
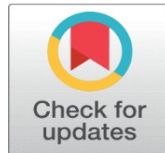
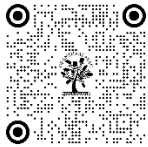


“GOOD GIRLS AND BAD WOLVES?” - A READING OF BLURRED GENDER ROLES AND PARENTHOOD IN THE GRAPHIC NARRATIVES OF THE RED RIDING HOOD

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1. INTRODUCTION

Warning little girls of the imperilment of walking alone in the “forest” and getting themselves violated by bad wolves, The Little Red Riding Hood is a haunting fairy tale that has stood the test of time along with many other fantastical tales over the centuries since its creation. The story of the little girl with the infamous red cape endangered by a “big bad wolf” draping her grandmother’s clothes has gained much attention, especially in the modern and postmodern adaptations of the tale. The tale of the Red Riding Hood may not have caught the attention of Walt Disney (though it was published as an animated short film, as part of the Laugh-O-Grams series that was released in 1922), but the little girl in the red cape has become a classic example of a girl endangered by the snares around.

ABSTRACT

Though not so iconised and popularized as the other fairy tales characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, or Beauty and the Beast, Little Red Riding Hood has seen multifarious subversive revisions and adaptations in modern and postmodern art and literature. The role of motherhood is inextricable from the traditional narratives of the fairy tales; nonetheless, the recent retellings of the story in fiction, poetry, and notably in graphic narratives show a blurring of the gender archetypes. This paper analyzes the blurring of gender boundaries and parenthood in the graphic retelling of the popular fairy tale, Red Riding Hood, namely The Little Red Wolf by Amélie Fléchais, “Red” by Teloka and Pi, and Emily Carroll’s short comics “In Conclusion” and “His Face All Red”. These graphic narratives will be analyzed with the theoretical discourses of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Marina Warner.

Keywords: Fairy Tale, Gender Blur, Parenthood, Red Riding Hood, Graphic Retelling, Webcomics

Originally titled "Le Petit Chaperon rouge", Little Red Riding Hood is believed to be one of the eponymous *contes du temps passé* (Tales of Bygone Times) collected and written by Charles Perrault, who is believed to have laid the foundation for fairy tales in the literary discourses. Predominantly stories with morals, his stories dealt with relationships between humans, animals, and the supernatural. The stories contain advice and warnings to little children and women of the dangers existing in the world, through tales of mishaps happening to those who don't heed these warnings. The translated narratives of Charles Perrault and the later collectors and editors of fairy tales nearly unanimously point out the moral of the story warning "children, especially pretty, nicely brought-up young ladies, ought never to talk to strangers; if they are foolish enough to do so, they should not be surprised if some greedy wolf consumes them, elegant red riding hoods and all" (Perrault et al., 1991). Perrault and his subsequent translators also advise young girls to be vigilant towards seemingly charming, good mannered and obliging "wolves" who pursue young girls in the street and flatter them with praises, as they are the most dangerous of all. This advice may have seemed innocent and good-willed at the time it was circulated, however, since the rise of various theoretical fields, each word is viewed with a critical eye. For instance, the advice is specifically addressed to "pretty, nicely brought-up young ladies", implying well wishes to those girls adhering to the societal conventions, or those possibly coming from families occupying higher social strata. The moral of the story also insinuates that wolves pursue those girls "in the streets", proposing the patriarchal notion that public spheres are unsafe or enticing (to be more overt) for young girls. Perrault's Red Riding Hood takes her clothes off and gets into bed with the wolf. The implications are obvious. This version is not appropriate for kids, and it never was intended for a young audience in the first place.

Narratives like these, though they were not regarded to have a literary eminence at first, had a great social influence, by and large through mothers, grandmothers, or whoever brought up the young ladies. Hence it is important to also point out that the little red riding hood was made by the doting mother for her daughter. The story reflects a symbiotic relationship between the mother, daughter and the grandmother, the youngest being conditioned and formed by the older generations. The fabled red cape is conspicuous due to its color and its function, red being a popular symbol of powerful emotions such as danger, passion, or lust. The late 19th century saw the rise of many universal theories that drew on the cosmos and related tales to planetary movements as they would have been perceived by the simple folk. "Red Riding Hood" was a fictionalization of primitive people's observations that the red dawn (Red Riding Hood) emerges daily from nocturnal obscurity (the wolf's belly)' (Bottigheimer, 2010). Some readers postulate that grandmother's illness is the cause of the events that unfold in the life of the red riding hood, the reason why she is made to go alone in the deep dark woods.

