

# Study of Female Consciousness in Female Gothic Literature

-- A Case study of Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves*

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**Abstract:** The female characters in Gothic novels are usually the representatives of fear or even the persecuted, while Female Gothic literature aims to establish the standard of female own value. The heroines achieve self-salvation through their own wisdom and calm attitude, and finally awaken their self-consciousness to form female subjectivity. This is a challenge to the gender hierarchy and the culture of male control. The style of Female Gothic runs through Angela Carter's life of writing. She pays attention to the sufferings of female, delving into areas where other female writers have not or dare not explore, boldly and frankly addressing topics such as incest, sexual abuse, and pornography. From her point of view, female's body and desire are subjects that cannot be bypassed in feminist writing and research. Through analyzing Carter's work, *The Company of Wolves*, this paper focuses on the power of female as subversive to the established value system and the guiding role they play as constructors of a new order and has a deep thinking of female in deconstructing patriarchal centralism to construct harmonious relations between male and female. In *The Company of Wolves*, the author also creates a new Little Red Riding Hood with a rebellious spirit, but here, the little girl is more about exploiting the fighting potential contained in the female "sexual energy". The seduction of Little Red Riding Hood by a Wolf disguised as a hunter can also be directly interpreted as a sexual seduction. Carter's rewriting is to release the repressed potential desire of the female subject in the traditional fairy tale, so as to break the traditional pattern of gender relations. For a long time, female have grown up under the discipline of male power, in a position of oppression and constraint, being taught to restrain their desires, learn to protect themselves and be a good girl, and being instilled with the idea that "it is their natural duty to bear and raise children and do a good job at home". Female are bound by the "feminine virtues" of self-sacrifice, obedience and docility, while their individual needs and desires are denied and hidden. Carter's new Red Riding Hood is not bound by moral norms, but boldly follows her own desires, using "sex" as a tool to gain a new life, so that sexual liberation is achieved and sexual reconciliation with men is completed. Female's self-consciousness and subjectivity are realized in this process.

**Keywords:** Angela Carter, *The Company of Wolves*, Female subjectivity consciousness, Female sexual liberation.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Brief Introduction of Angela Carter

Angela Olive Carter (1940-1992) is one of the most original and controversial female writers in contemporary British literature. She is a novelist, journalist, playwright, critic, essayist, and recipient of the Blake Memorial Prize, Maugham Prize, and many other literary awards. In 26 years of writing career, Carter left nine novels, four short stories, and three literary criticism monographs and a lot of scripts, essays, reports, communication, poetry. In addition, she has always been dedicated to the folklore and fairy tales of the compilation and translation, the novels have been adapted for radio film or many times and stage. Carter's works have a prominent personal style, with Gothic style, Latin American magic realism, French surrealism, feminism, fables, fairy tales, science fiction and other elements. Michael Wood, a British critic, compared her to Marquez and Nabokov in his book *The Silent Child: Contemporary Fiction*, and described her as "the Salman of women writers, the Italo Calvino of England" (179). Although she does not have the huge income of some of the best-selling writers of her time, she is still an outstanding writer who has achieved worldwide fame.

Angela Carter, also known as Stark, was born in the southern English town of Eastbourne in 1940 and moved

north to live with her grandmother in rural South Yorkshire. The grandmother's ability to tell folktales led to Carter's interest in fairy tales and folklore from an early age. As a teenager in high school, Ms. Carter showed a talent for literature. By her teens, she was able to mix ancient Greek and Egyptian allusions into poetry and prose, and the idea of adapting the classics had begun to sprout. Carter followed his father to work as a journalist at Croydon Advertise and studied English literature at Bristol University, specializing in medieval literature. During this period, Carter was absorbed in psychology, anthropology, social sciences, and had a fondness for Greek mythology and biblical literature. In fact, both his experience as a journalist and his study of medieval literature have subtly influenced Carter's subsequent literary creation.

