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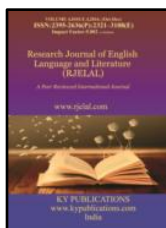
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A MODERN RENDITION OF THE FRENCH FOLKTALE “BLUEBEARD”

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ABSTRACT

Folk tales play a very important role in society and forming cultural and social norms, fairy tales create a dream like idealistic setting which every girl strives to know and wishes to incorporate into her own life. Even in the modern day and age of science and technology fairy tales and folk tales are read, told and cherished. But in all of them the main trait is the damsel in distress who is waiting to be rescued, no matter what her own accomplishments be, she can do nothing, achieve nothing and especially not save herself without outside male help, which in most cases is her prince charming. All the tales have the same outline. This paper focuses on a well loved and very popular French Folk tale called “The Bluebeard” by Charles Perrault, its modern rendition and its alternate ending in “The Bloody Chamber” by Angela Carter, the thoughts of the victim- what leads up to the ordeal and the end outcomes.

In order to best understand the modern version one needs to be acquainted to the original French folk tale by Charles Perrault, about an ugly, rich, noble man whose dark beard had the tinge of blue, and because of his ferocious looks got him the name Bluebeard. He had anywhere between five to seven wives who had all died in quick succession, their deaths were attributed to some careless accident and who was always looking to remarry. His castle is a place of uncountable wealth and mystery, one of the rooms which his last, beautiful young wife discovers is a chamber of torture and death. In the modern story by Angela Carter, the female character is a young pianist and one who is living with a widowed mother in a small apartment. The original story had the female character from a noble family whereas the modern rendering was based on the fact that the story is a first person narrative, a recollection of the time when she had met the Marquis “The Bluebeard” as a seventeen year old. The massive wealth of the Marquis is the attraction for the young poor girl. The girl and her mother had spend their entire lives without any material comfort. So when there came a much older man who just wanted to

marry the girl for the sake of getting married, though he was recently widowed the girl wants to marry him. The cause of the former wife’s death is not divulged and no one wanted to learn, though the young woman was intrigued by the fact that one of the most famous singers in Paris was his former wife, a woman whom the young girl had been awe struck with. The girl is aware of the fact that the famous singer and she would have the same man for a husband and how fate had made something similar in both their other wise dissimilar lives.

Strangely the young girl is the one who travels to her would be husband residence which is again a turn from the original French tale. When she travels by train to go to him in his castle she covers her journey which is more of a transformative journey The journey a metamorphosis, a journey from girl hood to womanhood, a journey from obscurity to security. The poor girl is impressed and besotted with the much older Marquis’ wealth it comes as no surprise. The fact that the ugly old man, with the odd appearance becomes attractive to extremely beautiful and talented young women is just because of his abundant wealth is unchanged

over the centuries. Nothing about his behaviour raises doubts either as he unabashedly displays his immense riches, to his wives friends and family. The original French folk tale where the blue beard chooses to marry the youngest daughter of his neighbour against her will, yet upon persisting she was attracted to bluebeard's immense wealth and grandeur of each room of his castle exceeding the other. In the original version we do not know the exact age of the girl though we know that she was young. But in the story by Carter we know the narrator was seventeen, and poor at the time of the incident. Sometimes she narrates the events as she experienced them at the time, while at other time she focuses on her retrospective understanding of the events.

In the old story the young girl was herself wealthy and living very comfortably and could have attracted any number of suitors yet she chooses the wrong match who in the long run be her worst mistake. Carter's character was attracted to the wealth in order to secure her future as she had lived all her life in poverty with her poor mother, as her father had died in the world was leaving her young mother penniless. Though her mother had doubts about the Marquis being an appropriate match for her daughter she remains silent because she too felt that money would definitely make her daughter happy and provide her daughter the security that was lacking all her life. The suitor was never doubted, neither his appearance nor his age, nothing deterred either of the female characters in both the old or the new tale. In both the cases neither the family nor the girls doubt or grow suspicious about the strange disappearance of the wives, with no bodies ever being found, multiple times. He called himself a widower and everyone accepted that as a decent excuse to be remarried. Though all the wives were women of great beauty, wealth and personal accomplishments. Yet their disappearance goes unreported and unnoticed. Even more strange is the new wives eagerness and willingness to marry a man who has neither age nor appearance. It was only his wealth that the girls and their families were attracted to be it a noble woman or a seventeen year old poor pianist, and that is what is used to lure the women into the trap. Which

goes to show that all the women though endowed with wealth and talent were easily beguiled by the sadistic psychopath who fully understood their vulnerabilities.

