



## BEYOND THE BINARY: RECONFIGURING GENDER ROLES IN ANGELA CARTER'S "THE BLOODY CHAMBER"

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper examines how the story "The Bloody Chamber" from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) subverts traditional notions of gender and sexuality. By destabilizing the binary oppositions of male and female, Carter challenges the patriarchal hierarchy that relegates women to secondary positions. Through role reversals, gender blending, and the blurring of subject-object distinctions, Carter's story explores the complexities of gender identity and agency. Drawing on theoretical insights from Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, and Michel Foucault, this paper contends that Carter's work is a powerful critique of heteronormative discourses and a call for reconfiguration of restrictive gender roles.

**Keywords:** agency, gender-discourse, gender-performativity, heterosexual-normativity, patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

The debate surrounding gender is ongoing and multifaceted. As the truth is a matter of relativity, the reflection on gender, too, has drawn diverse definitions this far. Concerning the same, this research paper examines how Angela Carter problematizes the prescription of heteronormativity in her *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979). The patriarchal preaching follows the hierarchy of male and female in binary oppositions clearly

relegating women to secondary/inferior position. Carter, through her stories, upsets traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, at times, by role reversal; and/or by blending both traits in individual subjects on other occasions. Carter's approach is not only centered on the reversal of subject-object position, but also to either blur the distinction or dissolve the fixity imposed therein, leading the discussion to an undecidable end. While doing so, she exposes multiple possibilities of her subjects unlocking them from the confined domain of suffocating dichotomy.

"The Bloody Chamber," a key story in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, articulates a new notion of gender and sexuality by giving agency to female characters. The story narrated by the first-person female narrator, gives females an opportunity to speak for themselves. The story particularly projects the female characters as cultivating their agency and free will in their own rights and that they are not merely objects to be acted upon by the patriarchal agents. Using superior ingenuity and potency, the female characters challenge marriage, sexuality, gender relations, and violence against them. Along with the subversion of the traditional notion of masculinity and femininity, Carter demythologizes heterosexual normativity, gender roles, and sexual behaviors. This research paper examines how Carter has problematized the prevailing conventional notion of heterosexual normativity in the selected story and thus is interested in questioning and remolding power dynamics and relationships between the sexes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As a prominent feminist writer, Angela Carter challenges conventional paternalistic representation of her characters and literary styles. Up until her passing in 1992, she produced many novels and short stories, many of which serve as commentary on gender, identity, and patriarchy. "The Bloody Chamber" is often regarded as a paradigm switch in the portrayal of female protagonists in western literary writings. Due to the unusual and atypical roles that she has assigned to her characters, Carter has often been criticized. However, this story has been appreciated for Carter's daring attempt to challenge heterosexual normativity.

Cheryl Renfroe contends that "The Bloody Chaber" is "a depiction of the oppressive sexual initiation of a young girl at the hands of a powerful older man as well as a tale of self-initiation and survival undertaken willingly" (p. 90). Renfroe's reading of the story as both a depiction of

oppressive sexual initiation and a tale of self-initiation and survival acknowledges the power dynamics and potential for trauma inherent in the narrative, while also recognizing the protagonist's agency and resilience in navigating and ultimately overcoming those circumstances.

Seda Arikan, a focusing on the stylistic aspect of Carter's stories, writes, "Carter's transitivity choice, namely "who does what to whom", at the beginnings of these stories makes the ideological message of traditional fairy tales, where the stereotypical females are pictured as passive victims and males as strong agents, explicit" (p. 125). Arikan's observation highlights how Carter strategically employs sentence structure to expose and then subvert the traditional, patriarchal power dynamics inherent in fairy tales.

Assessing Carter's literary merit, Robin Ann Sheets argues, "We cannot achieve freedom, according to Angela Carter, until we understand our own historically determined involvement in sadomasochism. And if we are to move beyond the oppositions of male/female, dominant/submissive, sadist/masochist, then a reconceptualization of the mother's role might be the place to begin" (p. 657). Sheets' opinion is that it is necessary to reconceptualize the traditional notion of gender and sexuality to break away from the bondage of patriarchy.

Patricia Duncker, on the other hand, argues, "The critical relationship between women and men in Carter's fictions, whether the women be wives or whores, is always economic: the heterosexual cash nexus, where cocks and cunts carry price tags" (p. 62). The economic concerns seem evident as the heroine in "The Bloody Chamber" finds herself as "the poor widow's child" with "mouse colored hair" having "bony hips and nervous pianist fingers" and she narrates "He was rich as Croesus" (p. 18).

