

Beyond “Happily Ever After”: Trauma, Identity Crisis, and the Rewriting of the Fairy-tales in Modern Narrative

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Abstract

This article aims to challenge the conventional fairy-tale promise of “happily ever after” by exploring how their narrative closure obscures the trauma and destabilized identity of the characters. Through an analysis of three modern retellings; *The Bloody Chamber* written by Angela Carter, *Wide Sargasso Sea* written by Jean Rhys, and the film *Maleficent*, the article argues that contemporary authors dismantle the illusion of permanent resolution as given by the conventional fairy tales. Utilizing a combined theoretical framework of trauma theory, feminist criticism, and postcolonial perspectives, the article foregrounds how violence, memory, and power shape the identity formation of the characters beyond any romantic closure. In her work, Carter has exposed patriarchal structures that construct female vulnerability, while Rhys has portrayed how identity gets fractured under trauma of colonial and gendered oppression, as Antoinette’s uncertainty about belonging reflects (Rhys 61).

Similarly, in the movie *Maleficent*, the titular character redefines love through maternal care rather than romance, emphasizing ethical transformation rooted in trauma. These three works reject the traditional romantic endings of “happily ever after” and instead depict identity-formation as a continuous process. By shifting focus from resolution to negotiation, this article positions the contemporary retellings of fairy tales as a critical site for examining the psychological and cultural complexities of post-traumatic selfhood (Caruth 4; Moi 21).

Keywords: Trauma theory, Feminist literary criticism, Postcolonial theory, Identity fragmentation, Narrative Closure.

Introduction

Traditionally, fairy tales conclude with the idea that there is a happy ending where everything will be okay, after being married or having some evil defeated and returning to how it was. This ending implies that the problems of all characters have been dealt with but does not show us the psychological, social and structural aspects of the suffering that remains in all characters after

being affected by the acts of others. According to Cathy Caruth and Toril Moi, trauma and identity are not easily resolved just by one narrative event; they continue after the narrative ends (Caruth 4; Moi 21).

A conventional structure of a fairy tale contains a transformation within the storyline where the heroine becomes a princess, the beast becomes a prince and chaos becomes ordered. The transformations seem quick, easy and comprehensive; therefore, one assumes that the problems caused by traumatic events will be resolved as long as one character receives romantic or moral closure. By operating under this assumption, one will not take into account all of the on-going recovery, memory, and identity building that took place following any traumatic event.

There are many retellings today which from various perspectives address this thought process. For example, in *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter critiques the patriarchal power that resides within a romantic story. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys overtly illustrates that identity can be fractured as a result of either British colonial oppression or gender oppression. For example, the protagonist Antoinette asks herself, "I often wonder who I am; where is my country; where do I belong?" (Rhys 61). Similarly, *Maleficent* reconfigures the fairy-tale villain through trauma and betrayal, redefining love as ethical and relational rather than romantic.

This article will contend that the contemporary retelling of fairy tales deconstructs the idea of closure of narrative, and instead offers identity as an evolving entity based on trauma, memory, and power.

Literature Review

Research regarding fairy tales has addressed their psychological and ideological functions since the beginning of academic study of this genre. Early psychoanalytic interpretations (e.g., Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*) suggested that fairy tales could provide symbolic representations of the unconscious and psychological fear responses while providing a form of reassurance through the use of closure. In other words, fairy tales suggest that conflict will ultimately be resolved through a thoughtful structure (Bettelheim 8). Feminist critics challenge this perspective by exposing the ideological constructs behind these narratives. In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Warner asserts that fairy tales create and reinforce the perspective of women as patriarchal beings, presenting marriage as the ultimate symbolic resolution to a heroine's struggles (Warner 312). Although the closure of the story also provides a sense of resolution, it also provides an avenue for continuing to police gendered roles and conformity.

The most recent scholarship incorporates trauma and postcolonial theory to indicate that suffering continues beyond any resolution depicted through the use of narrative closure. Caruth explains that trauma is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be known in full; this demonstrates resistance to closure (Caruth 4). Similarly, researchers such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue that that identity can only be considered historical and remains fluid due to the nature of colonization (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 5).