Carter began to write novels in the 1960s, and her whole career can be divided into three stages: early, middle and late period. In the 1960s, the beginning of Carter becoming a famous British writer. In the initial stage of writing, due to the influence of marriage change and the second wave of feminism, as well as her preference for Gothic literature, so that the "death, destruction and madness" was the theme of her works in this stage. In her twenties, she published four books, including the *Bristow Trilogy: Shadow Dance* (1966), *Several Perceptions* (1968), the first two parts of *Love* (1971),

and *Heroes and Villains* (1969). Carter considered the early *Bristow Trilogy* to be “about learning how to write” and that she “wanted to establish a personal style of writing that was full of imagery and various writing techniques”. Her efforts soon paid off. Her novel *Magic Toyshop* (1967) won her first literary award, the John Prize, and she pioneered a distinctly English style of magical realism with a feminine touch. In 1968, *Several Perceptions* won the Somerset Maugham Prize, and with the money, Carter left her broken marriage behind and left for Japan.

It is the short story that has become iconic in Carter’s life and has earned her the most acclaim. In Carter’s short stories, many of her works are bold rewrites of some of the famous classic European fairy tales. According to her point of view, because traditional Western fairy tales are subject to the social morality under the patriarchal rule, they are all deeply male values and become the product of the patriarchal culture. In these fairy tales, the female image is seriously distorted and marginalized. From this, Carter concludes that it is especially important to expose the deception of these fairy tales on women and to reconstruct the rich and true image of women. Carter’s rewriting of the traditional fairy tale can be said to be the great achievement of her life’s work.

The second stage of Carter’s creation began with three years of living in Japan, which was also the most vigorous and successful of her three years. When Carter first arrived in Japan, the language barrier forced her to understand things through careful observation. She documented the sexual deviance of Japanese entertainment culture, and living in a close relationship with a Japanese man made her reassess gender issues. A mysterious East like Japan, far removed from Western cultural traditions, “gave her a way of looking at her own culture and strengthened her ability to create the strange from the familiar things” (Zheng 532). Carter sees the world from the perspective of an outsider, she understands the differences of the world, and the strong erotic culture of Japan which stimulating and challenging her imagination, where Carter “learns what it is to be a woman and becomes radicalized” (Carter 28). The influence of Japanese culture on Carter has left its mark in her works. In the creation, she makes full use of her imagination. The setting of the novel changed from the early realistic society to the post-modern environment lacking concrete time and space.

After the trip to Japan, Carter traveled to the United States, Europe, Australia and other places, teaching and lecturing at a number of universities. The period from the early 1980s to Carter’s death in 1992 was her final period of writing. Her major works included the James Tait Black Award-winning novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984), the short story collection *Black Venus* (1985), There are also two collections of critical essays, *No Sanctity: An Anthology of Works* (1982), *The Expurgation Mantra* (1992), and the *Wise Children* (1991), the author’s last full-length novel, published before her death. The 1980s was the most mature and philosophic stage of Carter’s creation. No matter the narrative style or the portrayal of characters pushed to the extreme of imagination as always. Under the conservative forces in the mainstream of British literature, the author always focused on the survival mode of women and the problem of sexual relations. Carter died of cancer in 1992.

*The Company of Wolves* is one of Carter’s representative rewrites. This short story is particularly notable for its subversive rewriting of the classic fairy tale *Little Red Riding*

*Hood* and its depiction of the story's desolate world. Her adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Company of Wolves*, contains a lot of feminist ideas and a lot of her writing skills in it. *The Company of Wolves* is a representative work of her perfect fusion of realistic traditional writing and modern consciousness, the work has the style of Gothic novels and contains elements of magic realism. It integrates the perspective of feminism and the social reality of that time into it. It is a very rich and worthy work for us to have a further study.

## 1.2. Literature Review

Different scholars hold different point of views on the term “Female Gothic”. Ellen Moers was the scholar who first used the term ‘Female Gothic’ in *Literary Women* (1976), she thought that it was easily defined as ‘the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called “the Gothic (90).”’ While Moers view was too essentializing (Andrew, Diana 1).

