**THE WOLF AND THE FEMINIST: A CRITICAL READING OF ANGELA CARTER'S WOLF TRILOGY**

Angela Carter’s fiction has been a source of controversy among many critics. While some argue that her writing is feminist, others claim that her writing is anti-feminist and even sexist in its “representations of the physical abuse of women in phallocentric cultures” (Makinen 3). Carter’s adaptations of traditional fairytales often present the readers with a sexualised, feminist angle. This can be said specifically of Angela Carter’s **Wolf Trilogy**, “The Werewolf,” “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alice,” where the traditional message of Red Riding Hood as a warning to young girls is adapted to one with a feminist purpose. Although superficially the Wolf Trilogy appears to convey a feminist message, it can be seen that, between the lines, Carter merely rewrites the tales “within the strait-jacket of their original structure and therefore [reproduces] the rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic” (4). Thus, Angela Carter’s Wolf Trilogy attempts to present its readers with strong female protagonists who use fearlessness or sexuality to remain free from patriarchal dominance. However, Carter ends up undermining her feminist purpose in the way she portrays her protagonists; this is done either by her engagement with patriarchal conventions, her objectification of women, and the portrayal of the traditional gender binary as something inherent rather than socially constructed.

The link between Carter’s Wolf Trilogy and the traditional Red Riding Hood story, is imperative to understand. By comparing the portrayal of the protagonists and the purpose of the original story, one can draw some conclusions regarding how Carter attempts to write a feminist adaption. For example, **The Brothers Grimm’s “Little Red Cap”** emphasises obedience to one’s mother and it serves as a warning to young girls about strangers and the dangers of sex; Little Red Cap promises her mother that she will do everything right. Likewise, Perrault’s version is a simple and straightforward warning to children against predators. Carter, however, deviates from these moralistic warnings, placing an emphasis on sexual freedom and the power of seduction. Carter attempts to portray a feminist protagonist who is independent of male dominance in each of her short Wolf stories. She further deviates from Grimm’s version to underpin her feminist purpose in that there is no huntsman to save her heroine in "The Company of Wolves"; she deliberately omits the huntsman to emphasise that there is no need for a man to rescue a “damsel in distress.” Through the comparison of the messages in both the traditional tale and Carter’s adaptations, Carter attempts to highlight that women can be their own saviours.

Certainly, these views indicate Carter’s feminist project in her rewriting of the tales. In “The Werewolf”, Carter attempts to portray **a fearless female protagonist who is capable of defending herself** when faced with grave danger. Her mother requests that Red visits her sick grandmother, and gives her the means to defend herself should she encounter a wolf: “take your father’s hunting knife, you know how to use it” (Carter 127). The latter half of the quotation suggests that the girl has had experience defending herself with the knife. Carter attempts to show that the girl is not in need of rescue or protection from a man, such as the huntsman that appears in the Grimm’s version. Furthermore, as the girl enters the woods, she is hunted by the wolf and it is at the point of hearing “the freezing howl of a wolf” (127) that she transforms from prey into predator, hunted into huntress as she “seized her knife and turned on the beast” (127). Carter attempts to portray a strong and fearless protagonist who “with her father’s knife [slashes] off its right forepaw” (127). Carter depicts Red as taking control of the situation and defending herself to highlight female empowerment. She further emphasises this point in the last line of the story: “now the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered” (128). This suggests that the girl not only takes control and defeats the wolf, but she is also triumphant because she takes control of her own fate.

Although the quotations above appear to support a feminist reading of Carter’s “The Werewolf,” the way Carter represents this fearlessness or capability of self defense actually undermines the feminist reading. Firstly, although the girl is initially described as being able to defend herself, the knife she is provided with is her “father’s hunting knife” (127). The knife belonging to her father suggests that she is still in need of her father’s protection; this reaffirms the tradition of the father as the head of the family. Furthermore, Carter re-writes the depiction of the werewolf to highlight the beast’s cowardice (Makinen 5). This creature is no longer strong and dangerous, but weak and vulnerable after his paw is chopped off: “the wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem” (Carter 127). Carter describes the wolf as a less vicious foe who can easily be defeated; wolves are now considered weak and “less brave than they seem” (127) This rewriting of the wolf’s characteristics undermines the fearlessness of the protagonist’s action.

