

Re-Conceptualizing the Gender and the Gothic mode in Angela

Carter's The Bloody Chamber

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Angela Carter's texts vehemently attacks the stereotypical notions asserted by the culture with a sturdy intention of deconstructing the collective order of society. There is an excessive use of violence, sexual brutality, pornographic contents and exuberance of female power in Carter's writing. Makinen addresses Carter as the "avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism" (2) for savagely attacking the cultural stereotypes which is both disturbing and alienating. Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a set of re-structured fairy tales with an obtrusive purpose of altering the formula set by the traditional stories. Carter reassembles the well known fairy tales to an adult version of those tales with a feministic angle to explicate her ideas. According to Patricia Duncker, "for Carter the strength of the tale lies in the fact that it does not sink into the slough of dailiness, rather, it un-fetters the imagination. For the tale interprets rather than presents everyday experience, through 'a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience, and therefore the tale cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge' (Afterward to *Fireworks*)" (3). But Dunker in her essay, "Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers" criticizes the view of Carter by affirming that,

The unconscious is not a treasure vault containing visionary revelations about ourselves. It is rather the cesspool of our fears and desires, filled with the common patterns that are also projections of the ways in which we have been taught to perceive the world. And the deep structure of those patterns will reflect the political, social and psychological realities within which we exist as best as we can. The unconscious mirrors these changing realities (3).

The Bloody Chamber, the title story of the book is a deviation of ¹Perrault's "Bluebeard". This article intends to study Carter's attempt in revising the gender role and applying a different approach to the Gothic genre in *The Bloody Chamber*. Though a retelling of the fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber* is branded as a Female Gothic text because of the dark motives and Gothic elements present in the book in association with the female sexuality. Like a conventional Gothic story, the setting of *The Bloody Chamber* is in a remote castle which is an embodiment of mystery and terror. Marquis' castle is rendered as a dark horrific space from the beginning of its depiction in the story. The castle is manifested as,

The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day ... that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaiden who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place! (6).

The foreboding element is prevalent in the description of the interiors of the castle by the narrator. Carter employs the conventional concept of entrapment in Gothic fiction while setting up the imagery of castle in *The Bloody Chamber*. The complicated structure of a castle creates a feeling of entrapment in the female character which often amplifies their sense of imminent threat and fear. Jean-Yves, the blind piano tuner describes the castle in the tale as the "Castle of Murder" (20).

'We whisper all manner of strange tales up and down the coast,' he said.' There was a Marquis, once, who used to hunt young girls on the mainland; he hunted them with dogs, as though they were foxes. My grandfather had it from his grandfather, how the Marquis pulled a head out of his saddle bag and showed

¹ "Bluebeard" is a French folktale authenticated to Charles Perrault which was first published by Barbin in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* in 1697. Different versions of the tale are published since then.

it to the blacksmith while the man was shoeing his horse. "A fine specimen of the genus, brunette, eh, Guillaume?" And it was the head of the blacksmith's wife'..... 'Oh, madame! I thought all these were old wives' tales, chattering of fools, spooks to scare bad children into good behaviour! Yet how could you know, a stranger, that the old name for this place is the Castle of Murder?' (19-20).

The colour, red, a prominent shade of the horror and Gothic has got a significant place throughout *The Bloody Chamber* as it is employed by Carter in a copious amount- (red chairs in the opera house, "A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat", "red ribbon like the memory of a wound", crowd at the opera house part "like the red sea", "flashing crimson jewels round her throat, bright as arterial blood", his lips are "red and naked", the bed has "vermillion lacquer", the blood stained sheets of their marriage bed as if "he has eaten her innocence", the rugs on the library floor has same shade as "heart's dearest blood", the forbidden key stained with blood). Carter's lavish and excessive use of red constructs a symbolism of violence, trepidation and menace in *The Bloody Chamber*. The title itself screams about a grotesque and vicious imagery in the book. Lokke uses Wolfgang Kayser's and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque in analyzing that

In *The Bloody Chamber* it is not the heroine-narrator who is the grotesque figure, but rather her monstrous husband. He is an inhuman embodiment of sexual perversion and destructive power, ultimately a symbol of death itself.... *The Bloody Chamber* is a contemporary transformation of that quintessentially grotesque motif, the dance of death and the maiden, a modern, feminist transformation in which for once the maiden is victorious over death itself. In fact, it is the interpretation of death with such richly positive facets of life-wealth, beauty, youth, and sexuality- that gives the symbolism of this novella its grotesque and uncanny power (9-10).

An attempt of de-codifying the gender by Carter is prominent at each passage of the tale. The position of the female character in carter's *The Bloody Chamber* takes the spot of the subject and male character, that of the object, which is a reversal of the roles when compared to the earlier Folk and Gothic narratives.

