CHAPTER 5
THE CONCLUSION: HAPPILY EVER AFTER...

“My family have always behaved anecdotally, and I do perceive every event as having the potentiality for being retold” (Angela Carter)

The present study celebrates and reaffirms the basic premise that women are as equal and valuable beings as men. There is reconnaissance and undercurrent of the theory that both gender and sexuality are social, cultural and ideological constructs. Being ideological products their immediate reality appears as the only reality; with no room for alternative possibilities. Further, the study takes into cognizance the historical, social and cultural perimeters of patriarchal domination and how it has been biased and exclusive of the female milieu. The thesis does not endorse monolithic, uni-dimensional ‘universals’, it scrutinizes all essentials with corollary to postmodern and deconstructionist aesthetics.

The thesis is an outcome of the increasing responses to the fairy tale genre’s remarkable concoction of tradition, innovation and style which continues to garner critical attention and reader’s interest. The thesis does not overlook the fact that fairy tales have been ‘naturalized’ over the centuries with the act of telling and retelling. In their mythical forms they seem so entrenched in history that it appears nearly impossible to see behind their magic. The reductionist/essentialist nature of this tradition is not only restricted to the European history rather, can be found in Eastern oral traditions as well. In his translation of tales from ancient India, Buitenen notes the sexist nature of these tales. In one of these tales the moral that we get at the end of the narrative goes like- “women are the source of all deception” (207). This moral is not very different from Western myth of disobedience of Eve. Such derogatory and sexually disparaging morals in fact, perpetuated the patriarchal rhetoric of female culpability and subordination.
The study also considers the vast number of writings and revisions in the area of fairy tale studies and scholarship, which have contributed to its intellectually and aesthetically challenging outlook. The thesis applauds the multi-vocal, pluralistic and hybrid tales penned by feminist writers and revisionists who substituted the univocal and single-faceted tales of Grimms and Perrault with tales which were multi-vocal and hybrid. In the wake of technological and scientific advancements the image of the fairy tales had to be reinvented. Amidst such cultural and social flux the definition and significance of the genre was undergoing a transformation, the revised tales retain debates about the nature and construction of patriarchal essentialism. Angela Carter is among those writers/revisionists who emphasize fairy tales’ pluralistic and hybrid spirit. In her collection of revised tales *The Bloody Chamber* Carter replaced the omniscient third-person narrative voice of the traditional tales with first-person and multi-vocal narration. Taking Angela Carter’s revision of these tales as its foundation, this study articulates the quintessential feminist query that how and in what manner the canonical tales have shaped sexual meanings and expectations for the human civilization. Holding up this prevalent theme, the thesis examines the socio-cultural contexts as well as the inherent dynamics of these tales. By revealing the essentialist nature of the mass-mediated tales, the study foregrounds the role of these innocent, magical tales in deepening the hold of patriarchal ideology. The rewritten tales unlike their traditional counterparts challenge the credibility and legitimacy of the patriarchal ideal of ‘beautiful, passive and chaste maiden’. Though the task is a daunting one, it is not impossible. By placing these tales in historical and cultural frameworks, their naturalization and magic has been dispelled.

The study also takes into account the fairy tale canon’s engagement with the emerging and evolving field of feminism that started spreading its wings in the late 1960s and 70s. The feminist fairy tales celebrate the marginal and suppressed voices of the traditional narratives and brings these voices at the centre. These tales fiercely and blatantly interrogate and question the socio-cultural institutions and ideologies that have perpetuated patriarchal domination. Such revisions stretch the rigid boundaries of these ideological constructs and contribute richly to the wealth of the fairy tale tradition. New readings and interpretations of these age-old tales by feminist writers and critics have opened various sensitive zones. These revisions bring to surface the submerged and suppressed voices of the past. Thus, feminist fairy tales are
formed of the disclosure of the suppressed and relegated voices and aspirations. Through employing an interrogating and non-conformist approach, these revisions question patriarchal construction of socio-cultural institutions. In their radical revisions these authors initiated dialogue with male literary traditions. These subversive, parodic and ironic retakes on the popular tales expose that how male hegemony has maintained control over these institutions. To grasp this revisionary poetics of the genre better we must look at it from new angles and agree with novelist Eugenides’s view when he ascertains that: “To be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began” (69). So, this thesis applauds Angela Carter’s initiative and radical effort to take her tales back to their origin and armor them with reawakened consciousness; making them more truthful accounts of female and male experience.