Contemporary retellings engage directly with these insights. Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* foregrounds female agency and exposes normalized violence within romantic narratives (Carter

11). Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals the fragmentation of identity under colonial and patriarchal forces (Rhys 61). The film *Maleficent* offers a unique way to challenge the "moral binaries" often presented in traditional fairy tales by depicting the film's main character as someone who has undergone trauma and ethical transformation instead of as being purely a villain (Stromberg).

Through these two perspectives, a significant change in the study of fairy tales has occurred; instead of being solely focused on the moral resolution of the genre, researchers are now looking at fairy-tale studies as sites of negotiation for cultural anxieties surrounding trauma, identity, and power. In addition to continuing this trend, this study demonstrates how contemporary fairy-tale retellings reject the notion of a "happily ever after" ending and emphasize the ongoing process of identity creation that occurs after experiencing trauma.

Theoretical Framework

By using an interdisciplinary approach that combines trauma theory, feminist literary criticism, and postcolonial theory, this study looks at contemporary fairy-tale retellings that dismantle the myth of "happily ever after." Traditional fairy tales usually resolve conflict through either transformation or marriage, which present closure as a complete resolution. This study's framework will show how these endings are also a way to ignore some of the psychological and structural effects of violence, dislocation, and inequality.

The trauma theory assists with the understanding of how past experiences remain unhealed. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma occurs in a way that is too immediate and overwhelming to be fully understood at the moment it happens and that it repeatedly happens through the use of fragmented memory and repetition (Caruth 4). This perspective counters the narrative logic of fairy-tale resolution and demonstrates that suffering cannot be completely resolved within a singular narrative moment.

Feminist literary criticism critiques the gendered constructs present in fairy tale traditions. As noted by Marina Warner, marriage serves as "the symbolic resolution of the heroine's challenges," and proliferates the values of compliance and conformity (Warner 312). Thus, feminist analysis reveals that the notion of "happily ever after" is an ideological construct that simultaneously affirms patriarchal hegemony and does not confront trauma.

Postcolonial theory complicates notions of identity through the examination of identity as fragmented due to cultural and historical dislocation. For example, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin contend that identities are formed through historically unstable locations (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 5). This argument is presented in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Antoinette's fragmented identity is shaped by her experiences of colonialism and patriarchy (Rhys 61).

These three works demonstrate the challenge that contemporary authors are making to some of the traditional expectations associated with fairy tale storytelling. *The Bloody Chamber* opens the door for a feminist critique of the novel to address multiple issues associated with not only the representation of patriarchal violence but also as an example of how female agency has been re-

created; both through the trials and tribulations of the protagonist, but also through the act of her being able to take control of her own destiny.

The *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates how the use of postcolonial theory and trauma can demonstrate the fragmented identities of characters who have been affected by a colonial past. In *Maleficent*, trauma disrupts moral identity as a result of being betrayed and then finding recovery.

This study demonstrates to what extent contemporary retelling rejects narrative closure and places identity at the forefront as an ever-evolving entity through the different uses of narrative.

Methodology

This research utilizes qualitative textual analysis in order to assess how modern texts reconstruct the classic elements of a fairy tale. The methodology consists of a close reading of the narrative structure, the characterization of characters, the symbolism present, and the thematic progression of a story, in order to establish how the concept of happily ever after has been altered (Eagleton 12; Hutcheon 7).

The three works that have been considered for this research include *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *Maleficent* (2014). They were chosen due to their wide-ranging representation within different types of media and their substantial connections to key fairy-tale themes.

The initial focus of the analysis is on identifying the primary characteristics associated with classic fairy tales. These characteristics would relate to continuity (transformation), dichotomous moral values, and the resolution to the story through the tradition of marriage or social restoration (Tatar 23). These attributes are then used as a common standard for analysing how a modern text subverts the closure of their own narrative.

Consequently, there are three theoretical lenses employed on each of these works to provide an alternative standpoint to the analyses. Trauma Theory is used to connect violence, loss, and memory and their effects on shaping how one can understand the subjectivity of human existence and how they resist closure (Caruth 4); feminist criticism investigates the dynamics of power and gender specifically with respect to the critique of patriarchy (Moi 21); and post-colonial theory addresses identity fragmentation as expressed through different historical and cultural contexts (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 5).

