A Feminist Revision of the Fairy-tale in a Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"

Bradanović, Katarina

University of Rijeka

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English language and literature

Katarina Bradanović

A FEMINIST REVISION OF THE FAIRY-TALE IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and History at the University of Rijeka

SUPERVISOR:

Antonija Primorac, PhD

September 2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on the analysis of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, a collection of rewritten and revised fairy-tales. It explains the aims of feminist struggle, giving close attention to the second-wave feminism agenda, a movement which Angela Carter belonged to herself. The focus will then be put on the meaning of revision in literature and Carter's writing style. Afterwards, it proceeds with a close analysis of each fairy-tale in the collection. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn on the basis of comparison between the aims of second-wave feminism and contemporary feminism explaining today's relevance of the collection.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decades of the 20th century, feminist movements have been pushing the boundaries and changing the reality as we knew it. Gradually but decisively, feminist viewpoint started to enter all pores of our daily life in all kinds of different shapes. Literature has always been a mirror of a society, as a sharp reminder of current events and affairs. Nowadays, powerful female characters and feminist plots occur as a common content of various literary endeavours. But what about 39 years ago in a fairy-tale genre which usually relates to everything opposite to female empowerment and is at its core fundamentally anti-feminist? In 1979 Angela Carter decided to completely bend the rules by publishing a collection of short stories which contained a number of well-known fairy tales, but rewritten in an unapologetically women-centric manner.

Angela Carter belonged to the so-called second wave of feminism which lasted throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a crucial period in history with roaring changes happening in people's perception and understanding of the world. The movement removed itself from the ideas of first wave feminism which were largely based on the pragmatic sphere of legal rights for women, but was instead focused on issues and questions concerning the everyday lives of women. One of the essential ideas was the necessity for female sexual liberation which will then finally lead to gender equality.

The majority of issues raised throughout the storylines in *The Bloody Chamber* revolve around the lead female protagonists' personal development that is described as reaching its peak and triumph through the sexual liberation of the body.

In my thesis, I will analyse the fairy-tales in *The Bloody Chamber* and examine how Carter revised the traditional narratives in the manner of a second-wave feminist critic. I shall also demonstrate why such revision may not have the same, liberating, effect when read from contemporary feminism's point of view.

1.1. What is Feminism?

Men and women, scholars and laymen, feminists and non-feminists all have a different array of opinions and visions about feminism. Feminism means a lot of different things to a lot of different people and therefore a working definition of feminism cannot be established easily.

Owen M. Fiss defines feminism as a set of ideas and beliefs belonging to a social and political movement where the aim is to achieve greater equality for women (Fiss: 413). Rosalind Delmar claims a feminist is someone who holds that women endure discrimination based on their sex, which is why a radical change or even a revolution in a political, social and economic order is necessary (Delmar: 8).

Even nowadays, there is a certain tendency for feminism to be understood incorrectly because many people do not realize the reasons for its existence. Feminism is considered unnecessary because the fight for gender equality, at least in the Western part of the world, is considered to be completed by now – women are allowed to vote, drive, work, carry briefcases and wear dark suits while hastily rushing to their offices in their stilettoes holding cups of coffee.

Unfortunately, the situation can hardly be described in such a simple manner. Today, in 2018 we stand as witnesses to the *#MeToo* movement which throws a light on the ubiquity of sexual harassment and assault, the issues which still affect the majority of women in numerous everyday situations. In addition to that, women all around the globe tend to be paid less than men for the same job.

When it comes to defining feminist fiction, Ellen Rooney's definition comes in hands. In her article "What's the story? Feminist theory, narrative, address", Rooney differentiates between four possible types of feminist narrative: the narrator telling her own story as the

listener's feminist story; the narrator narrating her feminist story as her own; the narrator telling the listener's feminist story as the former's own story; and the narrator narrating the listener's feminist story (Rooney: 1). *The Bloody Chamber* follows the fourth type of narration. Carter is not telling her own story, but introducing an individual feminist story in each fairy-tale.

Gender inequality is a sensitive and extremely serious issue which tends to be tackled in a rather sombre and careful manner. Angela Carter does the exact opposite and approaches the problem using sometimes apparent, sometimes tasteful and subtle, and sometimes even ridiculous types of irony and sarcasm.