The dread of sexual violence, eroticism and sadomasochistic behaviors are explicit in *The Bloody Chamber*. The “striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer” (16) is realized by the narrator when exploring the forbidden part of the castle. In her *The Sadeian Woman*, published in 1979, Carter celebrates the use of pornography in depicting the female consciousness. As Özüim observes, “what Carter depicts in *The Sadeian Woman* is not the mere objectification of the female to the pervert male world, but reinforcing the idea of separation of women’s sexuality from their reproductive function” (1). Özüim also talks in his essay about Carter’s acknowledgment of Marquis de Sade’s conviction that “it would only be through the medium of sexual violence that women might heal themselves of their socially inflicted scars, in a praxis of destruction and sacrilege” (3). In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), Andrea Dworkin deprecates Carter by addressing her as a “pseudo-feminist” (84). But amidst all the criticism centered on her work, Carter assumes the possibilities of the role of a “moral pornographer” who would “penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture” (19) and thereby guide the transformation of society in order to construct “a world of absolute sexual license for all the genders” (20).

The narrator, though a young girl who seem to be inexperienced in the outside world is not that naïve and innocent as she is depicted. Her ideas showcase a potentiality for corruption and evilness within her.

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away (5).

The chamber described in *The Bloody Chamber* is a “chamber of hell” where the Marquis’ darkest, vulgar and sadomasochistic behavior is depicted. The description of this chamber is the most grotesque part of the story. The forbidden chamber to the narrator could be directly connected to the theory of abjection as proposed by Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. When analyzed from the perspective of the theory of “abjection”, the chamber in Carter’s tale opens up to a broader understanding of the tale. Kristeva, describes “abjection” as something which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Kristeva draws her theory of abjection from Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories. Kristeva points out that we first experience “abjection” when we separate ourselves from our mother. “Abjection” is recognized as a revolt against that which gave us our own existence. At this point the child is said to enter the symbolic realm which is at a much earlier stage than that which proposed by the theories of Freud and Lacan. When as adult one feels this “abjection” it takes us to a realm when we were insignificant and a sense of helplessness creeps in. According to Kristeva’s theory an “abject” is neither a subject nor an object. When a person comes in contact with the “abject”, their self or identity is threatened. In *The Bloody Chamber*, “abjection” could be seen as a prominent aspect. The narrator faces the “abject” and the imaginary border between her ‘self’ and the ‘other’ stumbles when she enters the bloody chamber. She, being so naïve and young is brought into the world of death, mutilation and horror. The narrator realizes that death awaits her like all of Marquis’ previous wives. Thus as Kristeva’s liminal state of “abjection” testifies, the narrator stands in between her own ‘self’ and the state which threatens her.

The horror and bewilderment which the narrator encountered when she entered the “room designed for desecration” shook the base of her existence by disintegrating the codes by which she existed. The passage which narrates the bloody chamber is a highly provocative and muddled description of the horrific elements of the chamber with erotic undertones.

The walls of this stark torture chamber were the naked rock; they gleamed as if they were sweating with fright. At the four corners of the room were funerary urns, of great antiquity, Etruscan, perhaps, and, on three-legged ebony stands, the bowls of incense he had left burning which filled the room with a sacerdotal reek. Wheel, rack and Iron Maiden were, I saw, displayed as

grandly as if they were items of statuary and I was almost consoled, then, and almost persuaded myself that I might have stumbled only upon a little museum of his perversity, that he had installed these monstrous items here only for contemplation (16).

As soon as the narrator enters the secret chamber she realizes that the shred of innocence which was remaining in her is slipped away from her. She has now faced the unimaginable horror of which she too will soon be a part of. 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” (16). Carter employs the horror and erotic elements in a very adept manner as if they always belong together in a mutually co-existing way.

The opera singer lay, quite naked, under a thin sheet of very rare and precious linen, such as the princes of Italy used to shroud those whom they had poisoned. I touched her, very gently, on the white breast; she was cool, he had embalmed her. On her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers. The cool, sad flame of the candles flickered on her white, closed eyelids. The worst thing was, the dead lips smiled (16).

The mother figure in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* possesses the image of a woman who outwits the traditional role of women in a Gothic tradition. She embodies the courage and role of both the male and female heroism. Her “eagle-featured, indomitable mother...had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand” (2) at a very young age. The young narrator draws courage from her mother. When she enters the foreboding bloody chamber, she realizes that “she had inherited nerves and a will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indo-China” (16) and it is her “mother's spirit” which drove her on, “into that dreadful place, in a cold ecstasy to know the very worst” (16). As Sheets points out in the essay, “Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism,” “Carter equips the mother with male and female Freudian symbols...This parent is powerful enough to serve as father and mother to the young woman. Instead of rejecting her, the daughter and her new husband join the mother to form a new family” (653). Towards the end of the story, it is the “maternal telepathy” (26)

which brought the narrator's mother at the right moment to her rescue. In the Perrault's Bluebeard's tale, it is the heroine's brothers who come to rescue her. Carter asserts the subversion of the dominant roles by the chivalric entry of her mother at the climax to kill Marquis.

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the witnesses of a furious justice. And my husband stood stock-still, as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs (25).

While transforming the traditional tale to a radical modern tale, Carter was efficacious in employing *The Bloody Chamber* with sinister wit and elements which subvert the traditional gender and the Gothic tradition. An attempt to transgress the social and moral codes is visible at every passage of the story. The male fear, fascination and abhorrence at the power of women's sexuality and their subjectivity are presented in *The Bloody Chamber* with utmost skill and vitality. *The Bloody Chamber* thus proves itself as a powerful Female Gothic fiction with an authoritative attempt at inverting the gender codes in the Gothic tradition.

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