The comparative analyses performed identified similar trends across all three works such as the act of subverting romantic closure; the destabilisation of dichotomous moral constructs; and the minimalist definition of identity as an ongoing fluid process. By integrating theoretical and textual analysis, the methodology demonstrates how contemporary fairy-tale retellings shift focus from fixed resolution to ongoing psychological and cultural negotiation.

Rewriting Trauma and Agency: Gender, Power, and Narrative Disruption in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* shows how contemporary fairy tales include trauma, gendered power and psychological complexity to subvert typical fairy tale closure. By centering on women's agency, sexual politics, and systemic violence, Carter disrupts the ideological underpinnings of a fairy-tale ending (Zipes 157).

In the titular tale, the protagonist's encounter with the Marquis exposes her to two types of danger: physical and symbolic. She thinks about "a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away" (Carter 11). Her thoughts illustrate the conflict between desire and fear within a patriarchal context of power. Using trauma theory, this moment demonstrates Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma surfaces later and changes identity through its lasting place in one's life (Caruth 4, 7). As a result, the protagonist's exposure becomes the focal point of her psychological growth.

Through maternal actions, feminist analysis reveals how Carter disrupts traditional roles. As the protagonist remembers, "My Mother descended the stairs; she was majestic, terrible and beautiful; she came to save me" (Carter 52). The inversion of the passive heroine creates a new understanding of female agency that constitutes both power and protection and poses a challenge to patriarchal constructs (Moi 21; Zipes 158).

A psychoanalytic reading of the works enhances this understanding further. Bacchilega (29) describes that the castle of the Marquis and its hidden chambers are representative of repressed desires and unconscious knowledge. The heroine's curiosity also represents the conflicting pull of Eros and Thanatos, in that desire, fear, and moral awareness are all intertwined (Bacchilega 31).

The ideas surrounding these themes also occur in "*The Company of Wolves*," whereby the heroine asserts her independence and autonomy, asserting, "She knew she was nobody's meat" (Carter 127). In this instance, trauma is integrated in the evolving self of the heroine through her own personal evolution (Caruth 7), and the feminist criticism associated with that assertion of autonomy (Moi 25).

Overall, Carter's work represents a fairly significant rejection of the fairy tale ending, instead stating that identity is an ongoing negotiation that is affected by trauma, desire, and power. Through the integration of trauma theory, feminist criticism, and psychoanalytic interpretation, her narratives expose the instability underlying the myth of "happily ever after."

Fragmented Identity and Colonial Trauma: Rewriting Narrative Closure in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys reinterprets the character of Bertha Mason from the book *Jane Eyre*, written by Charlotte Bronte, and critiques the concept of finding resolution through marriage. Using postcolonial and psychoanalytic methods, the author examines how displacement, violence and patriarchy fracture identity instead of allowing for their healing or restoration to make whole (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2). Rather than providing resolution, the narrative explores the enduring existence of alienation and marginality from a continually created position by social structures (Caruth 4).

Antoinette Cosway (the main character) has her earlier years lived in Jamaica following the end of slavery and it was during this period that she felt both excluded from the social world around her, as well as uncertain of who she was. Her identity is marked by her lack of connection to any kind of a stable social structure within her life. As she questions, "I often wonder...who I am; and where's my country; and where do I belong" (Rhys 61). This sense of fragmentation aligns with the theory of trauma; as Cathy Caruth asserted, then, traumatic events will never reach complete understanding; they will continue through their dislocation or through the repeated 'replay' of the past (Caruth 7). The lack of societal acknowledgment for Antoinette ensures that she cannot ever know secure stability in her identity.

