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**(Un)becoming Women in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* and
Vijaydan Detha's *Chouboli***

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The representation of females in folktales and the influence of this representation on women's self-images, behaviours and hopes, their possibilities of accomplishments and expectations of rewards, has been the subject of feminist folktale and fairy tale scholarship from the last fifty years. Donald Haase's review of feminist fairy tale scholarship attributes its beginnings to Alison Lurie's articles, "Fairy Tale Liberation"(1970) and "Witches and Fairies"(1971). Lurie argues that the commonly known classics and more significantly, the less popular folktales, both depict strong, forceful and competent female characters. A year later, in 1972, Marcia Lieberman published her contrasting ideas in response to Lurie's articles. This catalytic debate is said to have been the start of feminist social, political and historical research on folktales and the specific genre of fairytales.¹ It gradually gave way to the current day development of a more nuanced view of the relationship between gender and folktale, "a view that avoids the insupportable generalisations about the genre as a whole" (Haase 15-16)

However, Haase's passing reference(in a footnote) to the French philosopher, essayist and activist Simone de Beauvoir's study of folktales as a sociocultural medium to subdue women, requires more attention. Just as the indebtedness of feminist literary criticism to Beauvoir was acknowledged years later, the same seems to hold true for feminist fairy tale scholarship too.²

¹Refer to Haase for a detailed description of this detail.

²For instance, refer to Kawan's analysis of the similarities between Lieberman's abovementioned essay "Some Day My Prince Will Surely Come" and Beauvoir's ideas. Lieberman's ideas "are strongly reminiscent of much that had been stated earlier by Beauvoir...whom however she does not mention." (Kawan, 39-40)



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This paper describes Beauvoir's static "myth of the eternal feminine" and its perpetuation as beliefs through folklore vis-a-vis the idea of the dynamic "lived experience" as reflected in other realities of women's existence. The enumeration of these contrasting, yet, complementary ideas is followed by studying the more contemporary re-writing of three women-centric folktales, namely, "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Company of Wolves" in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) and "Chouboli" in Vijaydan Detha's *Baatani Phulwari* (1961-1976). The women characters in these folktale-inspired stories by the two contemporary writers are analyzed in light of these reciprocal ideas to show the movement from the static roles endowed through the myth of womanhood to the more potent experiences of life.

Essentialist myths of womanhood have existed in thought, literature and culture since centuries. These ideas have perpetuated fixed and universal feminine traits such as gentleness, obedience, compassion and nurturing abilities in women. In her seminal work, *The Second Sex*,³ Simone de Beauvoir discusses the static nature of "the myth of woman". This static myth can be understood as the fixed roles and identities that are attributed to the feminine, which is distinctly opposed to the masculine. There are notions that translate as norms when it comes to the gendered roles that women are expected to perform. When gender binaries are static, any overlapping between the two roles or identities is discouraged because the feminine and masculine genders are considered to be firmly attached to their sexes. All differences of nationalities, experiences and class in the civilized societies are "outweighed by the similarities decreed by gender" (Anderson and Zinser, xii).

The title of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) refers to the idealisation of similar traditional roles ascribed to women in order to establish the dominance of men. The "fulfilment of their own femininity" was the "only commitment" for women and was accorded the highest value. Friedan's feminine mystique was closer to the experiences of her own life as well as the real experiences of her former classmates from whom she had recorded answers in an elaborate

³It is noteworthy that this seminal text was published almost a quarter of a century before the earlier mentioned debate on feminist fairy tales had begun.



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questionnaire. Despite this, she does not find dominant instances where static myths of the feminine are contested.

Unlike Beauvoir and Friedan, Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*(1970) explained the role of patriarchy in ascribing fixed roles, tendencies and statuses for each gender, thus making the feminine subordinate and dependant. She broadened the meaning of patriarchy to include its prevalent present day definition of an institution that is oppressive towards women. Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990) furthers the theory about enactment of gender. Like Beauvoir, she believes that a woman becomes a woman and acquires this identity by an "iteration of roles" of being a woman. She also sees scope for "negotiation, alteration and conflict" in the repeated enactment of this role.

