

Received: October 2023 Accepted: December 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58262/ks.v12i1.259>

Objectification of Women in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon"

Assist. Lect. Ruwaida Saad Safouk¹

Abstract

Angela Carter's feminist approach to violence and brutality of bestial men overpowering women is a result of the influence of the second feminist movement. Her works challenge the conventional presentation of women as housewives, whose only job is to take care of the house and bear children. The paper exposes how Carter converted canonical folktales and fairytales to fit adult literature by forcing contemporary themes and assuring feminist implications. The paper is concerned to the novelette "The Bloody Chamber", in which Carter discusses the objectification of women at the hands of an elderly wealthy man. It also tackles the objectification of women in the story of "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon". Although "Beauty" (the heroine), is treated elegantly, she is well aware of this objectification throughout the text. Angela Carter believes that women are portrayed in a demeaning way that neither pleases nor elevates them. Thus, through her stories, Carter hopes to inspire women to take action against patriarchal oppression and assert equality.

Keywords: *Angela Carter, Objectification, Masculinity, Women.*

Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed an increased interest in revising the established narratives of fairy tales. Defamiliarizing these fairy tales often utilizes postmodern methods, which means that they are rewritten in the light of new content that breaks the past constraints and stereotypes that they propagate. Cristina Bacchilega (1997:4) describes them as 'postmodern' fairytales that refuse to obey their authority by revising and appropriating them. Similarly, Angela Carter proposes that her work is intended to be a new reading of old texts, metaphorically referring to that as placing new wine in old bottles that even makes the bottle explode. Carter feels that women are portrayed in a very unfavorable light with less than ideal positions that neither gratify nor honor them. Through her newly written fairy tales, Carter hopes to inspire women to act against this demeaning image by standing up against oppression and battling for equality. The majority of Angela Carter's writings center on feminism and her criticisms of the patriarchal roles that have been assigned to women throughout history. Her female characters frequently assume strong positions where they rebel against oppression and struggle for both political and sexual equality. These women's efforts are a clear manifestation of the feminist movement that emerged in the 1970s (Seago, 1999).

it was, therefore, primarily through my sexual and emotional life that I was radicalized – that I first became truly aware of the difference between how I was and how I was supposed to be, or expected to be (1983: 72)

Carter deconstructs in her novels and stories the social structures and meanings that shape women's bodies and personalities. She recognizes that fairytales are a rich source to draw from and recreate, especially when these tales are abounding with misogynistic ideology. The literary past, in this context,

¹ English Department, College of Education for the Humanities, Kerbala University.
Email: ruwaida.s@uokerbala.edu.iq

becomes a huge repository of naturalized myths and lies that are instructed into all aspects of social life and culture. Through language and rewriting of the social and cultural norms, Carter attempts to change the way people perceive these tales to be able to create a change in their communities.

The Scope of the Study

This study investigates two stories from Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*; the first one is the story that carries the book title "The Bloody Chamber" while the other is "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon." The book is considered a sequence rather than a collection of separate stories as various elements and symbols keep appearing in the stories revealing a connection between them. "The Bloody Chamber" is a feminist retelling of the classic fairy tale "Bluebeard" by Charles Perrault, it also draws on the life of the French aristocrat Marquis de Sade. In this story, the bride's murderous husband gives her a ruby choker as a wedding gift, symbolizing her objectification and death. This choker reappears in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," linking the courtship of Beauty and the Beast to the exploitative sexual contract in "The Bloody Chamber." (Seago, 1999)

Major Questions of the Research

By analyzing the selected stories the research intends to answer the following questions: How does Angela Carter undermine the traditional gender roles and shed light on the objectification of women through rewriting old fairytales? Were female characters presented successful in making a statement in the face of the established patriarchal traditions? How they were able to make the objectification a motive rather than a cause for frustration and desperation?

Objectification in "The Bloody Chamber"

Feminist literature was inspired by the Women's Liberation Movement. New female writers appeared and encouraged to by feminists who took over the production process. New publishing houses and presses were run by women. They learned to type and print to increase the production of feminist texts and discover themes and techniques of feminism. Marginalization of women by patriarchal culture was a central theme in this period. Angela carter believed in empowering women against male dominance. She criticized conservative femininity believing that it demean women to mere possessions in the hands of men. She took to deconstruction of the rules of traditional patriarchy (Bacchilega and Roemer, 2001).

At first "The Bloody chamber" is seen as a feminist re-writing of Charles Perrault *Bluebeard*, but the writer subverts this anticipation. While the protagonist narrates her own story, readers discover that latent significance of the old tales are altered, the story shows fierce intentions and dark, sexual, gothic and intense meanings. Objectification of women for example, is a central idea in the collection of "The Bloody Chamber". It is in fact a common theme in almost all the ten stories.