Diane Long Hoeveler argued in *Gothic Feminism: The heroines of Gothic novels, masquerade as blameless victims of a corrupt and oppressive patriarchal society while utilizing passive-aggressive and masochistic strategies to triumph over that system. This ideology of ‘female power through pretended and staged weakness’ is what Hoeveler calls ‘gothic feminism’ (7).*

For some scholars, Female Gothic is not just associated with the novel is illustrated by *Uncanny Stories: the ghost story as Female Gothic* in which Diana Wallace explores nineteenth-century ghost stories written by Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Braddon or Angela Carter that their tales explore how a patriarchal culture represses images of the maternal. Such as Carter’s rewrite fairy tales, and according to her view, traditional fairy tales maintain and continue the dominant values in patriarchal society when they serve as the ideological control machine of patriarchal society. They are powerful tools to restrain and suppress children, especially girls. These concepts tame children’s natural instinct resistance into obedience through indoctrination (Wang, Huang 92).

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, the further analysis of women’s own psychology in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Cuba in 1979 expanded the study of women’s works, and made Female Gothic take on a stronger female ideology, so that female Gothic became a “genre expressing women’s inner secret struggle, fantasy and fear” (Elaine 127). Different from the traditional Gothic, the Female Gothic seems to pay more attention on the inner fear of heroine, instead of the external fear described by the male authors. Such as the novels completed by female authors, Northanger Abbey, Jane Eyre and *Wuthering Heights*, which expressing the hardships of female survival, inner anxiety and struggle.

Foreign research on Carter is very extensive, involving the study of erotic depiction, narrative skills, intertextuality and revelry in her novels, which can be roughly divided into the following three categories: Study of erotic themes; a study of rewritten fairy tales; and image studies.

Carter’s literary creation of rewriting fairy tales has attracted the attention of many researchers. Her short story collection, *The Blood Chamber and Other Stories*, is one of her representative works, which contains the author’s new fairy tales adapted from the Grimm brothers and Perot’s fairy tales. According to the novella of the same name, *The*

*Chamber of Blood*, Melia Markinen believes that it reveals the subversive power of Female Libido, while Mary Caesar focuses on analyzing Carter's intertextual technique and the use of gender symbols in this novel, and believes that Carter reveals different problems of sexual relations in modern society through fairy tales. Patricia Block gives Carter high praise for rewriting the fairy tale. She analyzes the female characters' performance in the face of the male wolf, tiger and lion, and points out that Carter has replaced the passive characters accepted in the previous conversations with more subjective female characters. However, this attempt to rewrite has also been criticized by some researchers. Patricia Dunkel and Avis Lu Allen have argued that Carter is simply repeating patriarchal discourse in another way, suggesting that her feminism is so radical that the novel is no longer a tool for criticizing patriarchal ideology.

For our domestic study, the scholar Huang Jie and Wang Labao (91-98) studied the new tales of Angela Carter, and the feminism new tales on the one hand, for the myth of masculine male and goddess mother hidden in traditional fairy tales has been deeply exposed and criticized. On the other hand, several distinct images have pointed out the direction for women to rebuild their subjectivity and then seek love based on gender equality.

In conclusion, the study of Angela Carter in the aspect of rewritten tales, especially the study of female subjectivity consciousness abroad and domestic is popular and necessary. Though some scholar comments Angela Carter's works are too radical to be used as a tool for criticizing patriarchal ideology, her works are meaningful for us to make a further study in the aspect of female subjectivity consciousness in sexuality liberation to some extent.

This essay mainly talks about the female consciousness contains in the female gothic literature, taking Carter's short story as an example to illustrate the characteristics of female gothic in the aspects of story plot and heroine images as well as exploring the female subjectivity and the liberation of the sexuality of female through analyzing the text in details, which expressing a view of fighting against patriarchal society base on the previous study.

