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## Wolves and Women: Rereading Angela Carter's Wolf Trilogy from a Zoocritical Perspective

**Dr. Aditi Chatterjee**

Assistant Professor of English

Mount Carmel College (Autonomous), Bangalore

**Abstract:** Angela Carter's renowned short story collection, *The Bloody Chamber* is a feminist retelling of popular European fairy tales. The "wolf trilogy" in this collection not only challenges the prevalent misogynist stereotypes but also problematizes the conventional portrayal of animals in literature. This paper aims to look at these stories from a zoocritical perspective and to emphasize how the narrative actively dismantles the existing boundaries between the human and animal world by questioning the assumed hierarchical supremacy of humans over the animals. Zoocriticism is an emerging subfield under ecocriticism that focuses on the representation of animals in literature and raises ethical questions in understanding the relationship that exists between humans and animals. It critiques the established anthropocentric assumptions regarding the secondary positions of animals in relation to humans and aims at providing a more conscious and ethical perspective that allows the world to recognize them beyond mere symbols used for anthropocentric representations. Angela Carter in this work, interrogates the anthropocentric approaches that promotes anger, hatred, violence, mistrust and cruelty towards animals in popular children's stories that play a great role in conditioning the attitude of humans towards animals as well as the natural world.

Through her retake of these tales she also attempts at liberating the characters in her stories from the throes of a deeply dominating, controlling patriarchal world, that not only strips women of any agency but also denies the animals, specifically the wolves their primordial nature and existence in the wild. The deep, dark, mysterious forces that pervade the natural world mirrors the wild, untamed, unpredictable and primitive in the human and non-human characters that strives to constantly break free of the violence inherent in the passive, patriarchal world. Her stories teach us to rebuild the relationship that exists between the human and animal world, by fostering mutual trust and respect as opposed to fear and violence.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, zoocriticism, feminism, anthropocentrism, Angela Carter, Wolf Trilogy*

**B**orn in 1970, Angela Carter's unique ability to fuse magical realism and gothic narratives to century old, yet popular old wives tales and children's stories catapulted her popularity in the literary world. A writer, poet and journalist, her popular works include *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), *Wise Children* (1991) and many more essays and articles that she has written all through her career. These have established her as the most prominent writer of her time. "The majority of Angela Carter's works revolve around a specific type of feminism, radical-libertarian feminism, and her critique of the patriarchal roles imposed on women throughout history" (Nouri and Mohammadi 100). She is credited for her daring explorations of gender and sexuality, which challenges misogynistic practices and offers a fresh perspective to inherent power dynamic.

The renowned anthology *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a collection of re-imagined fairy tales like "The Bluebeard", "The Little Red Riding Hood", "The Beauty and the Beast", "Puss in Boots" etc. These stories that have been part of the European oral narratives for centuries have been reworked into a modern fairy tale, infused with eroticism and dark fantasy that pushes the boundaries of human imagination. In the article "A study of Carter's *Wolf\_Alice* based on Showalter's Gynocriticism" Nouri and Mohammadi state that, "One of the reason she so valued fairy tale and one that is obscured by a too exclusive focus on gender politics is that she associated it with a world where our dreads and desires were personified in beings that were not human without being divine" (Nouri and Mohammadi 2). The unexpected twists and turns that she endows to these tales not only inspire awe and wonder of its readers but are known for their ability to capture the essence of a women who desires to explore the mysteries of desires, identity and a world that is oppressive.

Her works have been credited for their exploration of female agency and for creating a social commentary with a strong feminist perspective. But her stories are not limited to the exploration of female agency alone. She incorporates animals in her story in a multifaceted, symbolic way that helps readers see these animals not just as a part of the background narrative, but as symbolic figures, that probes into the anthropocentric portrayal of animals and challenges the social construct revolving around similar narratives.

Angela Carter's "Wolf Trilogy" refers to three short stories, "The Werewolf", "The Company of the Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice" that appear in the anthology *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. These stories, though are highly credited for their feminist overtones can also be read as texts that explores the wild, untamed and the dangerous world of the animals. The narrative seeks to blur the boundaries that exist between the human and the animal world, forcing the readers to look at the wolves from a newer perspective devoid of the human centric lens. Natsumi Ikoma suggests that "Carter uses the motif of the wolf to embody not male sexuality, but the shaky, arbitrary line of

demarcation that human society creates in order to separate what is inseparable” (Ikoma 22). She enables readers to question societal constructs and embrace the interconnectedness of all living beings.