From a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, the heroine in the story mingles the different desires of the Eros and Thanatos (life and death only human derives). She experiences thanatic emotions since the moment she marries the marquise. She expresses her feelings of loss saying: "... in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" (Carter, p.2). Marriage, a concept that inkling new beginning, intimidates her and arouses doubts and feelings of threat and insecurity. The terminology used by the narrator suggests an unbearable sense of obsession in showing off and affectation of the husband. She addresses herself with the third person "the bride" and "a maid" affirming that she is no more in control of her own life, treated as a mere object by her husband the Marquise (Peach, 1998). His astonishing wedding ring, and the wedding gift reflects his tyrant-possessive nature "His wedding gift, clasped round

my throat. A choker of rubies, two incheswide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat" (Carter, p.4).

Mirrors are the strongest symbol used to assure the marquis's domination. His bedroom is of a different type, filled with mirrors which turn his wife into a showpiece, and objectifying her into a lively breathing image (Hart and Ouyang, 144).

The narrator has a complete realization of her position in the mansion of her husband, she is viewed as an object from different angles by an assessing, critical eye "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" (Carter, p.7). The recurrent comparison of herself to meat "lamb chop" displayed in the mirrors declares her comprehension of the overpowering and humiliating practice of objectification. Twelve mirrors multiply the images of the marquise and his wife, and intensify emotions. Mirrors usually are disturbing objects and gathering them in one room arises tension. To be watched and carefully examined in one's private situation is uncomfortable. But she has no choice in making any change in the room or any other part of the castle.

The husband exposes misogynistic behavior, disrespecting her desires and not taking her perspectives into consideration. Her husband addresses her with belittling descriptions that shows ill treatment:

My little nun has found the prayerbooks, has she?' he demanded, with a curious mixture of mockery and relish; then, seeing my painful, furious bewilderment, he laughed at me aloud, snatched the book from my hands and put it down on the sofa (7).

However his ambiguity and orders of forbidding her from getting to certain places in the castle ignite her natural human curiosity. By giving her the keys to his bloody chamber and preventing her from going in there, the marquise makes it clear that he is handing her the keys for a great concealment. Now, she is determined to disclose her husband secret life. She starts searching his properties for a proof that assures doubts "search through them all for evidence of my husband's true nature. His office first, evidently" (14).

Her interaction with her husband is changing her. Her fractured image in the mirrors which reveal her new split selves and the huge revelation of the chamber awakens the wife and provide her with awareness of her situation. She grows knowledgeable and not naïve anymore, defiant as she enters the bloody room describing her attitude "fear gave me strength. I flung back my head defiantly. 'Come in!' My voice astonished me by its firmness, its clarity" (18). She is no more the "little nun" and "scared Baby", the wife becomes aware of her identity and strength inherited from her mother "My mother's spirit drove me on" (ibid).

The ultimate and sure proof of this widower's objectification of apparently all his previous wives not only the new pride. The secret bloody chamber of the castle which is full of mutilation tools and dead bodies of wives from previous marriages. Where women are turned into mere objects, useless, disgusting diseased meat (Carter, 2015, p104).

With the help of the mirrors which function as a reflection of self-perception and identity the narrator comes to understand her ultimate reality and is driven to take action. Her power and strength is now directed towards him. She understands well that she is transforming herself from a sexual object in the hands of a husband who relishes in humiliating her and laughs repeatedly at her naivety which confirm his objectification of her. Her thanatic instinct is now directed outward in order to save her life, by disobeying him she is claiming power and control as her own now.

Objectification in "The Courtship of M. Lyon":

Intertextuality plays a crucial role in the narrative of the story. "The Courtship of M. Lyon" is apparently based on *Beauty and the Beast*, though the narrative expose many differences. In most of her stories, Carter

makes the heroines as poor, inexperienced and are feeling sincerely indebted for a bestial man for lifting them from poverty. She uses the conventional settings binary of town and country as a dual of naivety and sophistication and experience. However, she flips the roles of the main figures in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" making Beauty as the one who lives in the city and the beast is isolated in his secluded country castle. This duality of victim and victimizer helps the writer to shed lights on the objectification of women, archetypal female characters who have to endure absurd desires and instructions of the victimizer.

The story starts with the heroine waiting for her father who seems to be unusually late. Then readers informed that he faced trouble while taking shelter in the beast's house who asks him to bring his daughter as a compensation for his theft of a white rose from the beast's garden: "'Take her the rose, then, but bring her to dinner,' he growled; and what else was there to be done?" (29). The rose being perfectly white and is miraculously alive and fresh in the dead winter symbolizes the perfectness and incorruption of Beauty "as if miraculously preserved beneath it, one last, single, perfect rose that might have been the last rose left living in all the white winter" (28).