Karen Seago investigates Carter's approach to literature and culture, her professional role as a writer, and her political agenda to elucidate Carter's perspective on fairy tales and their importance within society. She argues, "Carter's voice has a clear emancipatory impetus, expressed in her famous comment that she is 'in the de-mythologizing business" (p. 77). The story under this study does not confirm to the idea of a happy marriage in which passive submission was all that shaped the sexual orientation of females. Rosalyn Stilling evaluates Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" as "a touchstone of postmodern fairy tale revisions" (p. 13). Stilling's assessment

positions "The Bloody Chamber" as a pivotal text that exemplifies and influences the postmodern reimagining of traditional fairy tales.

Kathleen E. B. Manley discovers that the protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber" is neither fully naïve nor fully accomplished. Additionally, Carter's character swings in-between position of the object and subject which comes from her insecurity and her efforts of trying to be sure of herself. She asserts, "Carter's use of mirrors, of the mother's legacy, and of music supports her vision of the protagonist as impossible to classify as girl or woman, wife or career woman, guilty or innocent. At the end, the protagonist ...is still sufficiently concerned about them to be telling her story as a way of expiating shame" (p. 80). Manley's observation reveals how Carter constructs a protagonist who transcends binary classifications through symbolic tools, yet remains tethered to societal guilt, as evidenced by her narrative's confessional nature.

According to Patricia Brooke, Carter's style of narrative is "sometimes troubling because on the one hand, she works against the masculinist representation of women, and on the other hand, she reinforces it through its representation" (qtd. in Asina and Elizabeth 1). Brooke's remark pinpoints the paradoxical nature of Carter's narrative, where her attempts to dismantle patriarchal representations of women are simultaneously undermined by the very act of re-presenting them.

The reviews demonstrate that Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" has been highly acclaimed since its publication and analyzed from diverse perspectives. Some critics have focused on stylistic properties, some on female objectification, self-discovery, and subjectivity whereas others have highlighted debunking of traditional fairytales pattern but the issue beyond the gender binary that this research tries to explore is largely unexplored.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research focuses on how the notion of gender is questioned and subverted in Carter's "The Bloody Chamber." To investigate the subversion of traditional gender and sexuality norms, this research utilizes Judith Butler's theory of gender as a social construct, Judith Halberstam's deconstruction of normative gender categories, and Michel Foucault's understanding of how discourses shape and regulate identity.

Patriarchy promotes or programs the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of

biological essentialism, which is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women. Rather than being naturally passive, inferior, or emotional, women are taught to adopt, accept and express these qualities within a patriarchal society. The role to be played by specific gender in any society is thought to be compulsory and normative, hence a disciplinary production. For Judith Butler, this leads to a false stabilization of gender. Butler writes, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that gender can be neither true nor false" (p. 583). Thus, women can actively resist being reduced to the state of a mere creature of innocence. Butler further argues, "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (p. 272). Butler's concept of gender as a 'rehearsed act' reveals it as a social performance, not an innate quality, thus highlighting its potential for disruption.

When it is established that gender is socially defined or constructed, then it can also be 'undefined' or 'deconstructed.' Foucault argues, "Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (p. 100-01). Foucault's statement dismantles the simplistic notion of discourse as merely a tool of oppression, revealing its dynamic and multifaceted role. Discourse, for him, functions not only as a mechanism of power, but also as a site of potential resistance, highlighting the inherent instability and contestability of dominant narratives.

Supplying a similar argument, Halberstam asserts, "Masculinity in society inevitably conjures up notion of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to even distribution of wealth" (p. 2). Halberstam's assertion connects masculinity directly to societal power structures, highlighting how it embodies and reinforces privilege, authority, and even economic dominance. This suggests that challenging traditional notions of masculinity is inherently a challenge to those power structures. Regarding this fact, Halberstam claims, "Masculinity represents the power of inheritance" (p. 2). Henceforth, masculinity is

associated with power, strength, and combative nature. Halberstam's view of masculinity as "the power of inheritance" implies that feminist writings must dissect and challenge the inherited privileges that underpin patriarchal power structures.

### **Destabilizing Gender Binaries in "The Bloody Chamber"**

Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a feminist re-telling of Perrault's "Blue Beard." In such a revisiting of the fairy tale, Carter has both borrowed some old elements and infused some new ones to serve her purpose of destabilizing the notion hetero normativity, which by suggestion traps men and women within the suffocating dichotomy of parochial male and female gender stereotypes. Giving the wrong audit suggesting the dangers of marriage and female curiosity, the original tale depicts murderous husbands and the deaths of wives for their disobedience. While it shows a brother saving her sister's life in response to her prayers, his saviour image renders her helpless and passive at the same time. Carter finds all these as the continual endorsement of patriarchal ideology undermining feminine fervor instituted in patriarchal supremacy. Told from the perspective of first-person female narrator, Carter lends voice to her protagonist to speak for herself in retrospection, which is a major departure from the convention of fairy tale that uses an omniscient masculine perspective.

