# A Feminist Post-Narratological Inquiry into Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves"

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#### Abstract

Angela Carter is an unorthodox figure of 20th-century literature that declares war on all kinds of orthodox beliefs and practices. One of those practices against which she boldly fights is myths. Myths draw social and cultural boundaries that tempt such writers as Carter to trespass by playing upon and with their breaks and leaks. Specifically alert to the distribution of power regarding sexual politics, Carter rereads traditional myths with closer attention and rewrites them to spoil their ideological fabric and debunk their malignant latent aims. As such, she sets out to explore fairytale tradition to see how women are misrepresented by and within fairytales and how these misrepresentations are encoded as universal facts. In her avant-garde work *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), Carter rewrites these fairytales with the purpose of denouncing the misrepresentations manifest in them and deconstructing gender stereotypes. This paper is an attempt to scrutinize one of these rewritings in this collection, "The Company of Wolves" from a feminist post-narratological stance, first discussing the inapplicability of classical narratological theories such as Proppian analysis of fairytales to deconstructive rewritings and then elaborating on the subversive potential of Carter's rewriting in comparison with the original version "Little Red Cap" by the Grimm Brothers...

Keywords: post-narratology, feminist rewriting, Angela Carter, the Grimm Brothers, fairy tales

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# Angela Carter'ın "Kurtlar Arasında" Öyküsünün Feminist Post-Anlatıbilimsel İncelemesi

### Öz

Angela Carter, tüm ortodoks düşünce sistemleri, inanış ve uygulamalara savaş açmış, 20. Yüz-yıl edebiyatında alışılmışın dışında kalan edebi figürlerden biridir. Carter'ın cesurca savaştığı bu uygulamalardan biri de mitlerdir. Mitler, Carter gibi yazarları üzerine çekecek sosyokültürel sınırlar çizerler. Özellikle de cinsel politikadaki güçler dağılımıyla ilgilenen Carter, geleneksel mitleri yeniden okuyarak, içlerinde barındırdıkları ideolojik dokuyu yapıbozuma uğratmak ve içkin amaçlarını boşa çıkarmak üzere bu mitleri yeniden yazar. Bu bakımdan, masallarda kadınların nasıl temsil edildiği ve bu temsillerin nasıl evrensel doğrulara dönüştürüldüğünü anlamak ve anlatmak için masal geleneğini keşfetmeye koyulur. Yenilikçi eserlerinden Kanlı Oda ve Diğer Öyküler'de de bu temsilleri çürütmek ve cinsiyet normlarını yapısöküme uğratmak amacıyla masalları yeniden yazar. Bu çalışma, bu koleksiyondaki yeniden yazılan masallardan biri olan "Kurtlar Arasında" öyküsünü feminist post-anlatıbilimsel açıdan incelemeyi, bunu yaparken de öncelikle Propp'un masal incelemesi gibi geleneksel anlatıbilimsel yöntemlerin yapıbozumcu yeniden yazımlara uygulanamazlığını tartışıp ardından Carter'ın öyküsünü, öykünün orijinali kaynağı Grimm Kardeşler'in "Kırmızı Başlıklı Kız" masalıyla karşılaştırmalı olarak ele almayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: post-anlatıbilim, feminist yeniden yazım, Angela Carter, Grimm Kardeşler, masallar

Known for "putting new wine in old bottles" (Carter "Notes" 69), Angela Carter, in her rewritings collected under the title *Bloody Chamber*, transforms the fabulas of traditional fairytales into her own sjuzhets with a remarkable feminist twist. These sjuzhets of Carter, though remarkably differing from traditional versions in terms of their ideological fabric, seem to be substantially following the same narrative structures with traditional ones. "The Company of Wolves", one of the most salient stories in *Bloody Chamber*, for instance, bears striking similarities with the traditional fairy tale "Little Red Cap" written by the Grimm Brothers. These similarities provide most researchers with an appropriate grounding to apply Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp's theory that "[a] ll fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure" (10). A structuralist analysis could be carried out on the linear sequence of events, focusing merely on the functions of the characters while disregarding the rest, that is, characters' positions, roles, identities, motives as well as author's writing style and ideological inclinations. Comparing Carter's rewriting with its original version primarily on the syntagmatic axis would take us to such a conclusion that both versions of Little Red Riding Hood are constructed through the same sequence of functions; thus, Carter's "The Company of Wolves" is simply one of many sjuzhets of the same fabula. Yet, such an analysis held by means of classical narratology would apparently neglect these fairy tales' position on the paradigmatic axis, and necessarily arrive at an overtly reductive and misleading conclusion. Carter, as an outspokenly political author, denounces the paradigmatic dimension of her work by declaring that "[a]ll art is political and so is mine. I want readers to understand what it is that I mean by my stories" (Expletives 214). Thus, a structural inquiry into her rewriting of Little Red Riding Hood can only explain how she "put[s] new wine in old bottles", but cannot unravel how she "the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" ("Notes" 69); that is, what she means by her new ideologically-encoded wine.