Beauvoir recognizes the significant role of the myth of womanhood in folk literature. In the last section of Volume One of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir asserts in the chapter titled "Myths" that the folk elements in "children's literature, mythology, tales, and stories reflect the myths created by men's pride and desires." The hierarchy of man perched on a pedestal is reconfirmed by folklore. She refers to Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty in various contexts as the most common passive heroines of fairy tales. Beauvoir remarks, "...there are a few sorceresses, some old women who wield formidable power in stories. But they are not attractive characters. More seductive are " the fairies, mermaids, and nymphs who escape male domination; but their existence is dubious and barely individualized" (350). Therefore, the image that is perpetuated and re-enforced with each telling of folktale is that of the woman as:

Sleeping Beauty, Donkey Skin, Cinderella, Snow White, the one who receives and endures.... the young man sets off to seek the woman; he fights against dragons, he combats giants; she is locked up in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, chained to a rock, captive, put to sleep: she is waiting. *One day my prince will come ... Someday he'll come along, the man I love ...* the popular refrains breathe dreams of patience and hope in her.



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The supreme necessity for woman is to charm a masculine heart; this is the recompense all heroines aspire to, even if they are intrepid, adventuresome; and only their beauty is asked of them in most cases (352-353).

This passivity of women in folklore is also necessitated to make the activity of men shine brighter. Beauvoir contends that the woman is removed from the site of activity because her entire situation “predestines her to play this role of an onlooker. The chevalier jousts in tournaments for his lady; poets seek woman’s approval” (236). This role of woman on the sidelines is also necessary because only then can she become the coveted prize promised to the adventurers and heroes. In order to maintain a steady balance, any action by a man needs to be supported by equal inaction by a woman. As Beauvoir remarks,

What would Prince Charming do if he did not wake up Sleeping Beauty...How would [rich men] spend this money for which they work their whole lives if they did not dedicate it to a woman?...Clearly man wants woman’s enslavement when fantasizing himself as a benefactor, liberator, or redeemer; if Sleeping Beauty is to be awakened, she must be sleeping; to have a captive princess, there must be ogres and dragons... Sleeping Beauty’s smile fulfils Prince Charming: the captive princesses’ tears of happiness and gratitude give meaning to the knights’ prowess. (236-237)

Beauvoir later also declares that this static idea of the myth of womanhood, “escapes all contention because it is endowed with an absolute truth. Thus, to the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existence of *women*, mythic thinking opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and fixed; if the definition given is contradicted by the behaviour of real flesh-and blood women, it is women who are wrong” (315). One problem that arises due to this static gender binary is explained later in the same chapter:



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Experiential denials cannot do anything against myth. . . . women manifest themselves in many different ways; but each of the myths built around woman tries to summarize her as a whole; each is supposed to be unique; the consequence of this is a multiplicity of incompatible myths, and men are perplexed . . . men find the same old confusion. . . [of] understanding how a person could be light and dark at the same time. (315-316)

However, even though Beauvoir goes as deep as any philosopher in her analysis of oppressive myths and their mute acceptors, she also narrates situations with others who resist this oppression with all possible force. In addition to this, *The Second Sex* also appears to make “a clear distinction between myths and facts with respect to women's situation.” (Le Doeuff 90). This distinction is furthered by its position in opposition to the free judgements of the realities of lives that women lead as unique individuals. The clarity of this distinction is evident in the separate volumes and their distinct titles that posset both “Facts and Myths” as complementary and contrasted to “Lived Experience”.

While Beauvoir assures of the static nature of the governing myths of womanhood perpetuated through folklore, she also believes in the difficulty of describing this or any other myth as a fixed entity. She took into account that traditional feminine roles and attitudes were in the process of changing or had changed already, that women “were beginning to affirm their independence”(Kawan 37). The flexibility and contradictory existence of the myth is echoed in her hope that “the myth of woman will be phased out one day” (196).

Although she clearly emphasizes the socially constructed nature of femininity, one only needs to read a little ahead to discover the radical, feminist nature of Beauvoir's expectations from “. . . the poet, [for whom] living reality is a far more generous resource than a worn-out fantasy” (322). In hopes of more individualistic writings in the future, she believes that the multitude of ambiguous figures that remain yet to be defined by literature, such as “...the pitiful, the detestable, sinners, victims, coquettes, the weak, the angelic, the devilish...” will replace the



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fixed poles of “the mother, the faithful fiancée and the patient wife” and the “vamps and witches” (246).

In the contemporary post-feminist world, this living reality of fierce, independent women who defy static myths in unique ways has been used to rewrite newer versions of folktales and fairy tales. Beauvoir’s hopes of writings based on the realities of bold and forceful women finds some fulfillment in British writer Angela Carter’s re-written fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* as well as in Rajasthani folktales collected and re-created by Indian writer Vijaydan Detha in *Baatanri Phulwari*. Despite the fact that the two writers differ widely in geographical locales, socio-economic settings, themes and style, this similarity in the women characters in their stories is noteworthy. As they use the more flexible form of folklore for their inspiration, they are less burdened by the task of supporting the established order of written literature. For both these writers, these tales provide a flexible structure with infinite possibilities. The framework from an oral tale is utilized and the writer reworks the tales using the experiences of womanhood in order to enliven this medium.