In fairy tales, traditionally, marriage is viewed as a resolution, but in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, marriage is portrayed as a site of violence and erasure of identity. By creating an alternate name for Antoinette (naming her Bertha), Rochester uses his power to dominate Antoinette by destroying her connection to her culture and identity and providing a barrier whereby she will never receive acknowledgment from the world in which she lives (Rhys 102). Not only does this act exemplify how postcolonial domination occurs through control of language (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 5), but it also supports the subjugation of women through the denial of female subjectivity through patriarchal violence (Moi 23). Instead of confirming one's identity, marriage has actually created more confusion in relationships due the psychological effects of trauma.

Rhys uses a specific form of narrative structure, alternating between the two characters of Antoinette and Rochester within different kinds of realities. The fluidity between these perspectives and the blending of the inside and outside realities demonstrate that the illnesses associated with trauma do cause fractures in a person's ability to deal with the trauma they experienced (Rhys 45-47; Caruth 9). The oppressive environment of the heat, decay and wilderness that surround the novel are representative of the way in which Antoinette is psychologically lost, connecting the environment to the trauma suffered by Antoinette (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 7).

By placing suffering within the larger framework of colonialism, the history of colonialism, and the history of racial hierarchies, this novel demonstrates just how systemic violence shapes how people create their identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 3; Caruth 8). Ultimately, *Wide Sargasso Sea* breaks away from the traditional fairy-tale model of closure to demonstrate that identity is a process of continuous change due to trauma, power, and historical dislocation (Caruth 7; Moi 21).

Trauma, Moral Reconfiguration, and Agency: Reimagining Villainy in Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent*

Maleficent demonstrates how postmodern film reinterprets the classic fairy-tale, specifically in case, *Sleeping Beauty* by focusing on the concept of trauma, psychological depth, and womanhood rather than providing a closure-type ending. Although Maleficent, in the classic version of *Sleeping Beauty* is known as an evil character, she is shown in this film as a woman who has suffered betrayals and the loss of her family and thus is not considered a “happily ever after” character (Hutcheon 7).

Maleficent experiences intense trauma due to Stefan's betrayal and the brutal severing of her wings; this trauma profoundly affects and shapes her psychological state and moral response. This trauma also confirms Cathy Caruth's theory that trauma does not get fully processed at the moment of occurrence but continues to shape one's subjectivity over time (Caruth pgs.4-7). Maleficent's single act of vengeance is a result of unresolved trauma. Additionally, her repeated, ongoing acts demonstrate the complicated relationship she has established between her memory of experiencing loss and feeling morally obligated.

The film also subverts traditional gender roles from a feminist vantage point. Maleficent is portrayed both as a powerful being and an emotionally developed being. The evolution from vengeance to nurturing can also be a challenge to patriarchal narratives that place women in either subordinate or villainous roles (Moi pgs.21-23). The impetus for Stefan's betrayal is an attempt at ambition and power and serves to illustrate the continuation of patriarchal domination.

Furthermore, a psychoanalytic reading of the film expands the understanding of the trauma experienced by Maleficent. Her loss of wings represents her physical violation and a psychic rupture. The loss of the wings represents a loss of power over one's body (Bacchilega 29-31). Attachment to Aurora represents the beginning of Maleficent's journey of emotional healing by replacing her need for revenge with a desire to nurture and protect.

The relationship between Maleficent and contemporary changes the way one thinks about love - from romantic love to maternal love and from erotic love to ethical love. The end of the story, which shows how Maleficent heals Aurora, does not have a definitive closure, but rather shows how people develop their identities over time, through trauma and choice (Caruth, 9; Moi, 25).

Maleficent emphasizes trauma and moral ambiguity, as well as female agency in retelling fairy tales, and makes traditional "happy ending" conclusions more complicated by challenging the ideas of villainy and the way identities are continually constructed over time through social and psychological experiences (Caruth 4; Moi 21; Bacchilega 29).

Reconceptualizing the Fairy Tale: Trauma, Identity, and Agency in Contemporary Reinterpretations

All three texts analyzed - *The Bloody Chamber*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Maleficent* - were developed using similar approaches in revising contemporary fairy tales. They all help to undermine the "happily ever after" component of fairy tales, by focusing on trauma, identity, and power, even though they are in three different forms - short fiction, a novel, and a film respectively (Caruth 4; Moi 21; Bacchilega 29).