In Angela Carter's hands, fairy-tales, traditional stories passed on from generation to generation, read to boys and girls at bedtime, become a playful instrument. She rewrites them in such a way that the patriarchal and the traditional becomes feminist and even matriarchal.

Despite the fact that certain victories have been achieved, feminism is far from completing its task and mission. The struggle for gender equality is as relevant today, as it was in 1979, or one hundred years ago. In order for it to be achieved, people have to continually rethink, revise and rewrite the established male-centred order of things.

But, what exactly does the act of rewriting or revision imply?

2. WHEN DEAD AWAKEN: WRITING AS REVISION

In order for one to efficiently immerse oneself into the work of Angela Carter, he or she must recognize the importance of revision, i.e. understand its meaning and purpose. Adrienne Rich describes revision as the act of looking back, in other words – entering an old text from a new critical direction (Rich: 18). Right from the beginning, in her essay 'When We Dead Awaken' Rich mentions the so-called awakening consciousness in a collective reality, which is affecting both men and women (Rich: 18). She does this to avoid placing her theories solely within the scope of literature, but to demonstrate the sheer necessity of a complete social transformation which will then be applied to all aspects of human lives. Rich points out that as outdated perceptions of both sex and gender lose their functional load and with function, they also lose the reason for their preservation (Rubin: 58).

According to Rich, women writers, especially poets, tend to place themselves in victim's shoes. For them, love implies men, men imply terror, domination, power, struggle, tyranny and all of that could be reduced to – love implies suffering (Rich: 19). Women's poetry could easily be compared to a blues song with female wailings and shrieks of pain aimed at the cruel male figure, where she succumbs herself to a seductive vortex of relentless victimization (Rich: 25).

In *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter follows Rich's call for revision by representing fairy-tale women from a completely different perspective. They seize to be powerless figures who let their emotions, actions, and feelings be controlled by a man. They became initiators and originators of the plot and control their own destinies. The female protagonist's destinies are envisioned to suit an alternative view on happy endings, not the original and expected patriarchal, fairy-tale endings society is used to.

Another overlap between Rich's and Carter's vision of literature can be seen in the way they look at the position of women in literature. Rich states that for or a woman to get to know who she really is, she must refuse the self - destructiveness which derives solely from a society dominated by men (Rich: 18). Furthermore, Rich highlights the fact that male writers do not write for women (even when writing about women), whilst women writers write for men, even when they are explicitly supposed to be addressing women (Rich: 20).

This inferior position of a woman within literature derives from her position in society in general. Carter and Rich both considered literature as an excellent starting point for a radical change in people's perspectives on women's role in the society and gender equality.

3. ANGELA CARTER: THE WHITE WITCH OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Various literary critics have referred to Carter as the white witch of the north, a mythical fairy-tale figure, the Fairy Godmother and the white witch of English literature (Makinen: 2). But who was Angela Carter exactly?

According to Makinen, her work is known for the excessiveness of its violence and the ferociousness with which she attacks cultural stereotypes, all of which may be perceived as disturbing, even alienating (Makinen: 2). Carter has a tendency to be generously inventive using aggressive subversiveness and active eroticism to achieve a humorous effect while at the same time raising important questions (Makinen: 2, 3). According to her vision of life and literature, women must fight back the system using their own sexuality which must empower them. The women in her stories are powered by, but also troubled by their violence, yet in it find stability and demonstrate the sheer ability to not just be themselves, but to survive (Makinen: 3).

The fairy-tale genre suits her because it gives her an opportunity to explore the often neglected dark elements of the human psyche and the hidden experiences within it

(Makinen: 4). Her texts are open-ended and her irony deconstructive – in it "the beasts" present projected desires and sex sells openly (Makinen: 6, 9). Reoccurring motifs of flesh and skin are equated with pleasure, whilst the motif of meat represents an economic objectification (Makinen 10). The female protagonists in "the Beauty and the Beast" storylines, for instance, often fearfully immerse themselves in the exhilarating change which derives from pleasure, but also defiance in choosing "the beast" (Makinen: 10). Such actions also demonstrate the polymorphous potentialities of female desire (Makinen: 14).

