



**Ress Congress 6 (27 November 2022) Special Issue, p.247-257**

**Article Information**

**✍ Article Type:** *Research Article*

**✍ This article was checked by iThenticate.**

**✍ A special issue of the proceedings of the Sixth International  
Conference on Human Sciences (Ress 6)**

**Article History:**  
*Received*  
25/12/2022  
*Received in revised*  
*form*  
30/12/2022  
*Available online*  
20/01/2023

## **SHEHRAZADE'S LEGACY: FEMICIDAL FEARS IN ANGELA CARTER'S FICTION**

**Zaid Ibrahim Ismael<sup>1</sup>**  
**Sabah Atallah Khalifa Ali<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Literature often explores violence and crime and deals with the social and psychological motives that drive murderers to commit homicidal acts. Domestic violence is not excepted from the authors' list of choice in their examination of family relations and the trauma that results from vicious acts of violence. In modern and contemporary times, female novelists, like Angela Carter, A. S. Byatt, and Margaret Atwood, focus on this omnipresent phobia in women's lives. This research deals with Angela Carter's rewriting of traditional folktales in an attempt to expose and condemn the patriarchal society that abuses women, both physically and psychologically. It focuses on two representative short stories: "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Erlking" (both published in 1979), stories that recount the experience of Bluebeard's brides and the female victims of the mythical diabolical Erlking and shows how their experience echoes the suffering of their eastern counterpart, Shehrazade.

**Keywords:** Bluebeard, Carter, Erlking, homicide, Shehrazade, violence, women.

### **1. Introduction**

In her book, *Femicidal Fears* (2001, 59), Helen Meyers explores the phobia some female characters suffer from in contemporary novels that enact spousal violence and wife-killing. Her insightful study offers a lens through which to investigate the fears women experience in fiction.

<sup>1</sup> Inst. Ph.D. A freelance researcher.

<sup>2</sup> Prof. College of Education- Ibn Rushd/ Baghdad University, [sabah.atallah@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:sabah.atallah@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq).

It shows how women's lives, in the past or the present, are controlled by a male-dominated system which forces women to conform within the social norms and exacts severe punishment for non-conformist "female victims" (Meyers 2001, 59).

Similarly, feminist scholars, Diana E. H. Russell and Roberta A. Harmes (1976, 13-14) believe that women are victims of sexism and misogyny since uxoricide and honour killing are committed by violent male partners only because their victims "are female[s]". Women are not only targeted as sexual objects, but they are also abused, both verbally and physically, and are even killed when showing any sign of defiance or transgression. The home, instead of being a haven, where women expect to be safe and respected, is rendered into a gothic site or a prison in which they are confined, abused and even murdered (See Dawson and Gartner 1998, 380).

Known for her talent in rewriting traditional European myths and folktales, British author Angela Carter makes use of these tales as fundamental means to explore her feminist ideas. Alison Lee (1997, ix) points out that Carter's fiction mainly deals with "the position of women in literature, in history, and in the world, and her corpus provides a large number of perspectives from which to see women and from which women may see themselves". Published in 1979, a time when women were struggling to gain social and political rights, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, in which "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Erlking" are included, is a rewriting of traditional fairy tales. In it, she presents strong female characters who are aware of the hardships that afflict women in a male-dominated society. Her heroines, like Sleeping Beauty and Little Red Riding Hood among others, are not passive victims, waiting for male rescuers to save them from their predicaments. They survive thanks to their adventurous and powerful characters or through the female bonds they develop in their man-centred world.

Carter's stories address a wider audience than the original fairy tales were addressing, i.e., they are not retold to entertain children, but are meant for an adult reading public, mainly because they focus on sexual issues and the relationship between the sexes. Mary Kaiser (1994, 36) states that "In *The Bloody Chamber*...Carter deconstructs the underlying assumptions of the 'official' fairy tale: that fairy tales are...meant exclusively for an audience of children, and that fairy tales present an idealized, fantastic world unrelated to the contingencies of real life".