The fairy tale corpus is based on and defined by sexual and gender politics. In their antiquarian clothing these tales emerge as timeless and ahistorical, transcending laws of transformation and change. In the previous chapters of the present study we have seen how the genre has been employed as a tool of acculturation and socialization; making it the most viable and pregnant site to confront and contest prevalent ideologies. Highlighting the ‘naturalized’ gender and sexual manifestations that the classical tales embody critic Patricia Brooke comments: “Through excessive repetition, acts and representations become naturalized, constructed and masked as essential or natural although they are constructed through the very repetition that enables their seeming originality” (69). If, we maintain that sexuality is a product of the dominant ideology then, these revised tales in their transgressive and subversive fashion challenge this prevalent ideology.

The collectors and writers of fairy tales, pampering the status quo presented such female role models for the masses who were imprisoned and fettered to their hearths, enslaved, silenced, victimized and pitted against each other, hence, colluding in their own subordination and exploitation. The most representative and popular tales applaud passive and submissive female models and punishing and murdering women who exhibit vigor and independent will. Male-penned tales are enceinte with an awareness of their role as vehicles and testimonials of a patriarchal culture. The study brings into focus the complicity and collusive nature of the canon in endorsing and perpetuating sexist ideology of a patriarchal culture.
Growing out of dissatisfaction with the inherently biased gender and sexual rhetoric of the canonical tales, feminist revisionists deliberately and consciously tried to rewrite and replace these hegemonic aesthetics. The revisionary poetics of the canon is aimed at speaking for the asphyxiated female population. Women writers like Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and Christina Rossetti, etc. consciously employed and subverted the genre and its popular symbolism in their works. Acting as a double-edged weapon this revisionary poetics sometimes exposed the sexist nature of the popular tales, at other times produced counter, non-sexist or even counter-sexist models; which were more in tune with the female experience.

Analyzing the association between fairy tales and women and how this connection has been ridiculed by the society as ‘nonsensical’ Oates write:

What is troubling about the fairy – tale world and its long association with women is precisely its condition as mythical and stereotypical, a rigidly schematized counterpart to the “real”; an enchanted, or accursed, world whose relationship to reality is analogous to that of our dreams to our waking lives. As if the province of women must be unreal, trivial. As if women are fairy – tale beings yearning for nothing more than material comforts, a “royal” marriage, a self – absorbed conventional life in which social justice and culture of any kind are unknown. (102)

Carter’s penchant for fantasy and fairy tale is evident from her earlier fiction. She takes up the symbolism and motifs of the genre and interweaves them with feminist issues. She skillfully make use of the knowledge that for centuries folk and fairy tales have been employed as tool of acculturation; defining sexual and gender expectations. Committed to explore and illuminate the unexplored realm of woman’s mind, these tales articulate women’s repressed desires and experiences. Carter with her admixture of fantasy, irony, erotic violence and sadomasochism portrays the complexities of human relationships, especially, between men and women. Carter
employs the genre for re-conceptualizing gender and sexual reality and for this purpose the fairy tale genre serves an apt medium.