This problem arising from the degree of applicability of Propp's theory, classical narratology in the widest sense, to such narratives becomes the major query of postclassical narratologists, particularly feminist ones. Susan Lanser,

the owner of the coinage "feminist narratology", criticizes classical narratology for its tendency to categorize, binarize and universalize what is on the syntagmatic level while disregarding the paradigmatic aspects one of which is the issue of gender: "In the structuralist quest for 'invariant elements among superficial differences' (Levi-Strauss 8), for (so-called) universals rather than particulars, narratology has avoided questions of gender almost entirely" (676). Apparently, classical narratology fails not only in taking the "particulars", women who are on the margins of both the society and literature into consideration but also in freeing itself from binary logic and Platonism, which makes it another grand narrative that regulates our experience of reading and perception of literary works. Ruth E. Page, hence, suggests a feminist narratological approach that does not fall into the same trap of "binary and universalized pairing of 'male' and 'female'" (64), rather revisits gender by recognizing the fact that gender is the most salient variable which can be performed in various ways. For Page, the inquiry of feminist narratology should not be about "how women and men might differ" but it should rather lay bare "how stories might function to reinforce or challenge gendered inequalities" (186). There have been various attempts at revealing how Carter challenge the "gendered inequalities" by rewriting fairy tales such as Marcela Vasickova's MA dissertation entitled "Reworking of Fairy Tales in the Work of Angela Carter". Vasickova, in her dissertation, studies how Carter's rewritings "are affected by the feminist ideas and thoughts that are especially claiming equal rights for men and women and female sexual freedom" (2). Similarly, Catherine Orenstein, in her book entitled Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked (2002), tackles how the traditional fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood" has been adapted or rewritten by different authors and in what terms these rewritings differ from each other and from the original one. One of the rewritings that she touches upon is "The Company of Wolves" which, Orenstein remarks, has become "a parable of sexual awakening" (166). Departing from Vasickova's and Orenstein's works in terms of the vantage point adopted, this paper aims to unveil what is beneath Carter's Red Riding Hood's cloak, that is, how "The Company of Wolves" deconstructs not only phallogocentric dichotomies in the traditional fairy tale but also the fairy tale tradition itself, employing

an innovative approach that, as Page suggests, combines feminism and narratology without falling into the error of universalizing or binarizing.

In "Notes from the Front Line", Carter overtly expresses that she is "in the demythologizing business", believing that myths are "extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree" (71). Myths, as Carter notes, constitute the very foundations of boundaries regarding gender roles and sexuality, and settles into the collective unconscious of the society in such an abiding way that they start to shape the way of our thinking rather than being shaped by us. This internalization of myths becomes one of the most tedious concerns of feminists who strive to eliminate the categories sprung in, by and out of myths. As such, Simone De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, touches upon how myths about women have been created by men for centuries in order to "ke[ep] in their hands all concrete powers" and to "keep woman in a state of dependence" (159). Claiming that there is no inherent category of "woman", Beauvoir contends that woman is created as an empty locus by man who needs her to assert himself, his power and so-called superiority. Evidently, myths are the malicious products of patriarchal ideology through which they create binaries between man and woman and privilege the former leg of this binary by identifying it with power and superiority. Thus, woman is obviously an invented Other whose identity, sexual and social roles are defined by and for man, which is voiced by Carter in her Sadeian Women (1978) as follows: "[M]an aspires –woman has no function but to exist, waiting. The male is positive. An exclamation mark. Woman is negative" (4)

Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, points out that each and every text is a socially symbolic act that is "grasped as the imaginary resolution of real contradiction" (77). Accordingly, fairy tales can be regarded as ideological acts aiming at preserving myths by speaking to both conscious and unconscious of children. They are established upon the constructed binary structure regarding gender and sexuality such as mind/body, culture/nature, active/passive, dominant/submissive and predator/prey. In this binary paradigm manifesting in fairy tales, man is always associated with power, mind, nature, dominance, and power while woman is pushed into the repressed leg of the binary identified with body, nature, passivity, submission and weakness, and this

binarism inevitably appropriates woman as the prey of male predator. Abound in gender stereotypes rest upon these socially and culturally constructed binaries, fairy tales, as Zipes underlines, "operate *ideologically* indoctrinate children so that they will conform to dominant social standards" by means of "the socio-psychological mechanisms through which ideology exercises an influence on readers" (emphasis added) (18), which makes them a serious threat to feminists.

The othering of woman in fairytales by pushing her into the underprivileged leg of the binary only to privilege male counterpart reminds one of the colonialist practices. Woman is the colonial Other through which man, the colonizer, identifies himself with power and assign himself to be the one in charge of dominating and restructuring her. For Carter, writing against the patriarchal norms lurking in traditional fairy tales that are primary vehicles for transmitting them is crucial for freeing woman from these colonialist practices of patriarchal ideology:

Yet this, of course, is why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women—it is part of the slow process of decolonizing our language and our basic habits of thought. I really do believe this [...] it has to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed. ("Notes" 75)

Thus, she becomes a literary warrior against phallogocentrism, fighting with the binary logic and its productions through her parodic rewritings. Carter's rewritings, in this respect, are successful attempts at questioning the unquestioned patriarchal ideology, subverting gender and sexual stereotypes and redistributing power and authority. She takes the latent material in fairy tales and presents them not from the center but from the margins by voicing the unvoiced and reversing all the existing binaries to such an extent that the previously suppressed leg is elevated to the same level with the privileged one or even becomes superior to it. Thus, through each rewriting, traditional fairy tales "record the breakdown of an old world structure, chaos, confusion, and the striving to attain a new world which might allow for more humane conduct" (Zipes, *Breaking* 35).

Carter, defining herself as "feminist in everything" without compartmentalizing herself in any category ("Notes" 69), plays upon traditional fairy tales

by creating revisionist versions which, though following the same syntagmatic pattern, foregrounds their paradigmatic dimensions through the reversal of the representations of gender roles. For Carter, "[t]o be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case- that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman" (Sadeian 77). The Grimm Brothers' "Little Red Cap", as such, reinforces women's passivity through the moral instructions imposed on little girl: not to stray from the path, not to speak to the strangers, and to obey her mother's rules. The ideal woman defined by patriarchal ideology is, then, the one whose life is determined by others rather than being the agent of her own life, to whom things are done rather than being the one that is doing, and who obediently yields to the destiny prepared for her. The Grimms' fairy tale is built upon either/or category of gender, either rewarding women who conform to the expectations of the society and performs their constructed role, unquestioned obedience, and passivity, or punishing those who attempt to become the agents of their own lives. In the world depicted in "Little Red Cap" as a miniature of patriarchy, there is no space for woman's sexuality; rather it is something acted merely by man upon woman who has never given the opportunity to be the subject of desire, instead is doomed to be the object of male desire, which is best illustrated in the scene where the wolf, the metonymic extension of patriarchy, satisfies himself by consuming the object of his carnal desire: "No sooner had the wolf spoken those words than he leaped out of bed and gobbled up poor Little Red Cap. Once the wolf had satisfied his desires, he lay down again in bed, fell asleep, and began to snore very loudly." ("Red Cap" 15)