This potential of unrestrained female sexuality initiates the question which will be raised repeatedly through my interpretation of Carter's stories. Should women use the power of their sexuality when trying to achieve their goals? Or does doing this further diminishes the possibility of obtaining gender-equal society?

4. REWRITING THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST NARRATIVE ARC

4.1. The Bloody Chamber

When it comes to "The Bloody Chamber", the first and title story, I think it is fairly easy to underpin its importance, simply by the fact the whole collection is named after it. But, once we surpass this obvious triviality of logical conclusions, it is still easy to extrapolate the story's significance and its contribution to the process of bringing strong female characters into previously unexpected situations. The story is one of the three rewritings of the Beauty and the Beast plots in the collection. Even though it essentially rewrites The Bluebeard, a fairy-tale which describes the destiny of a young woman who finds the corpses of her husband's former wives in a room where she has been forbidden to enter, "The Bloody Chamber" is overwhelmingly similar to some elements of "The Beauty and the Beast".

This story follows a young woman who marries a wealthy, powerful, and much older Marquis and moves into his mansion. Soon after consummating the marriage, Marquis leaves

due to his business obligations and the young bride is left alone with all the keys of the mansion. However, Marquis forbids her to use one key and enter one particular room. Nevertheless, she enters the room and discovers the dead bodies of his three former wives. The Marquis returns home, discovers her misdeed and tries to kill her. Luckily, the young protagonist's mother enters the scene and rescues her daughter while killing Marquis. The young heroine inherits all of Marquis's wealth and remains living in the mansion with her mother and a piano tuner.

At the very beginning, without much delay, the lead female protagonist warns us about the uncertainty of her situation, she was sort of marching "away from girlhood…into the unguessable country of marriage" (Carter: 1). Like the protagonist, the descriptions are at first incredibly delicate, unsteady, unsure and forced in a sense. Again, soon enough, we are introduced to the second female character, her mother, who at first seems calm, steady, experienced and subordinate, but gradually she starts to assume the features of a powerful and omnipotent senior figure, suggesting a guardian angel in disguise. Some of the opening lines could be interpreted as the protagonist's farewell to her – "She ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" (Carter: 1). The protagonist's husband represents a typical dominant, persistent, powerful male protagonist, a characteristic "Beast"; his character is beautifully contrasted with the protagonist's innocence, lack of experience and amiable, naive insecurity. The story is packed with various types of symbolic objects and events. The opal ring he gives her represents generations of oppressed women - the wives disappear one by one, but the weaponry of seduction and power remains the same; three ex-wives are "three different graces" (Carter: 5) who stand for the "eclecticism of his taste" (Carter: 5), as the protagonist ironically puts it. The choker is equated with a "slit throat" (Carter: 6), materialistic presents and countless mirrors are both epitomes of his control; marriage is an "exile" (Carter: 7), the so-called wifely duties stand for an obligation while loss of virginity is equated with rape – "a one-sided struggle" (Carter: 14). However, her virginity also signifies an intriguing factor which separates

her from the previous wives. Furthermore, anticipation is being turned into a game while taunting nicknames he gives her - Baby, Nun - again stand for her inability of displaying character. She is equated with a toy while the forbidden chamber is an undeniable Pandora's Box of the story; a forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, but with a Gothic twist.

These symbolic references at first may seem utterly obvious, old-fashioned and sometimes, perhaps, even childishly naive and limited. However, in my opinion, the beauty of the story lies in Carter's use of very simple patterns which carry very powerful messages. The patterns have to be obvious in order for us to fully experience and concentrate on the transformation of her character but also to underline the parody beneath it all. Except for the ending which contains a surprising turn of events, the very point of the story is this explicitly evident transition in the protagonist's actions and points of view. Immediately after facing the chamber she ceases to be a passive figure locked inside a devil's mansion and starts to actively contemplate her future actions, wisely concluding she cannot trust the people around her with the discovery. Does this all mean she can be interpreted as a feminist character? The answer is probably not, but we cannot deny the transformation of her personality.