This disturbing tale has been manifested into various literary forms over the years, including poetry, novels, paintings, films, advertisements, and comics, to name a few. Angela Carter rationalizes the spirit of fairy tales as "heroic optimism", a preferable phrase to the customary hope for a "happily ever after" ending. Her versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" have been included in the collection *The Bloody Chamber*, which contains tales where the grandmother is the lycanthrope (or the werewolf) and killed by the granddaughter ("The Werewolf"). Another tale shows the red riding hood sensuously seducing the werewolf who attempts to devour her ("The Company of Wolves").

Studies conducted by Baccilega (1997) and Benson (2008) suggest these postmodern reconstructions of fairy tales, especially those that have a distinct feminist vigor, appropriates the established gender schemata of the fairy tale by granting positive agency to female characters. Postmodern fairy tales, especially in Jeanette Winterson's "Twelve Dancing Princesses", Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves" and A. S. Byatt's "The Story of the Elder Princesses", try to revisit fairy tales; tend to rehabilitate the villains of the fairy tales and offer clues that prompt conflicting inferences and value judgments (Kukkonen, 2013). For instance, Carter subverts the story of Red Riding Hood in her short story "The Company of Wolves" by representing a sexual union between the girl and the wolf. Winterson reconstructs the story of "Twelve Dancing Princesses" as a metanarrative in her novel *Sexing the Cherry* and rejects the heterosexual romance and union while positing homosexuality as an alternative solution. "Little Red Riding Hood and the Woof" by Roald Dahl features the Red Riding Hood seeking revenge on the Wolf. Anne Sexton, in her *Transformations*, revocates the patriarchal meanings preserved in the tales of Snow White, Briar Rose and Cinderella, and satirizes the cultural notions of femininity.

Though the fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood, has been adapted into various short fiction, novels, poetry, and movies, this paper focuses on graphic retelling, especially three of them. The reason why the following graphic narratives were chosen for the presentation is that analogies can be derived from the fairy tales as well as the graphic narratives because both have a long ancestry. The fairy tales, as we know them now, have had their origins in ancient myths and generational

folk tales which, due to their popularity, underwent a naturalizing process and attained its contemporary status as a genre with an implicit schema. Comics, similarly, are asserted by scholars and art historians to have descended from cave art or Bayeux Tapestry and as Fransisca Goldsmith notes, "A more compelling case can be made for tracing them back at least to the European master's painters of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who developed the elements of caricatures". (Goldsmith, 2005).

1.1. A READING OF BLURRED GENDER ROLES AND PARENTHOOD IN THE GRAPHIC NARRATIVES OF THE RED RIDING HOOD"

Mainstream literature and art have been preoccupied with some of the most popular and immortal fairy tale characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and so on. These character representations in stories, films (especially Walt Disney movies), and paintings have consciously and/ or unconsciously imparted idealistic beauty standards and rigidly patriarchal norms to the predominantly younger and female viewership. However, with the advent of postmodernism, the lesser-known fairy tale characters have gained recognition through transformative retellings in various literary discourses. Little Red Riding Hood is one iconic figure who has sustained its fame and universality since its emergence through the works of Charles Perrault and subsequent writers. More Recently, the Girl with the Red Riding Hood has had its multifarious and subversive appearances in mainstream graphic narratives, namely in DC Vertigo's *Fables* (2005-2015) and Zenescope Entertainment's *Grimms' Tales*.

Emily Carroll's spine-chilling comic adaptation of the fairy tale motifs, *Through the Woods*, includes a short graphic narration of Red Riding Hood. In this particular graphic retelling, the girl wearing the red cape is seen departing from her father's house to her mother's house. This is suggestive of a dysfunctional family, with the father and the mother living separately. The father instructs the girl, "Don't linger in the woods, travel swift and safe, wolves are circling in the dark" (Carroll, 2014).

Figure 1



Figure 1 Carroll, 2014

This is reminiscent of the mother's advice in the classic version of the story. Interestingly, the girl travels in the dusk and the night, with fireflies lingering in the night, besides moonlit streams scented by pale night flowers. The girl wears pajamas under her red coat, and the loving mother welcomes her warmly and immediately sends her to bed. Before sleeping, she is relieved to think that no wolves crossed her path that night. Consequently, the moon outside the window transmogrifies into the shadow of a wolf with sharp wide teeth and gloats that it needs only a little luck to find the girl. The chilling declaration is but a glimpse of the post-modern angst prevalent in *Through the Woods*, The illustrations drawn by Emily Carroll are eerie and dark, predominated by black, red, and blue brush strokes. Carroll is known for bringing "object" horror through her webcomics.

Addressed by interviewer Taryn Hubbard as "A Fairy-Tale Teller in the Digital Age", Emily Carroll's narrative of *The Red Riding Hood* brings out an implication of parental neglect and imbues the dangers looming over the child, ready to

pounce at the right moment. There is an absence of symbolic and semiotic relationships between the child and its father and mother respectively.