Secondly, Carter attempts to portray an empowered female protagonist by depicting Red Riding Hood as capable of self-defense without a man’s help. This is illustrated by Red when she discovers the identity of the werewolf to be her grandmother; Red then kills and defeats the werewolf living “happily ever after” without a man. However, Carter’s choice to combine the characters of the grandmother and the werewolf serves to highlight that women not only need to defend themselves against male dominance but also against fellow women who can present themselves as dangerous. There is no textual evidence in “The Werewolf” to suggest any sense of remorse on Red’s part for causing the death of her grandmother. Instead she thrives off her grandmother’s possessions; Red takes what belongs to another woman and claims it as her own. It therefore can be argued that positing women as dangers to each other and as prospering at the expense of another, undermines the feminist understanding of the story. It positions woman against woman, and distracts from the important message of fighting male dominance.

Another way Carter attempts to present a strong, independent heroine is by depicting the protagonist as comfortable with her sexuality in **“The Company of Wolves.”** The protagonist in Carter’s story is represented as a mature heroine; she is still young but she is also highly sexualised as “her breasts have just begun to swell” (Carter 133) and she still has an innocent desirability in that “she stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity” (133). Not only is her initial introduction highly sexualised but the same can be said for her behaviour. When the young girl is confronted by the handsome man in the woods and a wager is made, she converses in a flirtatious manner asking “disingenuously” (135) what the stranger would like should he win the bet. Thus, Carter portrays her protagonist as a young girl who is going through puberty and recognising and taking control of her own sexuality. Carter intends for this sexuality to not only be expressed in a mild flirtation with a handsome stranger, but for it also to be used as a means to take control of her situation and be her own rescuer. When faced with what she believed would be her demise, for she “knew she was in danger of death” (137), she takes control rather than giving in to fear. This is where Carter highlights Red’s transition from a young girl who is afraid by taking “off her scarlet shawl [. . .] the colour of her menses” (138), into a woman who has gone through puberty and now at the peak of her sexuality. The young girl realises that since “her fear did no good, she ceased to be afraid” (138). Carter describes the process of the girl stripping and seducing the wolf: she removes her blouse to reveal “her small breasts” until she was “clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh” (138). Carter uses sexuality to highlight that the heroine makes the decision to control her own fate instead of succumbing to fear and becoming the wolf’s prey. Like in “The Werewolf,” she transforms from prey to predator by taking control.

Although the initial reading of “The Company of Wolves” attempts to portray a strong female protagonist who uses sexuality to obtain freedom from male dominance, a closer reading of the way Carter does this will highlight how the story actually results in female objectification. The initial introduction and description of the heroine is described by Kimberly Lau as one of the “conventional pornographic tropes surrounding the sexually desirable young girl” (85). This therefore supports the argument that the sexualisation that is meant to be representative of de-victimising herself and taking control actually plays into a male fantasy and does not depict female empowerment. Likewise, when flirting with the handsome stranger, Lau states that Red is aware of her innocent flirtation, which is exactly what makes her so highly desirable in the “typical male fantasy” (86). These conventions of sexualising the heroine support patriarchal expectations of sexuality. Sexuality becomes the only means of control and therefore, her only means of self-defense. This sexualisation of the tale is in “accord with the heterosexual male pedophilic fantasies about sexually precocious young girls” and a “cultural fetishization of young girls and the sexualisation of women” (Lau 80). Furthermore, the fact that she ends up “sweet and sound [sleeping] . . . between the paws of the tender wolf” (139) implies that she is only safe when between the arms of a male figure; the protagonist is not depicted as strong and independent as she still depends on a man for safety. It can also be said that Carter rewrites the characteristics of the wolf as she did in “The Werewolf.” Here the wolf is described as “tender” going against the typical description of a vicious predator. The rewriting of the wolf as “tender” results in Red Riding Hood not being in danger to begin with. It can be said that the young and highly sexualised girl does not free herself from danger through any form of self defense or through sexuality, but rather she succumbs to a male fantasy as she sleeps safely with the tender wolf.