Carter as an unorthodox feminist refuses any either/or gender roles, and questions "[h]ow do we know what is authentic behavior and what is inauthentic behavior?", believing that "it's about the complex interrelation of reality and its representations. It has to do with a much older thing. [...] it comes back to the idea of mythology [...]. It's because it's presenting us with ideas about ourselves which don't come out of practice; they come out of theory" (qtd. in Katsavos 16). As Carter indicates, gender and sexuality are not inherent essences but social norms constructed and shaped by patriarchy and acculturated upon

people repetitively by means of fairy tales. Opposing to the reduction of identity to constructed gender and sexual roles, Carter, in her writings, transcends the gender and sexual boundaries, coming up with gender and sexual hybrid characters instead of stereotypical models. Against the essentialist attitude of patriarchy, she suggests gender performativity, which paves the way for blurring the patriarchal binaries between man and woman and creating transformative identities rejecting to be integrated into either/or categories. This resonates Judith Butler's notion of gender as a performative phenomenon. Gender, asserts Butler in her *Gender Trouble* (1990), does not designate innate forms but is constituted via "discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex" (x). According to Butler, patriarchy creates the illusion that reality is indeed "an interior essence" just as gender itself; this illusion is "maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (ibid 136).

In "The Company of Wolves" Carter offers an alternative against the 'obligatory frames of reproductive heterosexuality' imposed by patriarchy by transforming one-dimensional characters that are strictly categorized either as active male or passive female into three-dimensional characters that transcend such categorizations. Little Red Cap in the Grimms' version is a flat character that becomes a caricature of "good", virtuous and innocent girl having no authentic identity and space for sexuality whereas in Carter's version she is converted into an innocent yet knowing girl who is reaching her sexual maturity: "Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month." (Carter, "Company" 133). As opposed to the traditional version avoiding to touch upon female sexuality, Carter's rewriting foregrounds Red Riding Hood's virginity and upcoming sexuality, emphasizing that "[s]he stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver" (ibid 133). Unlike the Grimms' Little Red Cap, she is a fearless and "strong-minded child" (ibid 132) insisting on being the agent of her own life: she is the one who wants to visit her Grandmother on Christmas Eve whereas the Grimms' Red Cap is *ordered* to pay a visit by her mother; she strays from her path not because the wolf in the guise of a young hunter persuades but because she is volunteer to lose the bet she has made with the young man only to receive a kiss whereas the Grimms' Red Cap is *persuaded to* change her route by the wolf that suggests her to pick flowers for her grandmother; she becomes "nobody's meat" at the end of the story unlike Red Cap who is *eaten* by the wolf and then *rescued* by the hunter.

Carter's three-dimensional characterization is, likewise, applied to the description of the wolf. Whereas the wolf in "Little Red Cap" is simply a metaphor for "the evil" with which one will be punished unless s/he does not conform to the ideals of the society, it becomes a metonymic extension of patriarchy in Carter's version. At the very beginning of the story, a descriptive essay is given on the wolf: "The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he's as cunning as he is ferocious; once he's had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do. [...] Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems" (ibid 129-130). Carter, before presenting the story of Little Red Riding Hood in her demythologizing rewriting, provides us with various myths to depict an image of the wolf as dangerous, fearful and powerful, which resonates with the patriarchal binaries associated with man. Yet, this image of authority/phallus is soon deconstructed through the introduction of Red Riding Hood who is utterly unconventional and remarkably assertive. Carter displays forest as an unknown territory occupied by wolves in which women are not allowed to enter, associating it with perils and evils:

You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are. Step between the portals of the great pines where the shaggy branches tangle about you, trapping the unwary traveller in nets as if the vegetation itself were in a plot with the wolves who live there, as though the wicked trees go fishing on behalf of their friends--step between the gateposts of the forest with the greatest trepidation and infinite precautions, for if you stray from the path for one instant, the wolves will eat you. They are grey as famine, they are as unkind as plague (ibid 130).

Yet, Red Riding Hood on the eve of her sexual maturity is exceedingly keen on discovering not only unknown territory of wolves but also the unknown territory of her sexual identity, desiring to be no more a "closed system": "She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing" (ibid 133). Through the characterization of Red Riding Hood who carves herself female sexual agency. Carter apparently juxtaposes myths about female sexuality. Accordingly, when this "strong-minded" girl meets the wolf in the guise of a young handsome hunter in the forest, she does not fear, rather is attracted to his good looks, which leads her to accept to bet with him. Blushing with the hope of receiving a kiss from this young man, she intentionally loses the bet: "[S]he wanted to dawdle on her way to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager" (ibid 135). Likewise, seeing a wolf in her grandmother's bed slyly waiting to eat her makes her not "fear and flee", but "burst out laughing", knowing that she is "nobody's meat" (ibid 138). Rather than being eaten by the wolf at the end of the story, thus, she courageously rips his shirt, burns it in the flames and tames him by putting his head onto her lap, sleeping peacefully with him in the bed. As Margaret Atwood delicately explains,

As with all of Carter's would-be steaks and chops, this 'wise child' wins the herbivore-carnivore contest by refusing fear, by taking matters into her own hands, by refusing to allow herself to be defined as somebody's meat, and by 'freely' learning to – if not run with the tigers – at least lie down with them. Whether she has become more wolf-like is anybody's guess (130).