The protagonist of the story is an anonymous girl who is in a "tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement" and on the verge of beginning a new life leaving the old one, "away from girlhood" as she is about to move into "unguessable country of marriage" (p. 7). Unlike passive and dependent women depicted in masculinist discourses, Carter presents women in a more luminous light. For example, the girl's mother is described as someone pretty bold, brave, and compassionate. She also thinks of herself as bold for venturing out into marriage, into exile. She recalls, she felt a certain loss while accepting the marriage proposal. Her apprehension about becoming a wife partly borrows from marriage as a confined sphere. However, the heroine is increasingly curious about her maturing sexuality.

The narrator is usurped by sexual curiosity in the wake of adolescence which makes her ponder the pleasure of bodily desires. Further, she is tempted to bear an heir to that vast empire with material affluence The Marquis owns. However, she recalls, "He was older than I. He was much older than I" (p. 8) and also observed his enigmatic disposition "with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute

absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask” (p. 9). In addition, her bewilderment as she recalls him as “a man with a flower but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily” (p. 9) does make her sensible of what ominous events are likely to follow. The Marquis had already tied knots three times to three different beautiful women. Now as if “to demonstrate the eclecticism of his taste, he had invited me to join this gallery of beautiful women” (p. 10) sharpens her ability to evaluate things around her.

The narrator, despite the temptation of a young girl, is not as naïve and innocent as she could be understood on the surface. With her keen observation of The Marquis, she can flesh out his lustfulness for her flesh. At this point, she is demystified of his pretentious regard beneath which is sheltered his carnal avarice for her. Meanwhile, she witnesses in her a potentiality of corruption looking at the mirror. Her discovery about herself is partly associated with her anxiety about losing her virginity anytime soon. The loss related to virginity can be contrasted to the purity/chastity characteristic of an ideal woman in gendered culture. However, the heroine’s loss of virginity shall bring her some enlightenment too. Thus, problematizing the notion of sex Carter brings it as a gateway to an awakening of her character’s self. It is only through her participation in this act that she will come to realize her identity, which will guide her actions that follow.

Ushering the narrator into the bedroom full of mirrors that replicated her dozen selves, the Marquis gesturing towards the multitude of images boasts “I have acquired a whole harem for myself!” (p. 14). Bringing his perversion to the fore, Carter intends to rupture the patriarchal politics hidden under the guise of polished dealings. He gives the heroine a feeling of a ritual from the brothel while disrobing her clothes. He stands as a purchaser initiating his bargain as he examines her limb by limb with his lecherous eyes while standing “bare as a lamb chop” (p. 14). Carter presents it as the “Most pornographic of all confrontations” (p. 15) where The Marquis is garbed in his London Tailoring and she lies completely naked. The shuddering heroine, therefore, associates him with lilies that leave you stained.

As such, the protagonist decides to explore the provinces prohibited to her, initially least bothered by the outcome. With increasing agency, he is



fully determined to unravel the mysteries as she has been kept quite aloof of this far. So, without fear, she takes the forbidden key and leaves the others on the floor while touring the castle. The protagonist reveals, "I took the forbidden key from the heap and left others lying there. ...I felt no fear, no intimation of dread. Now I walked as firmly as I had done in my mother's house" (p. 27). The key to the forbidden room is the first thing she picks up, and out of sheer curiosity, she makes her way to the isolated part of the castle where it is located.

The narrator's reaction to the anguish and confusion she experiences when she enters the "chamber meant for sacrilege" shook the foundation of her existence, destabilizing the codes by which she operated. The moment the narrator steps inside the hidden chamber, she recognizes that the last vestige of innocence she had is gone. She has now experienced the unspeakable horror that she will soon share. As soon as she lighted the candles in that dark forbidden chamber, she ponders: "it seemed a garment of that innocence of mine for which he had lusted fell away from me" (p. 28). The heroine discovers The Marquis' three murdered ex-wives' bodies in the shadowy room. Because he recently killed his previous wife, her body is still bleeding on the floor. Carter employs the horror and erotic elements in a very adept manner as if they always belong together in a mutually coexisting way.