This study shows how the gothic experience of Carter's female characters and their struggle for survival mirror those of traditional eastern women, especially Shehrazade and her struggle to survive as the last wife of the misogynic, homicidal King Shahryar. Unlike Shahryar's previous ill-fated wives, Shehrazade is praised for her unlimited knowledge and good education, things that she employs in curing the king of his jealousy complex which he develops in the aftermath of his discovery of his first wife's infidelity. Her highbrow knowledge, which was unprecedented for a woman during her time, assists her in her endeavours to survive the fearful nights with her bloody husband:

She had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of bygone men and things; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred. (Burton 2015, 12)

Unlike the other unfortunate wives of the king, Shehrazade is able to prolong her imminent fate, using storytelling as a means of survival and working like a psychiatrist by using her extended knowledge in the history and sociology of the ancient civilisations to show the king, through her endless fantastic tales which she recounts night after night, that not all women are unfaithful and that loyalty and dishonesty are part of human nature and are not limited to women.

## **2. The Dilemma Bluebeard's Brides: "The Bloody Chamber"**

### **2.1 Bluebeard's Legacy**

Bluebeard is a psychopath and a serial killer in fairy tales, who is often referred to as a gothic villain in western culture. He is noted for mercilessly killing his brides, shortly after their weddings, simply because they disobey his orders, which he views as a challenge to his patriarchal authority. His huge castle and his big fortune blind his female victims to his true sadistic nature and even make them overlook his hideous face and his weird blue beard.

Deeply rooted in the French lore, the most well-known version of Bluebeard's story was published in 1697, written by the French writer Charles Perrault (1628-1703). The tale focuses on the trials of Bluebeard's last wife. When he proposes to her, she and her sisters are terrified. Still, she has to accept his offer of marriage because of his social position as a wealthy nobleman. Bluebeard's neighbours know that his former wives mysteriously disappeared and that the man has a dark secret to hide in his lonely mansion in the countryside.

Few days after their marriage, Bluebeard informs his wife that he has to leave for days to finish some business in town. He gives her the keys to all the rooms in his lavish mansion and tells her that she can enter all the rooms, but firmly warns her that she cannot open a private chamber. Unable to resist the temptation and the curiosity to find out why her husband does not want her to open the room, Mrs. Bluebeard disobeys her husband only to find the murdered bodies of the former wives impaled on the walls with their blood flooding the whole chamber. Terrified, she drops the key into the blood, and fails to clean this stained, telltale, magical key, which condemns her to face her terrible husband with the truth of her disobedience of his ultimatum. As she asks her enraged husband to give her a time to pray before he kills her, Mrs. Bluebeard is rescued by her brothers who arrive in neck of time to save her. Bluebeard is killed and his surviving wife inherits his fortune and lives happily with her siblings.

The story has often been viewed as an allegory of females' transgressive acts, when they attempt to defy the established patriarchal order. Many moralist commentators on the fairy tale read Bluebeard's sadistic and weird behaviour as representing any man's desire to prevent his wife from gaining forbidden sexual knowledge, finding in the attempt of Bluebeard's wives to explore the forbidden room a desire to attain sexual experience. Feminists view this gothic tale differently. They believe that Bluebeard's wives are rebellious females, who refuse to blindly obey the rules of the patriarchal society and attempt to defy the social order. They also find in Bluebeard's horrific crimes an evidence of the cruelty of the man-centred world in which women are marginalised, abused, and even murdered savagely (Snodgrass 2006, 68).

The key in the tale is, thus, a symbol of women's need for knowledge as a means of survival in similar circumstances. Bluebeard is not killing his wives because he wants to protect himself from the authorities as his wives unfold his secrets. This is evident in the fact that his first wife

was killed without even finding a dead body in his secret chamber. The wives are obviously murdered for no other reason but disobeying their husband's order.

Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a rewriting of this fairy tale. While previous studies shed light on this iconic sadistic figure as a symbol of anxiety for women, the critical community overlooks evaluating the story in relation to Bluebeard's eastern counterpart, King Shahryar. This research aims at investigating the image of the homicidal husband and his victims and the surviving wife's struggle to evade a tragic fate similar to that of her ill-fated predecessors.