As Atwood remarks, Carter's Red Riding Hood, having her own female sexual agency, changes the patriarchy's determination of her destiny by being the agent of her own body and life. Carter, hence, reverses the predator-prey binary paradigm in such a way that the prey becomes the predator, which results in the redistribution of power, handed over from the wolf-man to wolf-girl. This is achieved primarily through Carter's hybridization of her protagonist by releasing the beast within her, which enables her to transgress all the gender and sexual boundaries and move from the object of male desire into the agent of her own desire.

In "The Company of Wolves", Carter not only challenges the phallogocentric definitions of gender and sexuality but also eradicates the very notion of nuclear family that is one of the steady institutions of patriarchy. In the Grimms' version of Little Red Riding Hood, family ties are strictly strengthened and foregrounded in order to ensure the continuation of patriarchy. In "Little Red Cap" while mother figure functions as a mediator to remind the importance of familial bonds by sending her daughter to visit her grandmother and take her some cake and wine so that she will get better, father figure serves as the representative of patriarchy, playing the role of the savior by rescuing the innocent girl from the evil, the wolf's stomach. Ironically, however, the nuclear family dissolves with the annihilation of the father figure. Thus, the authority endowed to father is automatically transferred to mother: When Red Riding Hood insists on visiting her grandmother by going off the wood, ensuring that wild beasts cannot harm her, it is her mother who lets her go: "Her father might forbid her, if he were home, but he is away in the forest, gathering wood, and her mother cannot deny her" (Carter, "Company" 133). Carter guarantees the bankruptcy of nuclear family with the murder of the grandmother who, as a bearer of patriarchy, acknowledges the phallus of the wolf before being gobbled by looking at his genitalia and uttering "Ah! huge" (ibid 136). Moreover, she does not permit the revival of a nuclear family, patriarchy in the widest sense, by not allowing the father figure to integrate into the story in the role of a savior, rather she assigns Red Riding Hood as her own savior.

Evidently, Carter demythologizes the traditional fairy tale by deconstructing the patriarchal binaries, reversing the prey-predator dichotomy, foregrounding the victim's point of view and replacing one-dimensional archetypal characters with highly-developed round characters upon whose insights she sheds lights. Her rewriting, furthermore, indirectly modulates the position and the response of the reader. Traditional fairy tales drive the reader into passivity by presenting events from the perspective of the omniscient narrator, which depicts how fairy tales prevent the reader from actively participating in the story, but rather direct them to receive the message embedded in them. Regarding reading "just as creative an activity as writing" ("Notes" 69), however, Carter invites the reader to transgress boundaries together with her. As Lorna Sage avers, "[h] er narrative utopia – her idea of an idyll for the writer- is a dialogue with the

reader, a sort of deconstructive communion" (50). Thus, by writing multilayered and open-ended texts like "The Company of Wolves", she wishes her reader to probe into each layer with a delicate attention and read against the grain rather than obediently accepting whatever is offered without even questioning.

"Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified!" (892) says Helene Cixous in her enlightening article entitled "The Laugh of Medusa". Carter is, accordingly, highly aware of the fact that phallogocentrism works through binaries, which is why she attempts to de-logocentralize them in her rewritings of traditional fairytales. In "The Company of Wolves", as such, she goes beyond all patriarchal dichotomies like man/woman, predator/prey, dominant/submissive. Carter's deconstructive text successfully blurs the existing categories of subjectivity, overturns the social hierarchies to such an extent that the prey becomes the predator, the victim turns out to be empowered; in other words, power changes hands, phallisizing the little girl and de-phallisizing the wolf. Carter intentionally pushes the fairy tale genre to its very limits through this subversive and deconstructive material the pressure of which finally explodes its whole structure.

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