulation and strategic construction fixes the generic standards that decide our moral and social well being. Predominantly, those standards adhere to the patriarchal idealizations and advocate their cause.

The narrative pattern of the genre itself is structured in such a way that it validates female subservience and celebrates their subjugation. These patterns confine the female subject within the structured frame that is approved by the patriarchal domain. This limitation inhibits the female subject her autonomy and her freedom and makes her a mere puppet in hands of men. The female characters are caught between her role that dictates her behavior and patriarchal norms that transmutes her nature. The fabricated role of female is then sanctioned and glorified through the

classical narratives. These tales are eventually canonized, as they attain the metanarrative status, which attempts to “systematize”, “order” and “control and mastery- that is to totalize” (Hutcheon 37). The metanarrative patterns, motifs, tropes and themes are fashioned in such a way that it advocates the cause of the patriarchal society and denies the female subject her freedom and right of speech, action and identity. The classical tales engrained the idea that passivity and silence is the cardinal virtue that is socially accepted and culturally privileged. The fairytale genre through its narrative manipulation valorized the cause of the male chauvinistic society by silencing the women or depriving them their voice.

Feminist writers rising to defend their position confronted this classical impetus by subverting the structured patterns paving way for “an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction- of bringing into being enabling alternatives” (Sellers 30). They restructure the gendered patterns of the genre and confer the fairytale narrative as a means of recounting female experience. Through their innovative strategies feminist writers denounces the customary conventions and socially accepted patriarchal norms. One such retold narrative that distorts the gender hierarchy and traditional patterning of the tales is Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*

Being the vindicator of women rights and equality, Angela Carter in this work showcases the manipulative strategies used in the fairytale narrative to silence women’s voices. *The Bloody Chamber* is a collection of fairytales that retells the traditional narrative from a women’s perspective in a confessional style. Carter through her ingenious craftsmanship and creativity challenges the prevailing stereotype and distorts the traditional patterning of the fairytale narrative. She empowers her female protagonist by making them the spokesperson of their own story. This breaks the boundaries laid by the patriarchal hegemony and liberates them into the free world where their voices are re-embodied into action. *The Bloody Chamber* through voicing out the voiceless brings to light the reality that is often overlooked or suppressed.

For ages, fairytales are considered as innocent and seamless tales that is entertaining and didactic in nature. Through its inerrant patterns and polished fabrication it indirectly hampered the progress of women in voicing out their desires, dreams and struggles. The narrative is deviously designed in such a way that the female characters are mere puppets and voiceless object in the hands of men. Retold fairytales through its narrative ingenuity and experimentation changes the state of women and transforms them into empowered warriors and skillful executors of action.

One of the significant strategies used by the traditional fairytale narrative is the Omniscient narrator. The classical tales are dominated by male authorial voices that silence the female voice. In the guise of recounting an objective rendition of the tale, omniscient narrator enforces a male perspective to the tales. This not only obscures the female voice but also changes the entire understanding of the tale. On the contrary, retold fairytale subverts this trope of the omniscient narrator by replacing it with the first person narrative. The female protagonist of the tale narrates her entire story that gives an altered perception towards the tale. The camouflaged reality comes to light bringing in the alternative version of the same tale. For instance in *The Bloody Chamber*, the story titled “The Tiger’s Bride”, a retelling of “Beauty and the Beast” the protagonist recounts the story from a first person narrative stand saying, “MY FATHER LOST me to The Beast at cards . . .

Gambling is a sickness. My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards” (56, 59). The protagonist through these lines expresses her displeasure about her father’s pretentious love.

The protagonist of the tale voices out her true feeling about her father that is in complete contrast with the traditional version. In the classical tale, she was portrayed in such a way that she accepts her father’s action and volunteers herself to be a sacrifice for her father’s sake. This idea is completely contrasted in the retold fairytale, where she condemns her father for his addiction and speaks out her unhappiness about his action of losing her in card game. This subjective narration of the protagonist distorts the traditional understanding and completely alters the readers’ perception of the story from the protagonist’s stand point.

In some cases, though the protagonist is given a voice to speak out, she will merely be an echo of the intended action of the patriarchal hegemonist. This is one of the other effective manipulative strategies employed in the traditional fairytale narrative to infuse patriarchal apprehensions. In this regard Susan Sellers aptly comments saying, “Women [had] no voice at all . . . or can speak only as the mimics of men” (24). This devious tact of the traditional narrative is exposed in the retold fairytales through its diplomatic narrative experimentation. The female subjects does not conform to the dominant principles instead rebels against it by voicing out their individual experience without being tampered by the slant ideology that restricts their freedom.

For instance in the tale title “The Bloody Chamber”, a retelling of the traditional narrative “Bluebeard” the protagonist narrates her experience with her cunning husband who tricked her into opening the forbidden room which he expected and punishes her for doing the same. She says:

I knew I had behaved exactly according to his desires; had he not bought me so that I should do so? I had been tricked into my own betrayal . . . The secret of Pandora’s box, himself, knowing I must learn the secret. I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at that charade of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost, as the victim loses to the executioner. (34)

Through these lines the protagonist tells the way she was maneuvered into falling in his trap. She explicitly criticizes the cunningness of her husband in tempting her into opening the forbidden room but later in the narratives she is the one blamed for the manipulated action. This showcases how women are being victimized by the narrative manipulation and the patriarchal norms that frame them for things they haven’t done. This exposed reality comes to surface only by recounting their side of the story and voicing out about the injustice happened to them. Instead of being the mimics of men, through retold fairytale carter enables her protagonist to rebel against the imposed norms and voice out the injustice at the hands of patriarchal driven narrative. She strongly rebels against the “social norms that oppressively pressure women into silence as a matter of decorum” (Jorgensen 15) that kept her manacled into her silence and patiently bears the blame imposed on her.

Inspite of these odds and struggle, few rare women strongly voice out their rebellion against the dictative paradigm but they are labeled wicked for the very reason of voicing out their opinion. This narrative strategy of the classical tales shunned away the very possibility and the desire to raise

their voice. The classical tales engrained the fact that the “female villains in such tales are so loquacious, and that the modest female heroes are so voiceless, points to the social context informing silence as a female virtue” (Jorgensen 24). Retold fairytales distort this idea of the traditional narrative by advocating an alternative opinion about the so called female villains. The negative portrayal of the wicked queen, step mother, witches and others are reconstructed in a positive light. The “passive construction and selective labeling” (Lundell 152) of the classical tales is deconstructed.

For instance in the tale titled “The Snow Child” a retelling of the traditional fairytale “The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, Carter completely changes the patterned structure of the classical version. In the tale, the Countess is not the reason for Snow White’s death but the brutal act of the Count. When the girl pricks her finger from the thorny rose, she bleeds and falls to ground. Then the Count “unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl . . . Then the girl began to melt. Soon there was nothing left of her . . .” (106). This alters the blame and the negative perception of the stepmother or the wicked queen. Here the “speaking woman refuses subjection, and turns herself from a passive object of desire into a conspiring and conscious situation” (Warner 11, 12).

Retold narratives with its innovative disruptive strategies break the canonical silhouette by channeling the voice of women for their empowerment and to procure an alternative perspective. This challenges the classical norms and also the patriarchal ideology that dictates and dominates the narrative as well as the social standards. Carter through her retelling enhances the chance of giving voice to the voiceless and reconstructs the new narrative structure that advocates the cause of women. Angela Carter through her blend of creativity and sense of mastery valorizes new ideological structure that instills a renewed social consciousness and anchors the empowerment of women. The voice of the voiceless echoes the revitalized potential and enlivens a legacy of lives untold, unnoticed and unheard.

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