## 2.2 Carter's Adaptation of the Bluebeard Tale

Like the traditional Bluebeard tale, "The Bloody Chamber" opens with the marriage of the innocent last bride and her movement into the infamous, yet lavish, mansion of the eccentric Bluebeard. The story is set in modern times and emphasises the heroine's, Bluebeard's last bride, search for knowledge in the gothic castle of her husband. Before she is taken there, the new bride expresses her anxiety over the prospects of her marriage. She contemplates the wisdom of marrying a man who is older, richer and socially superior to her, who has already married three women who disappeared mysteriously. Her motives behind the marriage, as in the original fairy tale, are "wealth, power and mystery" (Avis Lewallen 1988, 146). In her non-fiction, entitled *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter illustrates that the archetypal passive female and the dominant and aggressive male are essentially "determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men" (1978, 154). Thus, the seventeen-year-old heroine has no other choice but to frame her life within this traditional gender role by marrying a rich man, a Marquis, and settling as a dependent wife, as she explains in her first-person voice:

This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth, his scent of Russian leather—all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one single twinge of regret for the world of tartines and maman that now receded from me as if drawn away on string, like a child's toy. (Carter 2006, 7)

When she arrives in the isolated mansion, the new Mrs. Bluebeard is warned by her husband not to be curious and to avoid reading the books in the library. Obviously, the homicidal husband wants to keep his wives/victims ignorant and confined by the patriarchal yoke. When he leaves the house, pretending that he has some urgent business in town, Bluebeard gives his wife the keys of the palace and tells her that she can explore the place freely, but orders her to avoid entering one forbidden room. His intention, as in the original version of the tale, is to test his wife's obedience to his orders, which is also an examination of her fidelity.

Bluebeard knows how to arouse his wife's "dark newborn curiosity" by preventing her from entering his forbidden room, saying: "Every man must have one secret" (Carter 2006, 18-19). This will only end in the wife's attempt to explore the secrets surrounding her husband's past. She justifies her desire to open the room, saying:

The secret of Pandora's box<sup>3</sup>; but he had given the box, himself, knowing I must learn the secret. I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at that charade of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost, as the victim loses to the executioner. (Carter 2006, 34)

The new bride fails to conceal the horror of the scene of the decayed bodies of the previous wives she finds in this chamber. She realises that "the bloody chamber is a kind of wax museum of Bluebeard's previous wives, preserved in their last moments of agony" (Kaiser 1994, 34). She fails to clean the blood from the key which has fallen on the bloody ground of the room due to her overwhelming fear. Helpless after her husband's sudden return, she does not expect a fate better than that of the other brides and she realises that she "must pay the price for her new knowledge" (Carter 2006, 34). She passively waits for her husband to come and add her to his collection of embalmed wives.

---

<sup>3</sup> In Greek mythology, before Pandora was sent into the world, people were said to live a carefree life, undisturbed by sickness, old age, and death. Pandora unwittingly opened an evil box that brought all the mischief and suffering to the human beings. As the first woman, she was accused of being the one who introduced falsehood and treachery into men's lives. Out of the box she opened streamed cruelty, hate, poverty, hunger, sickness, and pain. Although she attempted to close the box after she noticed the evil things released from it, her attempt came to no avail (Ismael & Ali 2020, 102). Obviously, Carter uses this allusion here to show how Bluebeard blames and punishes his wives for being curious, like Pandora, though he is responsible for their temptation.

Though frightened by the fatal consequences of her deed after breaking her husband's orders, she remembers the courage her mother is known for when she grew up in Indo-China. "My mother's spirit drove me on," she says (Carter 2006, 26). Her mother, she recounts, "had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I" (Carter 2006, 2).

Carter changes the main line of the story in the traditional folktale, when she makes the mother, instead of the heroine's two brothers, kill Bluebeard and save her daughter. The image of the adventurous mother riding on horseback to save her newly-wed daughter, whom she instinctively feels in danger, reinforces the author's feminist revision of this fairy tale. Ellen Cronan Rose (1983, 212) states that this "strong bond between mother and daughter," emphasises Carter's feminist theme in her fiction reworking of these "male cultural myths". Unlike Shehrazade, Mrs. Bluebeard and the other murdered brides, who fall preys to the mischievous predator, do not have the knowledge that can assist them to survive and find the effective means of dealing with these perilous situations. Though the young heroine does not survive on her own, she gains the knowledge and experience she needs in a world dominated by violent males like Bluebeard, things that she tries to deliver to other inexperienced females through her voice as a first-person narrator as she tells her story retrospectively.