Again, a happy ending derives solely from the telepathy of her maternal guardian angel – a strong "woman in the making" is saved by another strong woman, not a knight in shining armour. The fact that the mother and daughter continued to live in the mansion with a blind piano-tuner, not exactly a dominant male figure suggests yet another reading. Robin Ann Sheets, for example, equates his blindness with a possible remonstrance of a new male erotic identity (Sheets: 655). She also states that readers seem reluctant to accept the blind piano-tuner as the hero (Sheets: 654). Finally, Sheets wonders if his blindness could represent a different kind of male gaze, wondering if women's only chance for equality lies in men becoming disfigured and therefore humble (Sheets: 655).

Second-wave feminism often emphasized the importance of women supporting each other, forming some sort of a sisterhood. Carter demonstrates this element of female solidarity through a candid and affectionate relationship between a mother and a daughter. However, after a brief analysis, it is fairly easy to conclude who is the actual feminist character of the story. Despite the fact that, after the revelation of the chamber, the lead protagonist did try to take initiative in order to escape a fatal destiny, she does not seem to do enough or even care enough to save herself. After failing to get in contact with her mother, she almost instantly asks the piano-tuner, in other words a man, for help and very quickly comes at peace with her destiny, refusing to undertake or even consider some further actions. The true feminist heroine of the story becomes the mother herself.

4.2. The Courtship of Mr. Lyon

"The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" is the second of the Beauty and the Beast transformational type stories in the collection and it bears a strong resemblance to the original fairy-tale. A man gets caught in a snowstorm and finds shelter in an abandoned mansion. After the storm has settled, he picks a white rose from the mansion's garden for his daughter and then, suddenly, a Beast appears. The Beast invites the man's daughter Beauty to dinner offering her to stay with him in order to help her father restore his fortune. She accepts the offer, but after a certain period of time leaves promising to return before the winter ends. Nevertheless, she breaks her promise, returns too late and finds the Beast dying. She kisses him and he transforms into a man.

Again, we are confronted with three interesting and counterbalanced characters, the first being an unreliable, unsteady and weak father figure. The Beast could be interpreted as everything but beastly (this creature is meek and almost seeks mercy) and the protagonist is an unobtrusive, but confident young woman. This female protagonist takes charge of both the male characters' destinies – she alone has to deal with her father's debt, and "save" the Beast. The story is, however, not free from all the typical fairy tale elements (love conquers everything and

redeems us) but what is important to highlight is that, paradoxically, despite the Beast's brute appearance and strength, his impotence and passivity overcome these beneficial features, so he must rely solely on Beauty's initiative and determination. He seeks a knight in shining armour in her and not the other way around, making this story's female protagonist a truly feminist character.

4.3. The Tiger's Bride

"The Tiger's Bride", the final Beauty and the Beast piece, also introduces a strong and opinionated woman as a lead as well as another unreliable father figure. A man gambles away his daughter to a mysterious and wealthy man, whom everyone refers to as the Beast. The young protagonist is soon transported to the Beast's mansion, where he demands to see her naked. She declines to obey. After a certain period of time, he reveals himself to her as the tiger. The protagonist answers by undressing in his room and the Beast starts to lick her, transforming her into a tiger.

The story is written entirely in the first person, which emphasizes the importance of her telling her own version of events even further. From the very beginning, the narration is filled with subtle irony; she is calm, but incredibly sarcastic and certainly not naive. She does not seem to be impressed with the benefits which come with her pleasant appearance. Furthermore, she is incredibly rational in observing the reality of the situation she is facing. For instance, when she uses the phrase "damned white roses", besides the harsh and extremely intended sarcasm, it seems that she is downright surprised with the Tiger's poor judgement concerning the supposed ease with which she could be purchased. When it comes to the act of evening out the debt itself, she is incredibly cautious and observant; she negotiates like an expert. Despite the supposed hopelessness of the situation, she still manages to make sure the debt will be repaid, but under her conditions. Moreover, she is painfully aware of the significance of her virginity and is willing to use it as a weapon. Unexpectedly, after the Tiger sees her naked and

the conditions are fulfilled, she does not experience shame or disgust, but liberation, because she is in charge of her body again. The ending is somewhat ambiguous and it may even be disappointing if not interpreted correctly. Throughout the whole story, the readers follow the voyage of an independent young woman who sticks firmly to her principles and suddenly, this creature emerges and transforms her, which should not be a logical sequence of events. I would like to think of her transformation as a metaphor for her psychological transformation; if we are to put aside the Tiger just for a second, her transition could be interpreted as belonging to just her, the magnitude of it emphasized even further by grotesque descriptions. It most surely represents a transition from a girl into a woman, but it is described in such a manner so as to preserve the "fairy" in the tale.