## **2. The Characteristics of Female Gothic in The Company of Wolves**

### **2.1. The Unique Plot of Female Gothic Work**

The typical plot of a Gothic novel is that a weak woman falls into the grip of a villain and is rescued from the clutches of a heroic man. It can be seen that there are basically three types of characters in Gothic novels. One is the villain; The second is the deliverer; The third is the saved. It can be seen from the plot that the female character is an indispensable link in the novel. But women are in a passive position, the object of persecution, the object of salvation. The battle between the male villain and the male rescuer is the core part in the novel.

Men are strong, dominant, villains who persecute women at will and heroes who rescue weak women. The functions of female characters in female Gothic novels have changed. Women portrayed by female writers no longer assume the role of the rescued, but become the leading force, become the spiritual support of men, and even become the salvation of men.

Angela Carter is a prominent female writer, her works are full of female consciousness that reversing the traditional

gothic plot. In terms of plot and ending, *The Company of Wolves* is quite different from the original story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In order to express her feminist ideas, the author make subversive changes to the story. Angela Carter questioned and resisted the previous male-centered concepts. The little girl in the story survived the risks and took control of her own destiny through her own resourcefulness and bravery.

In the first part of the work, the author depicts the environment where the story takes place, rendering a scary atmosphere. For example, the description of the Wolf's eyes: "shine like candle flames, yellowish, reddish", "they gleam a cold and unnatural green, a mineral, a piercing color (Carter 97)", these descriptions fully motivate reader's vision, hearing and touch, so that the reader has a sense of being on the scene.

In the second part of the story, the little girl wants to go to her grandmother's house, but her father is not at home and her mother does not agree to go alone for fear of her safety. She is not afraid of the danger and insists on going to see her grandmother alone. The little girl's bravery is not blind, she is well prepared, carrying a knife with her for protection and food for her grandmother and set out. The little girl remembers not to leave the road, so that it would be safer to go. But the cunning wolf disguises himself as a pretty young man, and the young man makes a suggestion in order to lure the little girl to take the path, he can get a kiss from the girl if he reached the grandmother's house first. The little girl is not fooled and she wants the handsome young to arrive first, and at the rest of the story is that the young man arrives first and eats the girl's grandma. When the little girl arrives at her grandmother's house, she finds that the wolf is waiting for her. In the critical moment, the little girl does not panic, but is very calm, and successfully saved herself.

The little girl's entry into the forest can be seen as her entry into the primitive wilderness and return to her nature. It is in this primitive environment that she learns and masters some of the skills needed to be an ideal representative, such as justice, courage and accurate judgment. In the process of growing up, the little girl meets the young man, and she accepts the compass given by the young man. This plot lays a foundation for her to deal with the Wolf, and lays the groundwork for the subsequent plot development. The little girl does not suffer passively in the face of great danger, but takes the initiative to fight against, with her own wisdom to save herself. This plot expresses the rebellion against the strong male power. She burns the werewolf's clothes so that he can no longer turn into a wolf, which eventually prompts the new birth of the wolf. The whole process gradually infiltrates the author's feminist idea into the plot of the story and makes the little girl show her brave, resourceful and fearless side. In the development process of this story, we can clearly see the conflict between male and female. The image of the little girl jumps out of the traditional female image and values, and makes full use of what she learns in the forest to save herself, taking control of her own life.

### **2.2. The Unique Images of Heroine in Female Gothic Work**

American female literary critic Elaine Showalter (1985) quoted Gerda Lerner's words when talking about female culture: The central problem of the study of female culture is, what will history look like if it is arranged from the

perspective of women and with women's values? Angela Carter's deconstruction and rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood* can be regarded as an attempt to analyze the historical text from the perspective of women with women's values. In *The Company of Wolves*, the traditional images of women as passive and weak is challenged. In *Little Red Riding Hood*, Little Red Riding Hood is a completely passive character: her mother lets her go out; her mother does not let her run around; she is tricked by the wolf; eaten by the wolf; and saved by the hunter.