The thesis attempts to voice the opinion that Carter is in no way a pseudo-feminist re-appropriator of a male tradition rather; she is a revisionist, appropriating a neglected and marginalized female history of tale-telling. Carter’s friend and critic Lorna Sage’s argument related to Carter’s employment of the fairy tale genre appears apt in this context:

Her discovery of this voice for herself didn’t happen all at once, but bit by bit over the years. It was a witty, witchy idea. Also, ironically, a sign of her originality. She rightly discerned that a woman’s inventiveness has still a whiff of original sin, and the grandmother-guise of the yarn-spinner was a splendid cover for a speculative, unsatisfied mind. She was the wolf in Grandma’s nightcap. (21)

Carter’s versions of the traditional tales constitute critiques and commentaries on the embedded discourse of gender and sexuality. Taking into account the cultural, historical and social factors which have shaped the field of ‘feminist fairy tale studies’ we find a parallel, alternative world; different from the one that was presented by male transcribers like Brother Grimms, Perrault and Anderson (the trinity of the fairy tale canon in the West).

The swooping number of allusions and inter-textual references in Carter’s anachronistic fairy tales (with cars and telephones) brings out the repressive elements of the canonical tales. By highlighting the sadomasochistic strain of these cultural and social constructs, Carter reveals the stark truth of patriarchal culture: “Masochism and sadism are different sides of the same coin, and perhaps a repressive culture can only be maintained by a strong masochistic element among the repressed” (38). Carter and other revisionist of the canon maintain that the male-penned and collected tales have served this fatalistic vision of masochistic female population. Despite being surrounded and indoctrinated by cultural reality that is at once repressive and totalitarian in nature, Carter’s heroines or princesses posit a challenge to this universalism, they prevail and sustain outside as well as inside this culture. Along
with a powerful and positive portrayal of female sexuality these tales also modifies the representation of heterosexual relations, achieving a positive picture, where both male as well as female sexuality co-exist in a mutually inclusive environment. Carter’s fierce imagination envisions her wolves as ‘tender’ hence, redeeming the male sexuality of its animalistic and bestial overtones. Carter in a dazzling and unconventional fashion destabilizes and re-conceptualize the cultural presumptions (encoded in the fairy tale genre).

Eliding the simplistic dichotomy of active/passive, predator/prey and victim/victimizer Carter brings into play tentativeness and ambiguity. Her characters though begin their roles as ‘objects’ in patriarchal economy but end as ‘subjects’ beginning to explore and experience their ‘subject’ positions. Such portrayals eschew monolithic, single-faceted views of female identity and experience. Interweaving dynamics of history, culture and society Carter seems to contest and subvert the sexist ideology upheld by the age-old tale tradition. Nowhere Carter’s tales appears to pamper the ‘patriarchal hegemony’ of the canon (as accused by her critics Duncker, Clark and Lewallen). Carter’s upfront, sexual and complex versions of Charles Perrault’s saccharinized tales attempts to advance the cause of women’s liberation; free from all social, historical and mythical confinement.

Turning the prevalent heterosexual paradigmatic structure of the society on its head, Carter endows her female characters with a desire; independent of the male norm. Though, critics like Duncker, Clark, etc. have accused Carter of re-inscribing the sexist ideology of the canonical tales. We can see it as an intended deconstructive strategy. Stressing the imbalanced power politics that plagues and corrodes male-female relationship, Carter moves towards a radical transformation of the age-old texts. The highly experimental, intertextual and self-referential tales of Carter’s collection anticipate new models of femininity and female sexual experience. By infusing sexual anxieties and innuendoes in her narrative frameworks Carter stringently interrogates the historicity of gender and sexuality; repudiating them from getting mired by repressive fantasies. Disrupting the encoded narrative paradigms of the canonical tales, feminist tales avouches for a re-conceptualized gender and sexual identity; establishing it as malleable, hybrid and polymorphous.
Patricia Brook analyzing Carter’s poetics of feminist revision of the age – old fairy tale canon maintains that:

…fairy tales provide Carter with a radical content – fundamental and revolutionary – in their sexual and violent manifestations, but they also contest the authorial position, rejecting the romantic and modern authoritative voice in favor of the multiplicity of voices, often female, that have been repressed by the ‘official’ telling of Perrault, Grimm, or Disney (67)