Finally, in contrast to the “The Werewolf” Carter separates the characters of the wolf and the grandmother, which serves to undermine the feminist reading. According to Bacchilega (62) the separation of grandmother and wolf is done to add emphasis to the sexual relationship of the girl with the wolf. This narrative choice further undermines Carter’s feminist purpose. Although this time Red did not directly kill her grandmother, another woman, she still shows no concern for her grandmother’s death. The werewolf has eaten her grandmother and upon hearing “the old bones under the bed [. . .] she did not pay them any heed” (138), the girl continues to seduce the wolf. Some critics argue that the grandmother represents old-fashioned, sexual values. However, regardless of the grandmother’s purpose, the fact that Red shows no concern for her grandmother’s death only emphasises the rivalry between Red and her grandmother. Just like in “The Werewolf,” Red takes possession of her grandmother’s house as she “sleeps in granny’s bed” (139) thriving off what belongs to another woman. There is a rivalry between the women and an emphasis on a sexual relationship as more important than the death of another woman; thus, as a result, the feminist reading is again undermined.

“Wolf-Alice,” the final story in Carter’s Wolf Trilogy, also attempts to portray a strong female protagonist, but again, the way in which this is done **undermines this feminist purpose as the story conforms to the gender binary**. Although Carter attempts to present a feminist reading by breaking down gender conventions of Wolf-Alice, she in fact portrays gender as something essential. Wolf-Alice grew up a feral child and so society had no influence on her, implying that Carter depicts gender as an essential and inherent trait, not something learnt or constructed. This can be seen firstly when she “began to bleed” (Carter 144), to menstruate, making a step toward becoming a woman. Rabab Al-Kassasbeh argues when Alice wants to clean up her blood her “feeling of shame can be explained by the fact that she has internalized the dominant culture” (32). Some have argued that this shame is a result of the nuns, who represent religion or society attempting to shape her to adhere to traditional gender roles and being embarrassed by her puberty. However, this is not the case. The story specifically mentions that “the nuns had not the means to inform her how it should be, it was not fastidiousness but shame that made her do so” (144). Therefore, these responses of shame are represented as something inherent and natural. This suggests that Carter merely emphasises that gender and shame of female sexuality is something inherent and not learned from society, thus undermining the feminist reading and supporting traditional gender roles. Furthermore, Wolf-Alice conforms to society’s gender expectations when she begins to wear dresses. She eventually finds and puts on the wedding dress and “saw how this white dress made her shine” (Carter 147). This acceptance of clothing “represents a parody of the socialization of the heroine [. . .] assimilating the cultural stereotype of what costume is appropriate for her gender” (Al-Kassasbeh 33). Again, the fact that Wolf-Alice accepts all these conventions of her own accord shows how Carter unintentionally plays into societal expectations of women and gender, thus undermining the feminist purpose. Carter’s representation of Wolf-Alice also unintentionally adheres to patriarchal traditions. This is exemplified in the fact that Wolf-Alice acts as the Duke’s maid, who himself is a werewolf and a symbol of patriarchal order. Wolf-Alice “can perform the few, small tasks [. . .] she sweeps up the hairs, makes up his bed at sunset” (143); furthermore, she does this while he is out hunting in the graveyards. This further underpins the patriarchal tradition of the woman staying home to do chores while the man serves as the provider bringing home the food. The final way in which Carter adheres to patriarchal traditions is depicted in the way Alice pities the Duke. After the Duke is shot, “he lies writhing on his black bed” (Carter 148), Lau describes Alice’s response as “both tender and erotic” (91). It is in this moment that the “two appear much like the newly wedded couple we might expect in a happy ending” (Jennings 105), as Alice leaps “upon his bed to lick [. . .] without disgust, with quick tender gravity” (Carter 148) the Duke’s wound. The symbol of the wedding dress as her sexual purity becomes “contaminated by the open and loving exchange of bodily fluids, the saliva commingling with blood and dirt” (Jennings 106). Once again the protagonist is sexualised, but this time not to save herself, but the Duke. These final images of Alice bent over the Duke in an erotic way “ironically enact the prototypical, hetreosexual fairy-tale ending” (105). Not only is Wolf-Alice ashamed of her sexuality and defined by society’s expectations of gender, but her happy ending is only achievable with a man and the traditional fairy-tale ending (106). Both of these elements undermine the feminist purpose of an independent heroine.

Overall, feminism influences Carter’s *Wolf Trilogy*. The sexualisation of protagonists is a technique Carter uses to highlight female empowerment and freedom from male dominance. However, the analysis above clearly highlights the ways in which Carter’s methods and portrayal undermine her feminist purpose. The oversexualisation of the young female protagonists only serves to play into male fantasies and does not result in female empowerment, but rather in objectification of young girls. Carter’s Wolf Trilogy is “locked into the conservative sexism, despite her good intentions” (Makinen 4), with patriarchy still featuring as an underlying force in her writing.