Angela Carter's little girl is different. She has an independent personality. For example, the little girl went to visit her old grandmother on her own initiative, not at her mother's behest. Though pure and innocent, the little girl was not ignorant like Little Red Riding Hood; She knows what wolves are, and she's armed herself with a dagger. It shows both courage and the common sense to carry a weapon of self-defense. After seeing through the Wolf's disguise, she was not frightened by the Wolf, but with courage and wisdom to save themselves. It is worth noting that the author does not make a simple and complete denial of the proposition that "women are weak".

Angela Carter writes at length about the innocence of the young girl, and specifically identifies the virgin's innocence as her safeguard. The girl still retained the relatively simple and weak side of the female: in the great forest of danger, she was an object of attack, and could be swallowed up at any time. She was not as strong or experienced as the Wolf disguised as a hunter, so she did not see through the Wolf's disguise and gave him her self-defense weapon. According to the traditional thinking, the girl can only rely on outside help to avoid being eaten by the Wolf. However, Angela Carter did not conceive the story according to conventional wisdom. She let the little girl take control of her own fate, and finally managed to escape. What we see in the story is not a passive Little Red Riding Hood, nor a "strong woman" who is stronger than a Wolf, but a new woman who has mastered her own destiny, knows how to protect herself, and is a new image of female.

### 3. The Female Consciousness in The Company of Wolves

#### 3.1. The Subjectivity Consciousness of Heroine

For Beauvoir, "women are not born, but rather becomes. (301)" This fate also falls on women in traditional Western fairy tales. For Carter, women in the patriarchal society suffer from double oppression. They either fall prey to the wolves - to the never-ending lust of men --- or are "saved" by God. However, men are usually God (Xiong 154), the process of men saving women is also a process of men denying women the right to seek self-awareness or subjectivity. In this situation, the image of women is gradually distorted and marginalized, this explains why the first thing women do is to abandon tradition in pain and pride. Beauvoir insisted that women could make the same choices as men and thus improve themselves. Women need to transcend the "ego" they used to follow to reach a "superego" where they can achieve freedom.

In *The Company of Wolves*, Angela Carter portrays and praises a young girl who transcends the world and represents a new era of womanhood. Little Red Riding Hood is described as a self-reliant, rebellious little girl. This Red

Riding Hood is very different from the original Red Riding Hood, she is wise and independent. Knowing the danger of the wolves in the forest, she was still determined to go through the forest. She had already made up her mind, and neither her mother's obstruction nor her father's advice could stop her.

Traditionally, women have either waited for the "hunter" to save them or accepted their fate without question or resistance, but in Carter's *The Company of Wolves*, you don't see these negative views anymore. When she first fell into the trap of the werewolf, she was so scared that she was trembling all over, and then she understood that "fear is not useful" and then "stopped being afraid". Instead of waiting passively for her fate to come down or childishly hoping that some hunter or God will save her, as women used to do, she saves herself through her composure, calmness and wisdom. She never flinched, not even when the werewolves said he were going to eat her. She knew that only carnal desire could appease the needs of the werewolf, so by sacrificing her virginity she took fate firmly into her own hands. When grandmother's bones made a loud noise under the bed, she did not care it at all.

She stripped off the werewolf's clothes and threw them into the fire because she knew that if she burned the werewolf's clothes, he would be cursed forever. The werewolf's clothes were burned by Little Red Riding Hood, and he could never be transformed into a person again, so Little Red Riding Hood's successful subduing of the werewolf verified the correctness of her choice and strategy.

Thus, the reason why the girl is able to overcome the werewolf is that she boldly "breaks through the traditional social concept and the concept of women" (Zhang 44). Therefore, in a male-dominated society, women must complete the transformation from passive to active identity in order to gain the wisdom of survival and achieve subjectivity consciousness.

To emphasize the need for women to fight for personal independence, Carter shifts the setting from a fairy tale world to a more natural and realistic one. In this world, when women are in danger, there is no God or hunter to save them. The only way to survive is to fight with the "wolves" who represent men in disguise and gain the wisdom to survive.

