

Breaking the Tampered Identity: A Postmodern Retrospect on the Trope of Mirror in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to critique on the postmodern predicaments in subverting the classical fairytale genre and its tropes. The trope of mirror is one of the stereotyped patterns in the classical contour infested with patriarchal intrusion. This reckons the female subject with patriarchal supremacy and infuses an erroneous understanding about their identity. This manipulated strategy employed in the fairytales is redefined in a new light with different cultural and intellectual context. Women writers of the modern era rediscover its imaginative potential and subvert the inscribed ideology. One such challenging contemporary retelling of fairytales is Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. The paper attempts to showcase author's attempt to redefine the trope of mirror which objectified women and reuse it to delineate female subjectivity. The paper also hinges on the critical formulations of postmodernism in deconstructing the classical trope of mirror by unravelling the manipulative ideology and restructuring the traditional corpus into a purveyor of new perspective and revitalised sensibility.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Fairytales, Mirror, Objectification, Female subjectivity

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman rises
towards her day after day...

– Sylvia Plath 'Mirror'

Fairytale is one of the primordial cannon of literature that constantly evolved reflecting cultural, social, political and

intellectual trend of the time. This classical genre plays an immense role in shaping and spawning crucial functions of our lives. As Jack Zipes points out, "Fairytales are thus produced and consumed to accomplish a variety of social functions in multiple contexts" (25). However, in course of time the fairytale genre acquired the feature of reflecting the contemporariness of each era keeping abreast the popular imagination and changing tandems of the society. Fairytale amend itself depending on the author, audience and ideology. In spite of its adaptive nature, the genre retains its primitive rudiments like symbols, tropes, metaphors, motifs, patterns and salient thematic intellctions which become the genre markers. One such trope that is conspicuous in fairytales is 'Mirror'.

The trope of mirror is widely used in most of the classical fairytales and it is usually associated with women characters of the tale. For instance, the Queen in "Snow White" uses an enchanted looking glass and Beauty in "The Beauty and the Beast" is given a magic mirror to see her father while she resides in the Beast's castle and to see Beast when she is in her father's place. Though it seemed as an innocent shinning piece of glass or an impeccable trope employed in fairytales, it was infested with patriarchal credos reckoning the female subjects with male ordinances. It inculcated an erroneous understanding about their beauty and identity. This manipulative strategy employed in fairytales forged a distant and superficial comprehension of their own self, channelled through patriarchal scrutiny. They 'objectified' women through this symbolic trope. The fairytale genre conditioned by the male hegemony infused a tampered identity and imposed version of reality maneuvered by them.

Women writers of contemporary era resisting such patriarchal dominance defied their subservience by subverting their ideological manipulation. This awakened them to rule their own world with their individuality, identity and creativity. This paved way for the emergence of retold fairytales. Women writers through their rewritings confronted the classical canon of

fairytales and subverted the tainted trope off its subjugative authority. Retold fairytales mounted strongly on theoretical formulations of postmodernism doubled their exertion in effectuating their cause. It questions and problematises the innocence of the seamless patterns of fairytales structured by hegemonic constrain and revalidates them on a postmodern space. It paradoxically challenges the governing foundation of the genre and critiques on its biased representation.

Postmodernism “interrogates the way the world has been presented in fairytales” (Zipes 161). Postmodernism enables the retold fairytales a legit platform to interpellate and to restructure the classical contour of the genre markers. As it redeem the fairytales from being “Ideologically narrow and repressive use” (Bacchilega 6) and broadens its realm by problematising “mimetic narratives, gender identities and humanistic conceptualisation of the subject” (Bacchilega 140). Retold fairytales deconstructs the dichotomous representation of women and disrupts the purposive patterns of genre markers. In retold fairytales the trope of mirror and its symbolic significance changes and it is no longer the fabricated stratagem of male hegemony rather a paragon of female power and transformation enabling a revisioned reality. As Christina Bacchilega aptly comments on this regard saying, “Postmodern wonders perform multiple tricks with that mirror to re-envision its images of *story* and *women*” (146).

Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* is one such retold fairytales narrative, published in 1979 is her pivotal work of rewriting ten classical fairytale with contemporary vision. As Salman Rushdie says, “She opens an old story for us, like an egg, and finds the new story, the now-story we want to hear within” (xiv). Each story takes the reader to a new venture in the old worn path as the tales convey new ideas with a realistic tone within the contour of the traditional old tale. This enables the reader to speculate different perspectives and gain

multidimensional insight about various fairytale genre markers. *The Bloody Chamber* vehemently captures and reflects the presumptive spirit of postmodern era that provides the readers with a liberating space to explore the new world of knowledge. This rewriting of Carter is an “imitation with a critical distance” (Hutcheon 36).

The retold fairytales deconstructs and reconstructs the traditional fairytale tropes and symbols into a creatively challenging facet. Carter rejects “male construct image of women as a form of false consciousness (Brittanzolis 44) and creates a dynamic image that subdues the ideological constraints and limitations. The trope of mirror in Carter’s work transgresses against the traditional construct and is recounted with more realistic touch, giving a new insight to the readers. As Selen Aktari says:

[Carter] aimed to change the conventional perception... and transform dominant cultural understanding, particularly of gender. Though seeing universally accepted notions from a different angle, Carter aspire[s] to uncover the ideologies of old narratives and to open new ways of plural thinking via narratives. (157)

Feminist critics like Luce Irigaray, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar regards the trope of mirror as a hostile entity for women. It is known as “a perfect metaphor for patriarchal subordination of women” (Schanoes 6). Though, mirror is a negatively manipulated device used in classical fairytales, Carter changes this negative definition and associates mirror as a potential trope to reveal a new world of knowledge to the women characters. She uses the mirror in a subtle way, as it critically constructs that which it previously destroys in the classical fairytales. In classical tales the trope of mirror is used as an objectifying device by the patriarchal community but now the same trope is employed to retrieve back the female subjects and construct the female subjectivity which it annihilated. The trope of mirror is used as a “repetition with difference” (Hutcheon 32).

As in the tale "The Bloody Chamber" a retelling of "Bluebeard", the trope of mirror plays a significant role in enabling the protagonist to reclaim her position as a "subject of her own right" not to be a "object of the gaze" (Sachanoes 8). The protagonist recounts her first physical encounter with her husband in a mirror gilded room. She says, "Our bed. And surrounded by so many mirrors!... the young bride, who becomes that multitude of girls. I saw in the mirrors... watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors" (TBC 10). These lines show how she was possessed as a property. The mirror turns the narrator into an object and an asset of her husband Marquis. Aidan Day comments on this saying, "The multitude of mirror and hence of girls emphasizes her objectification: she loses individuality and becomes an item in a series of multiply reproduced items, a specimen of female sex in Marquis's harem" (154). "I have acquired a whole harem for myself" (TBC 10). This line emphasizes how mirror played an important role in objectifying women as a mere possession of men and object of gaze. Carter through her photophic imagery has elegantly depicted the process of 'objectification'.

Angela Carter uses the same trope of mirror to redeem the narrator from being an object. As the narrator says, "A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside" (TBC 14). The unnamed narrator distances herself from what is happening by taking a third person narrative stand and observes her position that awakens her to reclaim her stand to be a subject. As Sachanoes says:

The mirror provides the young woman with mechanism of dissociation... she takes refuge in becoming an observer, in distancing herself from the events she is witnessing in the mirror... The mirror has estranged her as a subject, watching, from herself as an object, being watched and not just any object either. (8)

The switch in the narrative voice from first person to third person suggests that the mirror objectifies her at the same time it

gives a subjective understanding about her condition. This self-realisation is brought out clearly by Carter through the trope of mirror. On the contrary, this same self-realisation and subjective understanding was distanced and made inaccessible for women in the classical narratives by the trope of mirror. It forged a false understanding conditioned and projected through the male hegemonic apparels. Retold fairytales with postmodern sensibility altered the classical vision of the mirror and has brought the reality to the forefront. Postmodernism subverts the pre-purposed notion and challenges the tampered identity.