5. PUSS-IN-BOOTS AS A COMEDIC BREAK

"Puss-in-Boots", based on the fairy-tale by the same name offers a completely different experience and it is at first difficult to even connect this story with the rest of the collection. I think of it as a short pause within all the Gothic gloominess before and after. A young man falls in love with a young, married woman who is closely guarded by her powerful husband and an elderly chaperone. The young man owns a talking cat who comes up with the plan of uniting the two lovers. The cat, too, falls in love with the female protagonist's cat. Together, they kill the wealthy husband and the young lovers have sex next to the dead body.

First of all, the plot is incredibly farcical and ridiculous to say the very least, especially when we consider that it seems as if the murder were just a part of a well-crafted comedic show, not an "actual" murder. The tone is incredibly light and the descriptions are hilariously straightforward. The comedy derives partly from the playfulness of animals presuming the role of match-makers for their incapable masters. The male protagonist is a confused, hopeless romantic who remains passive in his endeavours to win his loved one. The cat becomes the

dominant figure in providing a solution for his master's problem, so the man here is removed from the typical dominant role which is expected of him.

It could be argued that Carter included this story in the collection in order to demonstrate the potency of uniqueness in each plot. "Puss-in-Boots serves" as a comedic break, but it does not solely represent a humorous interlude. The twisted relationships and ridiculous events serve to break the illusion of traditional "and they lived happily ever after" romantic endings. The protagonists having sex next to a corpse represents Carter's vision of a more primal happy ending, in stark contrast to the elevated and soft-focus endings filled with platitudes with which fairy-tales are usually associated.

6. THE MIDDLE SECTION

6.1. The Erl-King

"The Erl-King" offers something completely different: it is very intimate, and not nearly as eventful as the previous tales. The atmosphere is somewhere between gloomy and peaceful. It is based on a German legend, therefore it is not derived from a traditional fairy-tale, like the majority of stories in the collection. A young, female protagonist falls in love with the Erl-King who lives in complete harmony with nature but keeps his birds in cages. The female protagonist finds out that the birds were previously young girls just like herself, so she kills the Erl-King and releases the birds.

A legend tends to transfer obscure meanings through a simple storyline. The descriptions are incredibly sharp and precise. This abundance of detail combined with scarce dialogue instructs the readers to carefully follow the internal world of the female protagonist. The gentle mockery of this powerful male figure as "an excellent housewife" or "the tender butcher" (Carter: 100) is finely interwoven with the demonstration of a heterosexual female desire. The female protagonist surrenders herself to "The Erl-King", not because she is forced,

but because she wishes to do so. However, this fierce passion concerns her and she is painfully aware of the cages that surround him. She refuses to become as submissive as everything around him is because "he might be the death of me" (Carter: 103). The unexpected ending brings up a lot of philosophical questions: to murder what you desire the most, is it an exaggerated demonstration of feminist control or simply an act of cowardice? The protagonist murders the one she loves simply because she is afraid that by fulfilling her sexual desire she might lose control over her destiny. Is killing the man/the beast the only possible way to female empowerment and liberation? Why does it seem that a woman must choose between a man and herself? Feminism should not imply that the only pathway towards female equality lies in evaporating all men. Gender equality should not imply victory over men, but a fair coexistence of all human beings.