### 3. Femicidal Monsters: "The Erlking"

As the name suggests, the 'Erl-king' is the 'king' of the fairies in Scandinavian (Danish) folklore. An ominous elf or goblin, in some versions of the myth, the Erlking roams the woodlands, kidnapping and killing people, especially children, who dare to enter his domain and are lost there after daytime (Leerssen 2003, 3). In "The Erlking", Carter depends on this European legend, presenting a Shehrazade-like character who resists the title malignant creature, the Erlking. This mythical monster lures innocent young females into the forest with his enchanting playing on the flute. These young damsels unconsciously follow the fantastic voice across the forest until they fall preys to this fiend. He feeds on their vitality, exploits them physically, consumes their memories and threatens their sanity and identity. As they surrender to his will, he transforms them into little birds and ensnares them in reed cages in his den in the woods.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator's journey into the woods is compared to that of Little Red Ridinghood, the young heroine of a fairy tale who is supposed to penetrate the wood to deliver food and medicine to her ill grandmother and who is seduced by a wolf to disobey her mother's orders—not to divert from the straight path of her destination. As a result Red Ridinghood falls prey to the wolf's cunning plans and is devoured by the beast, only to be saved by a courageous hunter. The allusion to this fairy tale creates suspense as it provides hints to the reader that Carter's heroine will undergo a journey not too much different from that of Red Ridinghood. It is also deceptive because initially it gives the reader the impression that the characters are stereotypes of traditional figures in fairy tales: those of the damsel-in-distress and the male-as-savior.

The immature, nameless narrator, who is described as a “perfect child of the meadows of summer,” recounts her experience as she wanders the very forest that many young females, who have mysteriously disappeared, went through, following the irresistible music coming from inside it (Carter 2006, 101). This forest is not an enticing place for a young woman; it is depicted as a dark forest where everyone, whether a man or a woman, cannot find his/her way out as the narrator explains: “It is easy to lose yourself in these woods,” and “once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety” (Carter 2006, 96). The protagonist says that it is so dark and dense that it “swallows you up” (Carter 2006, 96). “The trees,” she adds, “stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt around hopelessly for the way out” (Carter 2006, 96-97). Of this bleak atmosphere in the story, Joyce Hart (2001, 46) writes:

Carter paints a very gloomy picture of the woods, using words like ‘dour spooks,’ ‘sulphur-yellow interstices,’ ‘nicotine-stained fingers,’ and ‘russet slime’—not especially enticing images, not ones that would draw a young woman in. In fact, she portrays an environment that a young woman might walk through very quickly, if she had to walk through it at all.

Thus, everything in the woods helps creating a menacing atmosphere, which foreshadows the danger the protagonist is about to deal with when she arrives at the Erlking's residence: “There is not much in the autumn wood to make you smile,” she explains (Carter 2006, 96).



The protagonist's journey into the woods, however, is a journey towards maturity and knowledge. When she meets the Erlking, she realises that the birdsong that lures her into the woods is the Erlking's means of trapping other women/birds via playing on his magical flute. Once she sees the miserable caged birds, the protagonist senses that she is on a mission to save and free them: "As soon as I saw them I knew at once that all [the wood's] occupants had been waiting for me..." (Carter 2006, 97). Though not as homicidal as Bluebeard, he is a menacing power that challenges women's identity and turns them into little submissive beings confined in small reed cages that stand for the domestic sphere in which women live. His humanoid figure does not completely cover his beastly features since his laughter "shows his white, pointed teeth with the spittle gleaming on them" (Carter 2006, 99). His ability to tame wild animals is a sign of his supernatural power which he also exploits in controlling women.

At first, the protagonist is entangled by his charms and struggles to break free from his masculine dominance. He urges her to weave new reed baskets to trap more birds, unaware of his malicious plan to transform her into a bird and confine her with his other collection of birds. She complains of his violent physical abuse: "You sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream" (Carter 2006, 101). Gradually, she realises that the Erlking plans to do her "grievous harm" (Carter 2006, 97) and she will soon face a fate similar to that of the other transformed caged women/birds if she remains passive under the Erlking's manipulative power:

Falling as a bird would fall through the air if the Erlking tied up the winds in his handkerchief and knotted the ends together so they could not get out. Then the moving currents of the air would no longer sustain them and all the birds would fall at the imperative of gravity, as I fall down for him. (Carter 2006, 100)

At the beginning, she thinks of accepting her fate passively, telling the Erlking about her knowledge of his plan to transform her: "I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty" (Carter 2006, 103). But even if she accepts this fate, she decides to resist her victimiser and his patriarchal dominance by keeping silent in order to deprive him of the songs he desires, which, she realises, is the main reason behind his entrapment of the women/birds. She says: "I shall sit, hereafter, in my cage among the other singing birds but I—shall be dumb, from spite" (Carter 2006, 103).