Now Beauty is viewed as no more than a scapegoat used by the story's two patriarchal figures, a way for her father to save his own skin and is summoned to the Beast's house to dine with him. She sees herself as virginal, innocent, pure, and "sacrificial," like a lamb being sacrificed. Beauty is objectified in a patriarchal society, her father sacrifice's her in a bargain for the sake of his safety and the beast asks for her company to break his prison and lulls his loneliness. She makes great effort to make her stay tolerable, grieved and anxious she describes her presence:

There seemed a heavy, soundless pressure upon her in his house, as if it lay under water, and when she saw the great paws lying on the arm of his chair, she thought: they are the death of any tender herbivore. And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial (29)

Although he has no intention of hurting anybody, male domination and lust for power is embodied in the Beast, his lion-like appearance, his territory, and his supposed reputation of danger. However, once Beauty accept going to the beast's mansion, she is showing her own identity and that she is emerging as a strong woman and a protector to her father rather than a child. Carter herself describes her as having "will of her own" (29), showing that she can claim her identity independently of her father or any male figure.

Carter creates sexually liberated females who contrast the usually pure, and submissive 'damsels in distress' of the fairytales. Through thrusting them in horrific gothic situations they are capable of creating the updated fairytales and deconstructing stereotypical features of women (Billias, 2010).

The narrative clearly presents in the ambivalent nature of the heroine the fact that there are several contributors which led to her objectification including economic, social and psychological forces which led to her violation as women. Her father lost his fortune and is in need of the beast's assistance "For she knew with a pang of dread, as soon as he spoke, that it would be so and her visit to the Beast must be, on some magically reciprocal scale, the price of her father's good fortune" (29).

Objectification increases women's body issues, self-respect, confidence and complete comprehension and consequent behavior that their appearance is more important than other factors like mentality, creative spirit, character and intellect. Objectification is a main cause in women internalizing a concept of being underachievers and is reinforced when they intermingle with the objectifier.

Mirrors are also significant in this story. Beauty sees herself reflected in the eyes of beast, she sees herself very beautiful and strong. This is reinforced when she leaves him and lives in London. There, she sees herself in the same image reflected in the lion's eyes, and when the spaniel comes to her informing of bad omens "Her trance before the mirror broke; all at once, she remembered everything perfectly. Spring was here and she

had broken her promise" (Carter, 31), she is frightened of his anger but with little joy (Gordon, 227).

In fairytales, mirrors reflect women's fantasies, desires, and experiences on conditions often hostile, while in Carter's stories women search in the mirror for true identity, mirrors emerge as a strong source for self-creation, a way to find truth. The mirror in "The Bloody chamber" is almost a character very effective in creating the tense atmosphere and helping females to know their role (Schanoes, page 9).

Conclusion

The collection of Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* apparently treats gender roles and the traditional female figures under the defining masculine power. However, this conviction is soon disillusioned when these females are discovered to have resolution and ability to discover their identity in difficult circumstances, in "The Bloody Chamber" when the heroine-narrator takes the risk and marries the marquise, and in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon", when Beauty courageously accepts going to live with the beast in his mansion.

Deconstruction of gender roles further manifested in the closing of the first story. Although there could be other male figures to rescue the heroine, for instance Jean-Yves, the pianist whom she admires, but she is saved by her mother, who breaks the gate and hurries fearlessly to kill the marquise. Here, Carter makes the message obvious; women have to claim their own rights and should be bold in order to achieve their independence and gain agency of their own.

Metamorphosis plays significant role in Carter's tales. She uses the process in a poetical way in the second story, suggesting that the beast could have been a man since the beginning of the story and Beauty's interaction with him helped him in the final transformation. He lost his plea to hunt and kill, and transformed to Mr. Lyon after she kisses him. This might suggest the innate peaceful nature of this creature who was missing the proper situation to expose this good humane side. This alteration of the old fairytales is also a decoding of the traditional male figure presented in literary at Carter's time.

References

- Bacchilega, C. (1997). *Postmodern Fairytales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bacchilega, C., and Roemer, D. (2001). *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*. Wayne State University Press. P82
- Carter, A. (1979). *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Carter, A. (2015). *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*. Little, Brown Book Group. Boston. P104-105.
- Gordon, E. (2017). *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography*. Oxford University Press. P227.
- Hart, S., and Ouyang, W. (2005). *A Companion to Magical Realism*. United Kingdom: Tamesis. p144
- Peach, L. (1998). *Macmillan Modern Novelists: Angela Carter*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press.
- Billias, N. (2010). *Promoting and Producing Evil*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Seago, K. (1999). *New Wine in Old Bottles? Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber of Revisioned Fairy Tales*. Métaphore, 26, pp. 7-98.
- Schanoes, V. (2016). *Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory Feminism and Retelling the Tale*. Taylor & Francis. P92.