### Analysis

“The Werewolf” is the shortest and most chilling of the three tales. Set in a world steeped in superstitious beliefs about animal transformations the story is a dark and unsettling retelling of the famous fairy tale, “Little Red Riding Hood”. The little girl is sent through a forest to nurse her ailing grandmother. Along the way she encounters a wolf that lunges at her. Instead of succumbing to the vicious attack of the wolf, she bravely fights it, maiming the wolf. In a shocking twist, the girl picks up the slashed forefoot of the wolf and places it in her basket.

Upon reaching her grandmother’s house, she discovers that her grandmother was the wolf in disguise, a witch who had transformed into the beast. The story ends with the grandmother being stoned to death after her true nature is revealed to all, and the girl inherits the grandmother’s house becoming prosperous.

Though the above story is built on the conventions of the traditional fairy tale, Angela Carter transforms it into a dark and unsettling exploration of power, violence and transformation. In this narrative the traditional animal-human hierarchy is challenged. “According to Rehnmark (2000), wolves in fairy tales were shown more as a metaphor for the inner beast inside people than as a way to scare children away from wild wolves” (Braborcová 26). Carter presents the wolf not as a purely evil character but as a complex figure. The werewolf here is not entirely evil but is a victim of an external force. The wolf here is not a passive animal but a transformed human being and therefore it complicates the typical animal representations as villains or monsters in simple fairy tales or folk narratives. ÇiMen reveals that “even a cursory glimpse at the image of the animal in “The Werewolf” reveals that the wolf is narratively portrayed as a vulnerable being” (ÇiMen 1220). The animals are often framed as mere symbols of human fears and desire and the need for human beings to tame the wild.

Though the girl’s victory of the animal speaks volumes about her own agency and her capacity for brutality, it also asserts her strength by moving beyond the traditional portrayal of women as passive figures and challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric structures. The use of superstitions in the story show how they are used to combine and limit the agency of a woman. “At midnight, especially on Walpurginsnacht, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them” (Carter 137). The dual identity of the werewolf both as a wolf and a witch deepens the connection between the supernatural and the societal fears that the story addresses. Witches are historically feared and persecuted- often associated with women who

defy societal conventions, particularly in patriarchal contexts. “When they discover a witch- some old woman whose cheese ripens when her neighbour’s do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! follows her about all the time, they strip the crone, search her for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death” (Carter 138).

In traditional narratives the werewolf is a man who is cursed but Carter chooses to bring in a twist to this narrative by presenting the werewolf as the grandmother of the girl. She draws a parallel between the werewolf and the woman, using both as symbols of transformation, vulnerability, and persecution. “As in the case of witches, wolves in Carter’s tales are a metaphor for those stigmatized by society because of their otherness, in terms of - for instance age, gender, sexuality, physical appearance, or behaviour” (Ikoma 23). Both are seen as dangerous because of their ability to shape-shift, whether physically or metaphorically. Society fears and persecutes them because they defy rigid boundaries and categories.

The act of violence against the wolf can be interpreted as the girls rebellion against the patriarchal and anthropocentric structures that define the human-animal relationship. “The wild nature of animals generally awakens feelings of fear and apprehension in humans and leads to a cold relationship where they strive to keep animals at a distance and are afraid of touching them” (Karagoz). The girl’s victory over the wolf can be seen as extension of humanity’s long standing history of subjugating the natural world. Therefore, the wolf stands for the untamed, the wild and uncontrollable natural forces that humans often seek to either control or suppress. “The idea of primitive self, represented by the wolf inside us is expressed in folklore and language as murder, incest and other banned acts” (Braborcová 14). The werewolf here is linked to wilderness and chaos which stand for the primal forces in nature that the organised patriarchal society always seek to dominate and control. This is especially relevant when we consider that the wolf is revealed to be the transformed grandmother. The alteration of the traditional portrayal of the grandmother and the granddaughter as nurturing figures suggests that even those who conform to the societal expectations of femininity and passivity might also embody the primordial force of nature. The act of violence while necessary for survival, is actually an expression of patriarchal and anthropocentric violence and its representations in traditional fairy tales. Carter also highlights how wolves are not as fierce as they seem to be. “The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem” (Carter 138).