All stories in the present collection conspicuously reverberate with the embedded references to their source texts (social, literary, historical and cultural). Informed with the source texts but foregrounding a consciousness (which has been re-centered) Carter’s tales bring women to the fore, freeing them from their inert, dormant positions. Almost every other tale in the collection The Bloody Chamber (1979) has been narrated either from the perspective of the female protagonist or they are third-person narration providing proof to the fact that Carter ventured to put words/speech in the ‘silenced’ mouths of the fairy-tale heroines. Carter’s heroines, be it the young, virginal maiden of the title story or the unnamed narrator of the ‘The Erl-King’, break the strictures and move towards the centre overcoming the fear of mutilation and even death, of being turned into a corpse or a caged bird. Hence, in this way, these female-centered narratives act as role-models and as powerful alternative to the damsel-in-distress archetype. In Carter’s gothic ‘fairy’ world there are no clear-cut solutions, no black and white options. Carter deliberately goes for the margins, enlightening the crepuscular arena of identity construction. She in her exuberant fashion approaches the oedipal theories of identity formation. By impregnating her narratives with excess, ambivalence and finally, transgression Carter envisages a world where laws of the binaries are not rigid and immobile. Exhibiting and stressing syllogistic model of arguments, we see in Carter-thesis (the traditional passive fairy maiden; Sade’ Justine), anti-thesis (literaralization of Sadeian Juliette) and finally, the synthesis (amalgamating the best of the two previous models).
Rejecting and sidelining the readymade, passed-down identity Carter’s characters embrace an independent identity and move towards the ‘subject’ position. Though we do not find a common thread, theme or even style that bind these disparate tales together but all these tales can be interpreted as testimonies of acceptance and further, celebration of female agency and female sexuality; sexuality that is at once transgressive and unfettered from the patriarchal codes and conventions. Such destabilizing and conflicting depiction of sexual experience (both male and female) upsets the heteronormative cultural presumptions. This incendiary narrative strategy confronts the prevalent phallocentric fantasy. Patricia Brooke notes in relation to Carter’s portrayal of sexually active heroines that: “Her fairy tales and heroines refuse externally imposed categorization by foregrounding the multiple and contradictory sexualized imagery and symbolism generated by the traditional tales through their performance in different social contexts”. (Brooke 86)

Carter’s retelling and reframing of these age-old tales in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* exemplifies the postmodern and feminist techniques that women writers have employed to transform the way these stories have represented women and their desire. It also foregrounds the manner in which these stories have formed women and their understanding of the world. By relying on postmodern techniques of – rewriting, parody and subversion, these tales reveal and criticize the long patriarchal history of oppression and violence against women. Not rejecting the potential of the canon as ‘carriers of patriarchal myths’, Carter fills their framework with a new vision; recasting everything from a new angle. In their ability to influence and further, acculturate the masses lies fairy tales’ power. These rewritten tales project and provide new and emancipating role models of female agency and behavior. Carter challenges the ideology of the seemingly immutable canonical tales. She endows her female characters with a will of their own; they are nowhere mute and inarticulate. If at times, they fear persecution at the hands of male authorities it is solely because they have chosen to be in that place. They are not passive, chaste and hence, asexual. Rather they have been given voice and agency to face the existential danger and a will to confront the tenebrous area of their hidden desires. They are never ignorant; they know their way out of the labyrinth. Carter’s tales which are not only inter-textual but intra-textual also, strengthens the artifice and constructedness of the canon. Their
incessant dialogues with the traditional tales and with other genres fill them with magic and simultaneously expose the trick.