6.1. The Snow Child

"The Snow-Child", based on an unpublished Grimm's story, is probably the most shocking tale in the collection. It is short, but extremely affecting. The male protagonist creates a girl out of his wishes, but his jealous wife gets rid of her. He, then, has sex with the girl's dead body. The plot relies on a controversial incestuous love triangle interwoven with cruelty and desire. The Snow-Child is a metaphor for the fruit of the male protagonist's desire. The female protagonist, his wife, takes charge of the situation and elusively erases the problem. His desire must be driven solely by her. The story represents criticism of traditional and everyday female rivalry which surrounds us in a patriarchal world. The plot is extremely exaggerated, horrendous and grotesque, and as such it makes the reader understand how twisted and wrong the concept of constant "wife versus mistress" battle actually is. Again, second wave feminists aimed to emphasize the importance of women sticking up for each other, trying to exclude this outdated fashion of a never-ending battle amongst women; Carter's intervention here uses shock and the grotesque to make the same point.

6.3. The Lady of the House of Love

"The Lady of the House of Love" is a vampire tale with a twist. We follow the destiny of the magnificent queen of vampires, a strong female protagonist. A young man wanders into the mansion of a beautiful female vampire. She seduces him and wants to kill him, but she accidentally cuts herself. The man kisses her wound and by doing so makes her mortal. Her beauty is soulless but innocent; consumptive and radiant. The atmosphere in this story reaches its peak in an extremely Gothic way through eerie descriptions such as "…too many shadows, even at midday, shadows that have no source in anything visible; by the sound, sometimes, of sobbing in a derelict bedroom where a cracked mirror suspended from a wall does not reflect a presence; by a sense of unease that will afflict the traveller unwise enough to pause to drink from the fountain in the square that still gushes spring water from a faucet stuck in a stone lion's mouth." (Carter: 107). The young male protagonist is completely powerless and unaware. The end of being for her marks the end of exile, death brings her peace and revelation, and every ending must always imply some sort of revelation.

The question is – can this female protagonist really be considered as a feminist character? At first, she is powerful and independent, but extremely lonely until a man shows up and makes her "more human" under his own terms. Why is it that a man must be responsible for her transition instead of her? This could be Carter's representation of female inability to make their own decisions as soon as the man gets involved, which is exemplified in the following line: "We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares." (Carter: 124). "The Lady of the House of Love" serves as a critique of always putting women's characters and personalities into the frame of men's expectations and desires.

7. THE WEREWOLF SECTION

7.1. The Werewolf

"The Werewolf" marks the first of the three werewolf tales, and it is comprised of "Red Riding Hood" elements. It is a chillingly laconic representation of harsh existence and human ability to adapt to every possible circumstance. A young girl walks through the forest wanting to visit her grandmother. A beast attacks her, so she cuts off his hand. She reaches her grandmother's house and sees she is missing a hand. The villagers kill the grandmother.

With a gruesome image of a little girl cutting off the beast's hand, we are left with a completely twisted version of "Red Riding Hood". The intended goal is to shock and to make the reader wonder – it could be a demonstration of how the element of surprise contributes to and supplements the plot. The girl gets attacked by a beast and she defends herself. She then realizes her grandmother had been this beast all along. What is a grandmother doing wandering around the woods and attacking little girls? This could be Carter's representation of an unrestrained female desire.

Within every woman there lies a hidden beast, her unexplored, unacceptable, animalistic side hardly or never available to the public eye. The villagers kill the grandmother due to the missing hand. If a woman demonstrates this hidden wildness of her character, will she immediately be punished by the society? Could that mean that every woman's reaction must meet a counter-reaction in a patriarchal surrounding? Punishing the grandmother could imply a warning for every female act of liberation and empowerment – if she does not act as she is supposed to, she will face consequences.

7.2. The Company of Wolves

The second tale in the werewolf section is the luxurious and less bleak "The Company of Wolves", where again, the beast turns out to be tender. A young girl wanders the woods and wants to visit her grandmother. She meets a handsome huntsman who comes first to the grandmother's house and eats her. The young girl soon arrives at the house and has sex with the huntsman so he would not kill her, too.

The beast/wolf here is undoubtedly a man. The images of a wolf, a man, a beast and evil all create a fertile ground for a burning question. If she ceases to be afraid and succumbs to the man/wolf/evil/desire, has she liberated or restrained herself, and could it be that in the sexual liberation of her body, she literally loses her mind? This is unarguably a topic for a heated philosophical debate, but I believe it is safe to say that this story most surely represents feminism as connected to a liberated female sexual desire. But could feminism ever be equated with solely fulfilling female sexual desire, if in fulfilling this desire she still pleases the man? Could feminism ever imply sacrificing female desire for a greater cause of gender equality?