“The Company of the Wolves” is yet another re imagined version of “The Little Red Riding Hood” story. The first few paragraphs discuss in detail the sinister nature of the wolf. It is both frightening and alluring at the same time. They are described as predatory, raw untamed energy that are also very magical and supernatural in their existence, intertwining fear with fascination. In the

next few paragraphs, Angela Carter heightens the sense of danger and seduction as she narrates the various encounters with the wolf. Most of them end in tragedy. This leads to the central narrative of this short story that is about a young girl who encounters a dashing huntsman who turns out to be a werewolf. But instead of succumbing to the fear of it, she ends up taming the wolf with her sexual awakening. The tale turns out to be a feminist exploration of desire, while blurring the lines between the human and the animal.

In this story the wolves are presented as multifaceted creatures. The repetition of the line “The wolf is carnivore incarnate...” (Carter 141), represents the raw unfiltered instincts of the wolf, unrestrained from the human codes of conduct that are governed by morality, reason and societal constructs. By repeating this line Carter emphasizes humanity’s deep seated fear of the wild, untamed “otherness” of the animal world. “As Rehnmark (2000) writes, many earlier religions found wilderness and nature divine, nevertheless, the Bible considered it godless. The wolf represents untamed wilderness, therefore it became hatred and misunderstood when people first feared it. It reminded of sins and weakness of humans. It is the prime burden of civilization and wealth” (Braborcová 8). The wolves carnivorous nature represents a part of human nature that is always repressed in the civilized world. It is not only about the physical danger that the encounter with the wolf posits but metaphorically hints about the sexual desires of humans as well that are seen as wild and untamed, requiring control and suppression. Therefore the representation of the wolf actually heightens the tension between fear and fascination. The synonymous use of the word “wolf” and “werewolf” suggests how Angela Carter underscores the fluid boundary between the animal and human, suggesting that primal instincts lie beneath the surface of the civilized behaviour. It actually highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings. The story represents that the animal world demands acknowledgement rather than constant human denial. The interplay of fear and fascination effectively reflects humanity’s ambivalence towards the natural world that it seeks to dominate. Wolves and werewolves symbolize human fear of the unknown but also at the same time highlights human fascination with it. The transformation mirrors shedding of societal constraints and embracing of the instinctual powers.

The voluntary disrobing of the girl in front of the wolf is symbolic of her shedding societal constructs to embrace a more primal and instinctual state. Derrida argues that “the property unique to animal and what in the final analysis distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short without consciousness of good and evil” (Derrida 373). This consciousness distinguishes man from animal. Her conscious embrace of her animalistic side removes the dynamic of brutality and violence, transforming the werewolf into a companion rather than a predator.

The girl's lack of fear and boldness signify her acceptance of her sexuality and instincts. The wolf, often seen as predatory male figure becomes a partner in her sexual awakening thus subverting the dominating and controlling figure that is associated with it. The union of the girl and the wolf thus, dissolves the boundaries between the civilized and the wild, the victim and the predator, the human and animal. Traditionally presented as a predator, a symbol of danger and destruction, the wolf in the end is transformed to become a partner and an equal. It hints at a harmonious reconciliation with the natural. By choosing to be with the wolf the girl embraces and celebrates the instinctual forces within herself and the nature.

Angela Carter purposefully introduces the other short narratives where encounters with werewolves end in tragedy to set up a sharp contrast with the girl's story. In these earlier stories, the werewolves are portrayed as fierce and wicked, and the girls as helpless victims who fall prey to manipulation and violence. These tales emphasize themes of danger, helplessness, and the inevitability of transformation, often following traditional tropes. The girls are passive, portrayed as damsels in distress who rely on heroic men to rescue them at the crucial moment.

In contrast, the girl in the central story flips this dynamic entirely. She is depicted as empowered and confident, courageously facing the threat of the werewolf with a calm awareness of the horror stories surrounding such encounters. "When she heard the freezing howl of a distant wolf, her practised hand sprang to the handle of her knife..." (Carter 146). Unlike the passive victims in the earlier narratives, she actively engages with the werewolf, demonstrating agency and fearlessness. "Soon they were laughing and joking like old friends" (Carter 146). This interaction transforms the encounter from one of fear and violence into one of mutual understanding and consent. Unlike in the earlier stories, where the werewolf is invariably killed or maimed—its paws cut off as trophies—the girl does not see the wolf as an enemy to be feared or destroyed.