This brings to our notice the notion of abjection put forward by Julia Kristeva. An abject encompasses any aspect that makes humans feel horror and disgust because it blurs the delicate boundary between the subject (‘the self’) and the object (‘the other’). The abject marks what Kristeva terms a “primal repression,” one that precedes the establishment of the subject’s relation to its objects of desire and of representation, before even the establishment of the opposition, conscious/unconscious. It also has a strong feminist context, in that bodily functions, in particular, are “abjected” by a patriarchal social order. Kristeva refers to the primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal: “By way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (1982).

Amélie Fléchais’ imaginative retelling of the classic fairy tale entitled *The Little Red Wolf*, transforms the roles played by original stock characters and re-envisions the roles played by them. In this ecocritical retelling of the fairy tale, the roles of the prey and the predator are reversed. Here, a little wolf cub is the wearer of the red cape, and it is tricked and trapped by a young girl for her father to take revenge for his wife, the girl’s mother’s death by the wolves.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Fléchais, 2023

The story progresses with how the little wolf is rescued from the humans and the climax reveals that the hunter’s wife was not killed by wolves, but instead, accidentally by the hunter’s gunshot. Incidentally, it is also shown that the hunter’s wife loved the wolves and she is the one who had stitched the red cape for the little red wolf. However, the real intention for giving red capes to the wolves can be considered as another area to discuss.

Here, there is a distinct role reversal, the wolves are seen as victims of human perpetrators. The protagonist is a male wolf cub, who is trapped by a little girl, who is later rescued by the father wolf. There are no graphic depictions of violence and the story ends with everyone back to their safe abode.

The absence of the father, and the subsequent trials of the young girls, are not an atypical trope in the fairy tales. It is the same in the original tale as well, but theories also suggest that the father figure is in the disguise of the bad wolf or the huntsmen. In a child’s imagination, the confrontation of the huntsman and the wolf is equal to the confrontation of the child and his “bad father” (sooner or later, every child experiences negative emotions towards his father). In this story, the huntsman does the dirty work, so the child doesn’t feel guilt over the killing of the beast. In a psychoanalytical level, assuming the child is in its developmental stage, we can consider the observations of Kim A. Jones in her article “Assessing the Impact of Father - Absence from a Psychoanalytic Perspective”: “Loss of father in the first year of life has the potential to impact the mother and her ability to be fully immersed with the infant, which may, in turn, disrupt the optimal need gratification/frustration rhythm. For the infant, this attachment alteration may lead to impaired development of self and object differentiation, reality testing, frustration-tolerance and the capacity for basic trust and confidence, and disrupt the proceeding tasks of separation-individuation.” (2007)

However, in this graphic adaptation, there are not one, but two father figures: the grief-stricken, revenge-ridden human father for whom his daughter is ready to trap and kill little wolves to satisfy her Electra complex; and the heroic wolf father who rushes to rescue his little wolf in red cape.

In the third narrative, "Red" the 20-panel web comics created by queer artists Teloka and Pi and published in Tapas, the stock characters undergo a massive makeover. Broadly plotted as the story of Red Riding Hood, the role of the wolf is taken up by an apprehensive gender-fluid individual with feminine features. The panels begin with the omniscient narration cautioning the dangers of straying away from the path, plucking the flowers, or catching the attention of the wolves (1-2), resembling the advice of the mother to the little girl in the original story. However, the parent figure is absent in this version of the story.

Here, the roles of who is bad and who wears the red riding hood are blurred, inviting multiple interpretations. In this narrative, the feral nature of the lycanthrope is evoked first, when it meets the girl in the red cape and sparks of attraction happen between them. A man immediately threatens them with a gun, reminiscent of the classic woodcutter who saves Red Riding Hood in the romanticized version of the story. Here, the woodcutter is a symbol of all the social agencies that control and delimit the expressions of gender identity. The feral nature is exacerbated when the contact between the lycanthrope and the girl in the red cape is threatened by the gun. The final panels of the story show the feminine werewolf adorning the red cape previously worn by the mysterious girl. In this narrative, there is a blurring of gender identity, as it is quite different from the conventional gender roles of the characters, and hence it is difficult to conclude who is who. The red riding hood takes the symbol of embracing one's gender identity, and though the characters seem feminine in appearances, there are no pronouns or terms that confirm this. Only the red cape is suggestive of the roles taken up by the characters. Another distinctive factor of the story is the absence of the parent to give warnings, or of the grandmother to be deceived by. Hence there is also an absence in the sense of abject horror or disgust about one's identity.