Her recently gained knowledge and development helps her see the danger that the Erlking represents. This leads her to the defiant decision of strangling the monster while asleep, with a rope she makes out of his long, wild hair: “I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half dreaming, half waking, and wind them into ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up, and, softly, with hands as gentle as rain, I shall strangle him with them” (Carter 2006, 104).

Thus, Carter subverts the stereotypical mainline of the plot in fairy tales in which the female victim is rescued by a dashing male. Her protagonist is a saviour rather than a damsel-in-distress. She is similar to Shehrazade because she risks her life and is able to save the entrapped young women. But her act is more defiant since she kills the Erlking, unlike Shehrazade who cures the homicidal king and lives happily with him ever after. However, like Mrs. Bluebeard, she survives but with a mark on her neck caused by a bite of the Erlking before he perishes. This mark, which Mrs. Bluebeard in the previous story views as a stigma, is a reminder and a condemnation of the cruelty of the man-dominated world.

#### 4. Conclusion

Angela Carter’s rewriting of traditional myths is part of her feminist discourse to tell her readers that women’s experience is not different throughout history, in spite of the drastic change in the position of women in contemporary time. Her female characters are similar to their eastern sisters when compared with traditional figures like Shehrazade. This is because of the author’s emphasis on the danger of ignorance and the significance of knowledge and experience as means of survival for women.

Mrs. Bluebeard, though branded on her forehead with the key by her husband prior to his death, is able to survive. She gains a new awareness and knowledge that she can deliver to the new generations of females through her own experience with Bluebeard. Similarly, the adventurous female character in “The Erlking” uses her first-person voice to recount her hardships when she crosses a haunted forest, where she encounters the Erlking, kills him and puts an end to his malignant deeds. Carter’s reworking of these folktales is a source of enlightenment and empowerment for victimised females, whose experience echoes those of the eastern heroines depicted in Arabic folktales.

## References

- Burton, Sir Richard F. Trans. (2015). *Tales from the Arabian nights*. New York: Race Point Publishing.
- Carter, Angela. (2006). *The bloody chamber and other stories*. London: Vintage Books.
- Carter, Angela. (1978). *The sadeian woman*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Dawson, M. & Gartner, R. (1998). Differences in the characteristics of intimate femicides: the role of relationship state and relationship status. *Homicide Studies*, 2(4), 378-99. doi: [10.1177/1088767998002004003](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767998002004003)
- Hart, Joyce. (2001). Critical essay on 'the Erlking'. In Jennifer Smith (Ed.), *Short stories for students*, vol.12, (33-49). Detroit: Gale Group.
- Ismael, Zaid Ibrahim & Ali, Sabah Atallah Khalifa. (2020). Opening the box of suffering, unleashing the evils of the world: Pandora and her representation in nineteenth-century American poetry. *Journal of Language Studies*, 3(4), 100-108.
- Kaiser, Mary. (1994). Fairy tale as sexual allegory: intertextuality in Angela Carter's 'the bloody chamber'. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14(3), 30-6.
- Lee, Allison. (1997). *Angela Carter*. Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers.
- Leerssen, Joep. (2003). On the Celtic roots of a romantic theme. In Theo D'haen, Peter Liebrechts & Wim Tigges (Eds.), *Configuring romanticism: essays offered to C.C. Barfoot* (pp.1-11). Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Lewallen, Avis. (1988). Wayward girls but wicked women? female sexuality in Angela Carter's 'the bloody chamber'. In Gary Day & Clive Bloom (Eds.), *Perspectives in pornography: sexuality in film and literature* (pp. 144-57). New York: Macmillan Press.
- Meyers, Helene. (2001). *Femicidal fears: narratives of the female gothic experience*. New York: SUNY.
- Rose, Ellen Cronan. (1983). Through the looking glass: when women tell fairy tales. In Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch & Elizabeth Langland (Eds.), *The voyage in: fictions of female development* (pp. 209-27). Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England.
- Russell, Diana E. H. & Harnes, Roberta A. (Eds.). (2001). *Femicide in global perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. (2006). *Encyclopedia of feminist literature*. New York: Facts On File, Inc.