This redefinition of the power dynamic highlights Carter's feminist and zoocritical approach. The girl does not succumb to the werewolf's predatory nature, nor does she lose her humanity. Instead, she integrates her instincts with her reason, subverting traditional narratives of victim hood and survival. This nuanced relationship between the girl and the wolf re-imagines the human-animal relationship, rejecting domination and fear in favor of understanding and coexistence.

Carter's nuanced portrayal of the girl and the wolf's relationship intertwines with her use of religious symbols to challenge religious narratives. The other folktales look at the werewolf as innately evil, a devil reincarnate, representing ultimate evil. In these folk stories the Devil becomes the agent of transformation, turning men into werewolves as a mark of corruption. "They say there's an ointment the Devil gives you that turns you into a wolf the minute you rub it on" (Carter 144). Traditional Christian allegories often portray the werewolf as an agent of the Devil,

emphasizing sin, corruption, and punishment. Braborcová in his thesis states that “It was mainly during the Middle Ages when the church used wolf as a symbol of malice and evil. The wolf was a useful tool for the church, thus portrayed in the Bible as an icon of Satan” (Braborcová 6). The only redemption possible for these unfortunate men would be death, as it was the only way to lift this insufferable curse.

Huggan and Tiffin argue that Christianity has long legitimized the hierarchical dominance of humans over animals and nature (Huggan and Tiffin 162). This demonization of the natural world, as seen in the werewolf's characterization, reflects a broader anthropocentric worldview where animals are stripped of their agency and relegated to symbols of sin and corruption. Through religious narratives, such hierarchies become institutionalized as "natural," perpetuating human supremacy at the expense of the natural world.

This reflects humanity's tendency to demonize the natural world, casting it as wild and threatening. Carter challenges this perspective by intertwining the werewolf's birthday with Christmas, a symbol of redemption and hope, to suggest that even creatures seen as monstrous are not beyond understanding or salvation. “It is Christmas Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through” (Carter 152). The wolf therefore stands more misunderstood than demonic.

While the grandmother's death could be interpreted as an act of savagery reinforcing the wolf's wickedness, Carter uses it instead as a symbolic gesture. Carter uses the grandmother to represent the older generations that cling on to superstitions and strict moral codes. “She has her Bible for company, she is a pious old woman” (Carter 148). The grandmother here stands for archaic patriarchal institutions. Therefore, the killing of the grandmother is symbolic of ridding the girl of the restrictive ideologies that view the world in strict binaries like good and evil or human and beast. The grandmother's death signifies the collapse of the world view that casts the world as dangerous and predatory. These stories though are meant to act as cautionary tales for young girls, can be also read as a way of perpetuating the fear and hatred of the natural world, in their minds. Freed from the grandmother's influence, the girl no longer needs to confirm to the societal expectations of passivity and obedience and therefore is able to build a more positive and empowering relationship with the wolf, that is free from the domain of fear, hatred and violence. Carter's portrayal highlights a radical departure from narratives that perpetuate domination and fear, offering instead a vision of coexistence that challenges humanity's estrangement from the natural world.

This story shows how the girl's empowerment is deeply linked to her relationship with the wolf. "She closed the window on the wolves' threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and since her fear did her no good, she ceases to be afraid" (Carter 150). The rejection of fear- both of the male predators and the natural world- becomes a shared feminist and ecological act. The wolf that is traditionally viewed as male and predatory is shown as vulnerable and deeply misunderstood. Similarly the women instead of being submissive and weak is fearless and empowered, because she willfully embraces the wolf. This conscious rejection of fear symbolize a rejection of the social narratives that seeks to dominate women and nature. Carter effectively highlights how such narratives rely on fear as an essential tool to control human- animal relationships and perpetuate patriarchal dominance.

The third story in the trilogy, "Wolf-Alice" is about a feral child raised by wolves and later taken in by humans to civilize her. When all attempts to civilize her fail, she is sent to a castle owned by a Duke who is a vampire-like figure. The Duke never actively engages in her life and is seen as a distant spectral figure, who is preoccupied with his own predatory existence and isolation. In the castle, the girl is left on her own and her discovery of her self awareness and her identity happens mostly independent of the Duke's interference. Her interactions with the Duke is minimal and indirect until the very end of the story when the Duke is shot and the girl tends to his wounds. This act highlights her evolution from a feral creature to a more evolved compassionate being.