In another instance, in the tale titled "Wolf-Alice" a retelling of "Little Red Riding hood" the protagonist, a ragged girl raised by the wolves has acquired an false identity or understanding about herself that she is one of them. "Nothing about her is human expect that she is *not* a wolf" (TBC 141). Though she is rescued and taught to acquire the habits and mannerisms of human, she refused and found it strange. When they tried to teach her certain manner, "she arched her back, pawed the floor, retreated to a far corner of the chapel, crouched, trembled, urinated, defecated, reverted entirely, it would seem, to her natural state" (TBC 141). It was nearly impossible for them to teach and to educate her about her true identity. The human part of her was hidden and camouflaged with an animal instinct and habit. Later, when she happens to live in the castle with the Duke, she comes in contact with the mirror that eventually triggers her humanly nature. Mirror plays an important role in educating her about her true identity. When she encounters her reflection for the first time she thinks it as a stranger. The mirror metaphorically objectifies her, as "she rubbed her head against her reflected face, to show that she felt friendly towards it, and felt a cool, solid, immovable surface between herself and she" (TBC 145).

During the course of time the mirror brings her to the reality making her realise her own self. The reflection that is

shown in the mirror is not a stranger but her own self. Her self-realisation was dawned through the trope of mirror “[H]er relation with the mirror was now far more intimate since she knew she saw herself within it” (TBC 147). Her true identity and her knowledge about herself are brought through the mirror. As Veronica Sachanoes aptly comments on this regard saying, “The mirror catalyses and signifies Alice’s emergence into human consciousness” (10). After her self-realisation of her true nature, she was able to bring Duke to humanity, which is signified by his reflection in the mirror. Carter transgresses the frame of traditional trope and unfolds implicitly a new insight through it. She uses the trope of mirror as a postmodern tool to dismantle the antique lure and classical representation that is manipulated to implant their perception.

Carter ruptured the archetypal presentation of mirror and has creatively recreated it to build a new consciousness epitomising a liberated perspective. As Merja Makinen critically comments on this regard saying, “[R]e-writings that take the genre and adapt it will not necessarily encode the same ideological assumption... the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology... subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions” (4-5). Postmodernism offered Carter a liberal space to manifest her challenging and revolutionary thought which outwits the generic modulations. Postmodernism reorients the same trope of classical genre into an emancipatory configuration with contemporary sensibility.

In another instance in the tale titled “The Tiger’s Bride” a retelling of “The Beauty and the Beast” the girl is given a magic mirror by the Beast who is taken as a captive as a compensation for her father’s defeat in gambling. Even though her father says he loves her, the reality which is different. She says, “My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards... In the mirror, I saw wild hope light up his eyes... at first I thought he smiled at me. Then I saw he was smiling with pure

gratification" (TBC 59, 72). The mirror showed her the reality, brought her to her senses and gave her clarity of where she should belong. Either to be with the lambs, as an object or as an slave without voice or to run with the tigers with power wielded on her shoulders. The mirror showed her the reality; it showed her father's image puffed with greed and his indifference towards his daughter. The mirror made her discern her position of an 'object' and made her realise her true place. Aidan Day comments on this regard saying, "In "The Tiger's Bride" Beauty, having begun to define herself outside the prescriptions of patriarchal culture, refuses the role of victim. She refuses to be... object of masculine gaze. It [mirror] incorporates her into subject position." (142, 143).

Thus, Carter has employed the trope of mirror with an altered vision. She has subverted and deconstructed the classical function of the mirror. In her rewriting *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter has dismantled the traditional trope of its classical function and has reused differently in the same context. The mirror which objectified women is used again with a different mission to enable them to reclaim their female subjectivity or female subject position. Postmodernism promotes an altered perspective through the same classical trope of mirror which constrained it once. The subjective consciousness revamped by mirror enables the protagonist to find their true identity and new sensibility that puts them in the pinnacle of individuality, authority and liberty. Thus, mirror played an ideal role in demurring a tampered projection and promoted a sensible refiguration.

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