The only doubt the modern character, the seventeen year old has is the total lack of emotions in the Marquis, she consoles herself with the logic that he was recently widowed and so was in mourning. Yet she was observant in her recollections that she likened him to both an animal and a plant. He was plant like because he resembled a lily, and animal like because he appeared as ferocious as a lion. This hints at him being bipolar which is more deadly form of psychosis than being psychotic.

The teenager's recollection has instances of foreshadowing as to where she remembered her bridal chamber bore the resemblance of a funeral, an embalming chamber with white lilies surrounding the room. There are various signs that signal at her impending fate. The gift the husband presents is a very telling symbol of his plans, his grandmother's thick double stranded ruby choker, which she had purchased to celebrate her own escape from the guillotine. The portrait of the martyred Saint Cecelia who was decapitated, is another very telling symbol, of her inevitable fate. Though we know that Carter's character is recollecting past events and so she has survived the tragedy. The tone seems to be both Gothic and romantic, often conjuring an atmosphere of mystery and secrecy or even horror. Despite the elements of Gothic the story is more like a confessional. The story also bears similarity to a Bildungsroman as it is the story of a character's internal development as she undergoes a succession of encounters with the external and internal, looking to share her life with a strange partner, so different from her in social class and age.

The concept of curiosity is another key feature as to how Bluebeard makes the excuse to travel away on business, to give his wife control over the castle and handing her the bundle of keys and then arousing curiosity by asking her to enter all the rooms but one, but giving her the key to the forbidden room as well. This is a reflection upon the curious nature of all women be it Pandora, Eve or Psyche, where they would alone be entirely responsible for the following consequences. That the

ill fated women were responsible for their own fates, their fates of choosing his as their spouse and then indulging in his wealth and then discovering the room.

Both the girls enter the forbidden room to find its floor covered with clotted blood, both the girls in their panic drop the key, retain it and try to wash the blood which mysteriously does not wash off leading to their entry to the room being discovered by the husband. The original story deals with how the young girl begs for time to pray giving time for her brothers to arrive and to rescue her from her being beheaded. The two versions are similar to this point, in Carter's modern twist which is more feminist, the girl's mother arrives in time to shoot the Marquis in a single shot. Both the female characters were unable to help themselves and relied upon outside help. In the old version on male help whereas in the modern version the mother drives down when she is unable to call her daughter to talk to her.

The key to the bloody chamber serves various connotations, first it is the bundle of keys that is handed to the female by the dominant male with a grim past. The omniscient ring to the handing over of the keys and then a request under the guise of a warning that all the rooms are to be accessed but one. Where the all powerful male is building his trust on the foolish wife making her over confident in her own powers and her control over the old husband. Like the lion giving the lamb a good sense of ease before falling prey to its might. It was like a transfer of power to the foolish women. Something which entitled them to decide if they wanted to enjoy all of the property and life they had everything at their disposal or go into the one forbidden room, which they knew would displease blue beard, the women feel that their husband would be displeased. Yet their curiosity gets the better of them. In the original story the girl was with her sister Anne and friends yet she left them all aside to use the key to the forbidden chamber to discover all the bodies of the past wives hanging on walls and the chamber floor covered with blood which was magical, as it refused to get washed off. The stained key serves to condemn its holder to their inevitable discovery and then death. In the modern retelling of the story Carter's key is stained with blood which mysteriously is shaped like a heart.

Bluebeard takes this key and puts it on the female character's forehead because of which her forehead is branded. In the modern version this scar is on her forehead forever which she wears as a reminder marking her shame and disobedience, and the only relief she has is that her husband was blind.