Wolf-Alice's journey explores the blurred boundaries between the human and the animal by challenging the anthropocentric views of the animal and natural world. Her upbringing by the wolves challenges the traditional divide between the human and the animal world. She embodies the physical form of a human and her animalistic instincts and behaviour that she is unable to shed, even after spending her time with the nuns, signify her wild upbringing. This duality undermines the anthropocentric notion of what it means to be 'civilized' and 'human'. Carter uses this divide to critique human society's hierarchical view of the animals as inferior or wild. The girl does not fit into either category. Initially the girl is driven by her animal instincts. She walks on all fours and prefers eating raw meat. But as she grows up she also develops empathy for the Duke. Her recognition of herself in the mirror stands for her developing self awareness. This marks her shift from her animal side to a more human side. But it does not mean abandoning her more natural instincts, rather they are integrated into her developing consciousness.

The traditional notion of identity and binaries are further elaborated through the gothic elements that are intricately woven in the plot. The Duke's decaying castle symbolizes stagnation and the remnants of the patriarchal world. The Duke's inability to see himself in the mirror stands for his inability to connect with his own true self highlighting his detachment from both human and the natural world.

The Duke here stands for the 'other'. He is depicted as a vampire, a predator whose existence is outside the realm of the human society. He is a grotesque, decaying figure, trapped between life and death. His vampirism stands for his deep disconnection from humanity and nature. "These eyes open to devour the world in which he sees, nowhere, a reflection of himself;..." (Carter 155). The Duke is portrayed as weak, decaying and impotent, signifying his detachment from the vitality of the human and animal world. It is interesting to note that though he feeds on young women, the Duke never looks at Wolf-Alice as a potential prey.

This could be interpreted as a result of the girl's upbringing. She is never recognised as entirely human or entirely animal. "He lives in a gloomy mansion, all alone but for this child who has little in common with the rest of us as he does" (Carter 155). Her complex identity prevents her from being a typical target. This duality creates a space for mutual understanding between them. Her animal side becomes a space for negotiation and transformation. Thus, by rejecting simple binaries, like human-animal, victim-predator- the characters embrace a more complex, integrated understanding of existence. The decaying, predatory liminal existence of the Duke stands for the old patriarchal traditions embodying the oppressive systems of power and dominance. Just as the Duke is trapped in his decaying vampiric state, patriarchal traditions too trap individuals in their rigid roles, denying them their full humanity. Wolf-Alice's hybrid nature challenges the Duke's power by refusing to submit to the dynamic of fear and violence.

The Duke's death in the end is symbolic of the triumph of Wolf-Alice's compassion, self awareness and most importantly the integration of both human and animal instincts. Carter uses the death of the Duke to highlight the rejection of rigid binaries that have outlived their relevance. The appearing of the Duke's face in the mirror stands for his final redemption from his monstrous existence before his death. Through the Duke's death and Wolf-Alice's transformation, Angela Carter celebrates the power of compassion and hybridity by suggesting that true liberation lies in the rejection of the binaries and the acceptance of a more fluid understanding of the self. According to Ikoma, "it is a story that criticises the human tendency to demarcate black from white, bad from good, abnormal from normal. By showing that the demarcation itself creates the monsters and the outcasts, this story imagines an unbiased human relationship where differences are appreciated and we can coexist with equal gravity and significance" (Ikoma 19).

## Conclusion

The Wolf Trilogy invites readers to reconsider the way animals are portrayed in literature and how these representations govern human attitudes toward the natural world. Carter encourages a more ethical and complex understanding of animals, one that recognizes their agency and intrinsic connection to human nature. In doing so, the stories critique the hierarchical and anthropocentric worldview that often relegates animals to the status of symbols or villains, urging readers to rethink the ethics of human-animal relationships. By weaving familiar gothic and fairy tale tropes with broader ecological and philosophical questions, Carter reimagines humanity's place in the natural world. "Carter's wolf tales envision a society where different beings are respected because of, rather than in spite of, their difference" (Ikoma 23). Ultimately, her exploration of identity and hybridity dismantles the binaries that permeate human life and our relationships with animals, offering a compelling vision of coexistence and interconnectedness. In an era marked by environmental challenges and humanity's growing disconnection from the natural world, Angela Carter's *Wolf Trilogy* serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of compassion, and a closer bond with the non-human. Her stories urge us to rethink the divisions we construct between ourselves and the animal world, inviting us to imagine a future where such boundaries cease to separate us.

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