2. CONCLUSION

Revisions and subversion of classical or folk literature have been in vogue since the late nineteenth century. Fairy tale characters have undergone psychological and ideological transfigurations over the years under the celebrations of writers, readers, critics, raconteurs, and feminists.

A deep reading of the famous cautionary fairy tale, "Little Red Riding Hood" inspires multiple readings into different perspectives, mainly focusing on the little girl wearing the red cape, her grandmother who is allegedly eaten by the wolf in some traditional narratives, and the big bad wolf itself who kills in some conventional discourse or killed in others. According to William Bernard McCarthy in "African American Tales of Rural South and Urban North", studies of the various versions of the fairy tales stories all over the world suggest the same kind of motifs, "Apparently very small children relish the formulaic language, the delicious threat posed by the wolf, and the successful evasion executed by the little girl" (271).

Jack Zipes observes that "Little Red Riding Hood" is a tale that will continue to evolve and undergo transformations in the hands of many authors: "There have been hundreds of notable literary revisions by such gifted authors as Ludwig Tieck, Alphonse Daudet, Joachim Ringelnatz, Milt Gross, James Thurber, Anne Sexton, Tomi Ungerer, Angela Carter, and Tanith Lee in which the nature of sexuality and gender stereotypes have been questioned and debated in most innovative ways. For instance, there are tales in which a rambunctious grandmother eats up everyone; the wolf is a vegetarian and the girl a lesbian; the girl shoots the wolf with a revolver; and the girl seduces the wolf. Needless to say, these literary alternatives and many films, such as the adaptation of Angela Carter's *In the Company of Wolves* (1985) directed by Neil Jordan, and *Freeway* (1996) written and directed by Matthew Bright, reflect changes in social mores and customs; as one of the most popular fairy tales in the world, "Little Red Riding Hood" will most likely undergo interesting changes in the future, and the girl and her story will certainly never be eliminated by the wolf (302).

In the traditional discourses, the role of the mother is so assertive and dominating, yet is subsequently disobeyed by the daughter. The idea of a mother repressing the desires or independence of the daughter/s is not an uncommon topic in psychoanalysis. Luce Irigaray, the noted French feminist and psychoanalyst, has given words to the anguished voice of the silenced daughter by writing about the dominant motherhood: "so whitewashed by the years, so censored-repressed, that it would be necessary to go back to a time predating Greek civilization to find another civilization which would permit us to decipher what there is of this archaic desire between the woman and the mother" (1981). However,

in the retellings of the fairy tale, the figure of the mother is barely present or featured in silence. In Emily Carroll's reworking, the father represents the role of dominance, whereas the mother is only at the receiving end. In Amelie Flechais' narrative, the human mother is "accidentally" killed by her spouse, envisioning another instance of subtle patriarchal dominance. In the third narrative, "Red" by Teloha and Pi, neither of the parent figures is present and the classical advice of the original tale is conveyed by an omniscient voice, signifying the transient censorship of society towards those who do not conform to the norm.

Why didn't Red Riding Hood know that the wolf was dangerous? Jennifer Freyd's theory of Betrayal blindness is one way of understanding why Little Red Riding Hood didn't know that the wolf was dangerous. When one experiences trauma, especially interpersonal trauma, one way of protecting the self is by not "knowing what we know and to not see what we see." Due to the bare minimum description of Little Red Riding Hood's age by Perrault and the subsequent editors and translators, illustrators have often pictured the protagonist as an infant, or a girl predominantly in her pre-Oedipal stage. Due to the unbalanced desire and control of the mother and grandmother, the girl is represented as naive and easily strayed from the path. However, other illustrators have occasionally drawn Red Riding Hood as a pre-teen or teenager as well, and the wolf, a symbol of her repressed desires which she falls prey to. A reading of the three graphic narratives reveals the various manners in which the writers have altered the age, gender, and even species of the protagonist: a child in a dysfunctional family in Emily Carroll's "In Conclusion", a little wolf cub endangered by a human girl child in Amelie Flechais' Little Red Riding Wolf and the gender fluid, shape-shifting young person in "Red" by Teloha and Pi.

Postmodern endeavors in literary discourse methods widened the scope of imagination. Electric and vertiginous consumption becomes the throb and core of societal life which in turn bestows a spectacular quality to everyday lives. As people demand explicit answers, the visual and the virtual gain more prominence over the symbolic and the metaphoric. Graphic narratives have flourished in popular culture, mainly for their iconic portrayal of life and characters. Experimentation and intertextuality project themselves as the basic characteristics of graphic narratives. In conclusion, it can be observed that the various post-modern retellings of Mythopoeic tales, bring about various subversive perspectives of gender, identity, the dichotomy of good and evil, complex relationships between parent and child, etc.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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