Second wave feminists and Angela Carter herself were under the impression that feminism implies unrestrained female sexuality and that the sexual liberation of women will finally pave the way for a complete gender equality. From today's perspective, this connection between female sexual liberation and gender equality seems rather naive. This sexual liberation again emphasizes the objectification of women. If feminism as a movement transfers all of its efforts on the sexual sphere of women's lives, are we not then back at the beginning? Could sexuality imply only empowerment, or is it that by narrowing down feminist struggle to only one aspect of women's lives solely, second-wave feminists did a great disservice to understanding the aims and scope of the movement?

7.3. Wolf-Alice

The final tale of not just the werewolf section, but the collection itself is “Wolf – Alice”. A young girl raised by wolves is taken in by nuns who give her to a certain Duke. He gets wounded, so the girl licks his wound making him human. Considering the Gothic, gloomy mansion and the werewolf which bears a strong resemblance to the male protagonist in „The Bloody Chamber“, it seems to me the association between “Wolf-Alice” as the closing story and the opening story “The Bloody Chamber” is inevitable. Unlike the female protagonist in “The Bloody Chamber”, Alice does not experience a feminist development of her character, because she is “the strong, wild child” from the very beginning. Instead, the emphasis is put on the development of her body. In a rather gruesome, but still very delicate matter, Carter describes the delights of growing up through the image of a young woman who is discovering her sexuality. The tale also contains another very important reference, and that is the strong symbolism of blood in a woman’s journey as a representation of the passing time, maturation, but also endurance. Once again, by the end of the story the female protagonist experiences rebirth.

What is interesting to pinpoint in this story is a *quid pro quo* relationship between Alice and the Duke. Their relationship is what makes both of them more human. She becomes a woman in his mansion and therefore she returns the favour by saving him. It could be a display of Carter’s vision what a relationship between a man and a woman should look like – representing them both as flawed humans on an equal level. They embrace each other’s animalistic energy, but also complement each other’s existence, forcing one another to become better versions of themselves.

8. CONCLUSION

The Bloody Chamber offers an extremely interesting and different view on fairy-tales. The stories revolve around young feminist protagonists and mock the ingrained, traditional views on relationships between men and women. The rich descriptions along with a predominantly Gothic atmosphere make the reader fully appreciate and follow the adventures of female heroines. Furthermore, the collection seems to be pushing forward the ideas of second-wave feminism which, from today's perspective, seem surpassed. The emphasis is put on sexual liberation of women as the key towards achieving gender equality, but such a notion of liberation is highly ambiguous because it further contributes to the objectification of women as it encourages them to rely solely on the sexual aspect of their lives.

The feminist struggle for equality is a complex process which has still not finished; in order to do it full justice, all aspects of women's lives must be taken into account. However, Carter's revision of fairy-tales in *The Bloody Chamber* is a valuable reminder of the aims of the feminist second wave in the form of literature. Even though, looking from today's point of view, they do not seem like a special breakthrough, they remind us of a particular moment in feminist thinking about gender and show us how far (or perhaps how little?) we have progressed from then.

9. REFERENCES

1. Carter, Angela. 2007. *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage Books.

2. Delmar, Rosalind. 1986. "What is Feminism?" in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (ed.), *What is Feminism*. New York: Pantheon, 8.

3. Fiss, Owen M. 1994. "What is feminism?" *Faculty Scholarship Series.* Paper 1331: 413.

4. Makinen, Merja. 1992. "Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality". *Feminist Review*. Vol. 42: 2-15.

5. Rich, Adrienne. 1972. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision". *College English*. Vol. 34: 18-30.

6. Rooney, Ellen. 1996. "What's the story? Feminist theory, narrative, address". *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Vol. 8: 1.

7. Rubin, Gayle S. 2011. *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 33-65.

8. Sheets, Robin Ann. 1991. "Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism: Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber". *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. Vol.1: 633-657.