Witnessing the dreadful reality surrounding her, she says, "My first thought, when I saw the rings for which I had sold myself to this fate, was how to escape it" (p. 29). She admits that she has colluded with her fate to some extent thereby taking responsibility to liberate her from this grievous situation. She retains the presence of her mind and tries to ensure that no trace of her visit is left. She then regains control, wipes out all traces of her presence in the space, and closes the door behind her. Jean-Yves informs her "that the old name for this place is the Castle of Murder" (p. 33). Further, he chooses to help her with removing the blood stain on the key, but it will not go off. They discover that despite their best efforts to scrub it clean, the bloodstain on the key has transformed into a red heart. Since the protagonist is in serious trouble, the piano tuner offers to be with her. However, she commands, "You shall not! Go back to your room, now. Please . . . for I knew I must meet my lord alone. Leave me!" (p. 34). Her ability to exercise her agency is pretty much exemplified by her imperatives and decisive statements.



The Marquis abruptly makes his way back and claims that his journey was postponed. The heroine tries to maintain her composure. He acts as if he has misplaced the key and thus starts looking for it. She tries to distract him by leading him to the bedroom while she starts undressing herself. The protagonist reflects, "If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then" (p. 35). But he grows insistent on getting keys. Now the protagonist feels she holds her life in her hands amongst those keys. While the evidence of the bloody chamber suggests this man will have no mercy for her, she yet pities him "if I loved him enough to follow him, I should have to die" (p. 35).

Upon learning the developments in his absence, The Marquis declares that the heroine shall be beheaded. He asks her to kneel and presses the key against her forehead transferring the bloodstain onto her head like *Scarlet Letter* equating her act with an unforgivable sin. But she believes, "I only did what he knew I would" (p. 37). Demanding his ring back, The Marquis makes the ugliest exposure of patriarchal debasement of females when she says, "It will serve me for a dozen more fiancées" (p. 38). Finally, The Marquis has set up a chopping block and ancestral sword blade in the courtyard to decapitate her. Jean-Yves follows the heroine there. The narrative unfolds, "He would come with me if I lead him. Courage. When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother" (p. 38). She had twice before sought her mother's assistance during the time of distress in an unspoken manner, yet the message is well received as though through maternal telepathy. Consequently, the heroine's mother rides into the courtyard and shoots the Marquis in the head before he can kill the heroine.

Carter boldly upsets the narrative closure of conventional stories wherein the females fall flat in the hands of males. Carter's females with their intervention champion the heroic cause of putting an end to ongoing male domination and paving free pathways for liberation of females. The implications are: no longer can the males be given any chance to ordain the future of females in ways whatsoever, females shall enjoy sovereignty of their thoughts and actions, and female desire and curiosity are no longer restrictive but constructive forces for their progress and freedom, and that any prohibitions against female intellectual inquiry shall meet with a force that is certain to shake the foundation of patriarchy.

Also, it would be a serious misunderstanding to take Carter's female force lightly. Unlike the women (mis) represented in old-fashioned stories

in domestic sphere with the outlook of servitude, Carter represents them as bold, brave and decisive. Should need be, they can become wild and go to any extent taking control of situations to ensure justice for themselves. Their ferocity can blaze out any obstacles that hinder their prospects. They are aware of their rights and hence shall not let any individuals trespass into their territory without exemption. Employing a mother figure as a rescue agent, Carter gives her female character a much-needed boost to oppose injustices against them and their counterparts. Such an experiment sets the tradition of 'writing against the grain' in so far as the remake of fairy tales is concerned.

Carter, in her adaptations of fairy tales, presents horrors of patriarchy, and ground-breaking aspects of female sexuality and identity as opposed to traditional moralistic tales giving cautionary messages intending to submit women at men's service. At the same time, the story lets the readers see the non-stereotypical dynamism of the female psyche by projecting the female protagonist in a state of reasoning and self-introspection.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of "The Bloody Chamber" reveals that Carter challenges the indoctrination of women to view themselves through a patriarchal lens. She believes women have multiple possibilities beyond stereotypical gender dichotomies and encourages them to break free from patriarchal constraints. Carter's characters in the story embody her ethos, escaping patriarchal oppression and objectification. They engage in sexual transactions in terms of equality and reciprocity, subverting traditional power dynamics. While Carter aims to empower women, she avoids subject-object reversals, recognizing their potential pitfalls. In conclusion, Carter's story contributes to her project of empowering women. By problematizing heteronormativity, Carter encourages women to overcome oppression, reclaim their sexual identity, and move beyond patriarchal indoctrination.

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