The surprising aspect of both the stories is the fact that the wife did not accuse the bluebeard or the marquis for the murders calling him a murderer. Instead they were begging for forgiveness pledging that they would never disobey him ever again. Asking this one mistake to be treated as their first and last mistake after which they would obey him without question. The fact that they did not even plan an escape while time permitted, or they assumed they could get away with it. Even then one cannot rationalise how they would continue to live in a building which has so many corpses and the person who was responsible for their deaths. It cannot be explained as their forgiving love which allowed them to overlook all his flaws, not such a grievous one. Did they not feel threatened at all time to have to be on their guard all the time. Instead of fleeing for life they beg to be forgiven handing over all control to him, someone who had murdered his wives, and had not changed his methods were getting more brutal with each victim as though he was experimenting with new ways to cause pain. On hindsight bluebeard or the marquis display the characteristic signs of a psychopath in him being Machiavellian cunning, duplicitous and manipulative knowing the weakness of his victims and deciding what their death is going to be like. His lack of conscience causing pain seems to provide his craving for self gratification. They blame the women as deceitful and for playing with their trust when it is the other way round. So the original story though a folk tale charts the three traits to the description of a psychopath.

Disobedience is what turns the bluebeard into a devil condemning to their death, neither their beauty nor their talent can save them from the hour of their inevitability. Their tears and apologies fall on deaf ears, as though their walking into the room was the one excuse he was waiting got prompting him to his action, which maybe he was waiting restlessly for. Because he says he would be away on a long journey

but returns in time to discover her act of disobedience and to pronounce her sentence and to carry it out. Whereas it was him who handed the bundle of keys to the women at all times, and also handing the condemned key too. He is the one who instigated them by arousing their curiosity, all this points to the fact that the Bluebeard was a serial killer on the rampage, giving time for things to cool down and not having to try too hard to clear his tracks owing to his tremendous wealth not arousing any form of suspicion let alone owning responsibility or being accountable for the quick succession of disappearing wives.

This folk tale is also strange because most old tales were not so violent and did not depict death in such a grotesque manner. Men were legendary for their valour and bravery in war. For slaying many headed monsters, but here the women were ruthlessly murdered after being tortured. This old folk tale has the air of being a modern day psychological suspense thriller, not fulfilling the criteria of the folk or fairy tales.

The French original story by Charles Perrault was translated into English by Angela Carter. Angela Carter's story too has a "happily ever after ending" but it is an alternative one. In the original story the female character retains the inherited wealth and uses it to make sure that her siblings were well taken care of and finally making sure that she marries another wealthy but loving man. In Carter's story the nameless female protagonist chooses to give away all her wealth to charity, the bodies of the wives are given a decent burial and the bloody chamber is sealed. The castle is turned into a school for the blind, The nameless female prefers to earn her living as a piano teacher and live on her meagre means with her blind husband and mother. She had learnt a lot from her experience and we know that her change is dramatic. The main male character Bluebeard is called Marquis in Carter's story which continues to be set in France, as in the old story instead of a sister Ann Carter's female lead has a blind admirer called Jean. The female character is nameless, Carter chooses to keep the character nameless for two reasons as the story is first person narrative, by keeping the character nameless she universalised the story for all women, when her mother saved her life,

women have to try to help themselves and other women -breaking the mould of patriarchy. The ending is an alternate one in another aspect where the story teller is talking of the bitter experience and the heart shaped scar on her forehead a grim daily reminder of the reality having her life saved by a hairs breadth. The fact that the woman married a blind Jean bears omniscient of that the woman's guilty, unlike hamartia and hubris, the guilt at having acquired everything and loosing it all to a mistake or guilt of surviving the ordeal. Or she is blaming herself for being the victim or from being saved from being a victim. The former wives though famous women for their various accomplishments had lost their identities after becoming his wives, bearing only that one label in life and in death. The narrator is not only hiding much physically but concealing much emotionally too and is grateful for succeeding at it attributing to his blindness. The bluebeard and the marquis could see physically but they were emotionally and psychologically blind because of their rage and their extreme nature. The modern rendition is for all modern readers to understand the guilt of the protagonist and the bluebeard and the marquis.

The modern title serves the purpose of punishment, punishment for the former wives who had obviously been lured into looking for the so called forbidden room, entering it, to seal their fate. Once they had found the room instead of pretending at not having seen anything and turning a blind eye to what they had seen behind the closed door. These women had not done anything to reveal the fates of the women before them thereby tempting their own fate. If they would have done something like reporting the room and fleeing from the wealth to save themselves instead of pretending not to have found the room and then their crime being "discovered" by their husband to whom no amount of pleading helped. Their greed for the boundless wealth the thought of losing it all led to their murders at the hands of a psychopath.

References

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