Trauma is an essential part of each text's central idea; both Carter and Rhys demonstrate that trauma can change a person's identity and the way they relate to others. In Carter's example, the heroine suffers from the psychological effects of constant abuse from men in patriarchal societies (Carter 11, 52). Antoinette's identity develops as a result of colonialism and gender-based oppression; this is shown by how societal constructs contribute to her feelings of trauma (Rhys 61, 102; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 5).

In these accounts, identity is reconceptualized as unstable and contingent rather than as definitive or recoverable through marriage. The heroines in Carter's stories use their agency by confronting and surviving (Carter 127), Antoinette in Rhys' story undergoes fragmentation due to the erasure of her name and history (Rhys 102), and Maleficent develops her identity through care and ethical decision making rather than through romantic completion (Stromberg). Thus identity becomes a process created through memory, power, and experience (Moi 21; Bacchilega 31).

A third area of overlap is the wreckage of moral and social binaries. Carter examines the workings of patriarchy (Carter 11, 52); Rhys exposes gender and colonial hierarchy (Rhys 61, 102; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 3-5); and Maleficent deconstructs the traditional idea of hero and anti-hero through moral ambiguity (Stromberg). Together these texts illustrate how the "happy ever after" resolution presented in conventional fairy-tales acts as an ideological entity used to obscure ongoing power and agency struggles.

In the end, all three authors establish that happiness is not an absolute concept, but rather a provisional one. Carter's protagonists live beyond their traumatic past (Carter 127), Rhys' Antoinette continues to negotiate her identity (Rhys 61), and Maleficent reconciles herself with others through care in relationships instead of through romantic partnerships (Stromberg). These new definitions of "happiness" portray fulfilment as a process of continual change based on resilience and ethical behavior (Caruth 7; Moi 25; Bacchilega 34).

In conclusion, all of the authors in this study—Carter, Rhys, and Stromberg—reject the simplistic end to traditional fairy tale narratives and highlight the complexity of trauma, identity formation, and systematic power. By using various literary and cinematic techniques, they

reframe (in some instances) the narrative of fairy tales as an area of continuous negotiation rather than resolution. Therefore, they help people understand their lives better after the idealized “happily ever after” (Caruth 4; Moi 21; Zipes 158).

Conclusion

This research has revealed how contemporary retellings of fairy tales, such as *The Bloody Chamber*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Maleficent*, unsettle the deeply rooted ideological and psychological meanings associated with the end of traditional fairy tales, i.e. the state of “happily ever after,” because they show that narrative closure (resolution of the narrative) in fairy tales inadequately reflects the continued effects of trauma, fragmentation of one’s identity and the maintenance of structures of power (Caruth 4; Moi 21; Bacchilega 29). The authors who wrote these retellings show that trauma is an ongoing influence on the formation of one’s subjectivity and identity is negotiable, meaning that it cannot be fixed or returned to a state of wholeness via marriage (Caruth 7).

Across these texts, agency emerges through resistance to oppressive structures. The protagonists in Carter’s novels grapple with patriarchal violence and assert their independence (Carter 11, 52, 127); Rhys’s *Antoinette* illustrates the fragmented state of colonial and gender oppression (Rhys 61, 102; Ashcroft et al. 5); and *Maleficent* reconstructs identity through trauma, care, and ethical choice (Stromberg). Thus, happiness is redefined here as an ongoing experience of resilience and moral engagement rather than a final state of completion (Moi 25; Bacchilega 34).

The article provides new insights into the field of literary study by synthesizing trauma theory, feminist criticism, and post-colonialism to illuminate the structural and psychological intricacies that exist beneath the surface of all storytelling forms (Caruth 4; Moi 21; Ashcroft et al. 2-5). In addition, these interpretations clarify how fairy tales remain relevant to the modern lives today: they provide frameworks for examining how individuals endure suffering and come to identify themselves through their ethical choices; rather than offering predetermined endings, contemporary narratives present the reader with dynamic illustrations of how people experience their lives after fairy tales are finished—this ongoing negotiation, reflection, and metamorphosis creates an ongoing process of achieving “happily ever after” (Caruth 7; Bacchilega 31).

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