#### 3.2. The Liberation of Heroine's Sexuality

In terms of morality, Angela Carter puts herself in the position of women and puts forward a view that is diametrically opposed to the basic moral preaching of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In male-centered societies, morality is in many ways directed toward women, which can be called the "double standard". Virginity is often reserved for women and not for men.

It is not unusual for men take away others' virginity, while women who are forced to lose their virginity are. The reason why Little Red Riding Hood was closed to death was that she had run into the forest without permission, as is clearly stated at the end of the story. If she had stayed at the path, there would have been no accident to happen.

The critic Jack Zipes has argued that the story is entirely the product of male morality, so that the death of Little Red Riding Hood can be said to have been self-deserved (Alexander 98). In her new story, Angela Carter tries to show that socially accepted norms of behavior and morality are not a panacea against evil, especially for women. The little girl in the story did not leave the path, but the Wolf in a different

guise ran up the path.

It is ironic that the wolf eats the grandmother, who is bound by traditional moral values and believes that belief in God is all that is needed to avoid disasters. The reason why the little girl can escape from the danger is precisely because the young and innocent girl is not aware of the traditional moral constraints on women, she makes the choice of companionship with the wolf by instinct. Although according to the traditional morality, the young girl loses rather than wins, just for she loses her virginity.

But is the idea that losing one's virginity is the ultimate shame something that women should accept unconditionally? Angela Carter's answer is clearly no. Women are masters of their own fate, and naturally masters of their chastity. It may be a rebellious opportunism in the eyes of traditional defenders, but in Angela Carter's writing, it is a successful act of women liberating themselves and taking control of their own destiny. Angela Carter is announcing a new generation of women breaking with traditional notions of chastity.

The girl and the Wolf are not in absolute opposition, in other words, the female and the male are not in complete opposition. The girl did not kill the Wolf, but tamed the Wolf with the innocence and fearlessness of a virgin, which on the one hand expresses the sexual liberation of women, on the other hand, expresses the sexual reconciliation between male and female.

#### 4. Conclusion

Gothic novels written by female writers often have the responsibility of speaking for themselves. In a social reality where there is a lack of voice, where the female gender is defined as weak, and where feminism is awakening, the female author dares to reflect on what is not saying before, acknowledges the irrational dimension of human nature, and tries to develop a new vision beyond the emotions sanctioned by social norms, rational rulings, and customary institutions. Through the excavation of self-consciousness, female achieves emotional and physical liberation, expands the scope of reality and its impact on others, enriches the connotation of feminism, and ultimately opens up a great space for feminist literature.

The female writers apply the Gothic genre for reference, and create the unique female characters and the unique plot in the Female Gothic. The female characters in Female Gothic are no longer the weak characters waiting for salvation in male Gothic works, but seek self-salvation. In the process of self-salvation, they realize the awakening of self-consciousness and the enhancement of subjectivity consciousness.

By rewriting *Little Red Riding Hood*, Angela Carter overturns the evaluation of female and the attitude of weakening female images, which contains in the original work. Carter challenges the male-centered society and the traditional thought, and presents the image of women in the new era. The new fairy tale *The Company of Wolves* seems to tell us that female seek not to be enemies of the "Wolf" (male), but "companions of the Wolf"; female are not demanding domination upon male, but equal rights with men. In the process of pursuing gender equality, instead of sacrificing women's characteristics to adapt to the male-centered society,

it is better to make full use of female's own advantages to make the society more reasonable and better.

Little Red Riding Hood in *The Company of Wolves* overturns the traditional dichotomy. She boldly pursues sexual indulgence and overcomes wolf with carnal desire. She believes that the only way to appease the carnivore is with carnal desire, and finally achieves reconciliation between the sexes and enjoys the tender embrace of the werewolf, which is the sense of equal rights.

In a word, female gothic is a literary theme to make scholars have a further study on feminism. Angela Carter, as a prominent female gothic writer, plays an important role for the awaking of female subjectivity consciousness. In the process of analyzing Carter's rewritten tales, a new female image and plot presents in her words, and the condition between male and female is not dual opposition, but live with each other in the aspects of physical and psychological harmoniously.

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