Taking into account the paucity of active, bold fairy tale heroines these postmodern, feminist versions of the traditional stories provide alternative role-models and expose the crucial role of these tales in promulgating and further in establishing gender and sexual codes and conventions. Carter’s stories takes into cognizance the complexity involved in the appropriation and re-appropriation of the tales. There is an undercurrent of the need to rediscover and reassess the canonical tales, especially in the vague of feminist scholarship. By playing with and conflating the traditional and postmodern versions Carter offers a female model that is subversive in nature. Such ambiguous and complex female subjectivity threatens the alignment between tales and patriarchal values. Carter’s self-referential narratives unravel the celebrated, restrictive images of fairy tale heroines; who now avenge their ‘romantic mutilation’. Carter’s stories repudiate the traditional tales’ repressive fantasies and aesthetics and in the process foreground feminist themes. The contrasting images of fairy tale heroine, in the end, appear to be a conscious re-appropriation and subversion of the canonical strictures and structures. The constant tug of war between desire/self-denial, reason/passion dichotomy renders ambiguity and complexity to Carter’s tales. Cancelling the romanticized, mythical image of women as prisoners of male aesthetics, Carter attempts to draw the graffiti afresh and draw self-aware, autonomous female characters.

In their relentless deconstructions, decoding and subversions of the artifice of the fairy tale genre and in providing more realistic alternatives Carter’s revisions attest to their postmodern status. In some of these revisions the traditional plot has been replicated while in others the entire plot and story line has been reconceived. Some stories alter the story staying within the boundaries of the canonical tale while others rebuild these outdated structures. All the stories in the present collection eschew the single-faceted, monolithic convention of the women-centered fairy tales; allowing more space for the interplay of ambiguity and ambivalence. Somersaulting through the field of established binaries- predator/prey, active/passive and victim/victimizer, etc., these tales aims at reshuffling the social attitudes and behaviors pertaining to the ideas of gender and sexuality.
The thesis ascertains that Carter in her postmodern, feminist reworking of these canonical tales shatter and further, subvert the notion of universality of human experience (with female experience in focus). Carter’s subjective, confrontational and provocative versions of vehemently dismiss the idea of a uniform, objective reality. Her tales suffused with elements of parody, irony and subversion talks back to the male literary tradition of tale telling. With their inquisitive outlook Carter’s tales scrutinize the meta-narrative of the western fairy tale tradition. They not only expose but also disagree with the manner these male-collected and authored tales have presented the female folk. Hence, we find in Carter’s tales disenchantment and disillusionment with the patriarchal notion of male supremacy and female subordination. Discarding the beguiling ‘realism’ of the male-authored tales, these feminist revisions highlight and evoke postmodern notions of ambiguity, multiplicity and fabulation.

To conclude the argument we can say that Angela Carter unlocks the door of the fairy tale tradition and not only encroach and usurp a male territory but also shows us the ‘bloody’ reality behind this magic door. The myth of male supremacy and female inferiority is debunked and deconstructed to offer new possibilities. By focusing and stressing on the issues of identity formation and gender and sexuality, these revisions reconstruct the past; a past that has relegated female voice to the margins. It takes into cognizance that how skillfully Carter allows and articulates the hitherto silenced experiences and aspirations of the fairy tale heroine. Her versions of these sexist and reductionist tales disperse women’s understanding of the world and their own selves. Such radical repositioning of the fairy tale archetypes questions the all pervasive myths and practices that deny women their due share within socio-cultural sphere. Through her polemic re-conceptualization of heterosexual relations Carter gives away her iconoclastic message, freeing both men and women from their binary essentialism: “In his diabolic solitude, only the possibility of love could awake the libertine to perfect, immaculate terror. It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women.” (176). Unlike her contemporaries Carter place both men and women on equal pedestal, making them mutually inclusive parties hence, unfettering them from their frozen stereotypes. In this way Carter’s fictional sphere becomes a box full of
possibilities and alternatives where we have mutable and flexible identities. Mutability becomes the norm of the day in Carter’s world.

Carter like Julian Barnes believed in the transformational power of art, which cannot thrive alone and hence, needs improvisation and fresh breath of air to sustain itself:

And there we have it – the moment of supreme agony on the raft, taken up, transformed, justified by art, turned into a sprung and weighted image, then varnished, framed and glazed, hung in a famous art gallery to illuminate our human condition, fixed, final, always there. Is that what we have? Well, no, people die, rafts rot, and works of art are not exempt…. The masterpiece once complete, does not stop: it continues in motion, downhill (139).