The woman characters in these selected folktale-inspired-stories by Carter and Detha have been analyzed in this paper and evidence of movement from the static myths to the dynamic nature of lived experiences are traced. Even though there are representations of a static, non-mysterious woman character in the beginning, as each story progresses, a definite shift towards contemporary living reality is observed. An attempt has been made to situate these stories in the space between Beauvoir’s earlier static idols of womanhood that construct them and her ideas about the freeing individuality of emancipated womanhood that lets them change their situation. The truth of the seen, heard and “felt experiences” takes precedence and the static myth recedes to the background. The clear distinction that Beauvoir draws between the static idol of the myth of woman and the free judgment of her lived experiences are demonstrated in the following analyses of these female characters. Furthermore, the cultural and contextual differences between the women in the re-created folktales under study are kept in mind to highlight the heterogeneity in their contestations of patriarchal social structures, relationships, identities and ideology.



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Angela Carter had turned to fairy tales because of the narrative's flexibility in subversive appropriation. Carter's awareness of the falsehood of the static mythologized depictions is seen in her understanding of myths as “. . . ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean, without trying to work out. . . .” (Katsavos 11). In her introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* (1990), Carter declares that the female protagonists in all her stories are not cast in one mould but are rather seen in multitudes of being clever, bold, good, silly, sinister or unfortunate (xii). In yet another introduction to *Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen: Fairy Tales from around the World*, Marina Warner explains how Carter turns the “most cautionary folktales” topsy-turvy in order to advance completely distinct values of womanhood (x). Carter also remarks that the stories in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* would affect men more than women because women readers had a better knowledge of the falseness of the “mythologized” depictions of women in literature. This idea also echoes Beauvoir's earlier quoted remark about the perplexity and confusion of men. Reading the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* Collection with this in mind can help us in understanding how lived experiences gradually take priority over the static gender binary of the mythical fairy tales that Carter draws upon.

The story “The Bloody Chamber” is based on the European folktale of the Bluebeard, a French nobleman who murders his wives and keeps their dead bodies hidden. In Carter's recreation, the static gender role is given at the beginning of the story to the young heroine. This is accompanied by a hint of the experiences of the “eagle-featured, indomitable” mother who has “outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates” and “shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand”. This unfeminine mother always kept in her reticule an antique service revolver that had belonged to her late husband. (Carter 1). These actions are in complete contrast to the static gender roles that myths assign to women.

On the other hand, the behaviour of the naive heroine of the story makes her the embodiment of stereotypical gender roles confirmed by the myth of womanhood in more than one ways. She



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is not aware of her destiny separate from that of her husband. She is also satisfied with being the commoditized “bargain”. Despite the foreshadowing awareness that “opals are bad luck” (Carter 4), the revelation of the mysterious deaths of her husband’s numerous former wives and the knowledge that marriage was going to be like a permanent exile that will bring loneliness for her, she does not regret her decision. She seems happy with her final destiny to give birth to a male heir. The naivety and acceptance of the subjugated role make the reader believe for a little while that she is another one of those heroines who fit into moulds. An emphatic instrument that fits her into this role is the comparison with the figure of Eve whose actions are pre-ordained by the God-like figure of the Marquis.

However, after she has played this role and has fallen into the trap of the Marquis; “lived experience” begins to take precedence while the static myth is sidelined. The heroine becomes more human than feminine as she begins to oscillate between “being insecure and feeling sure of herself” (Manley 71). As she begins to explore the mansion and unlock various doors finally leading to the discovery of the bloody chamber, she also begins to embark on a journey of self-discovery and establishment of her subjectivity. Manley’s observation is noteworthy in this regard:

In illustrating the bride's journey towards recognizing herself as subject, Carter places her protagonist in several scenes involving mirrors. The mirrors, by providing opportunities to see herself as other see her, allow the protagonist to begin to have a more complete sense of herself as subject. They also reinforce her in-process situation by indicating her wish to see herself as innocent and yet capable of recognizing the Marquis's wish to dictate her story. (73)

Her recognition of the fact that she has inherited her mother’s spirit fills her with confidence in the bloody chamber, yet she loses her nerves at the Marquis’ summons. The dualities of the protagonist’s reactions veer the story towards a dynamic one.



The penultimate action of her mother taking up the role usually reserved for a masculine persona further emphasizes the precedence that “lived experience” takes over the static mythical roles. The earlier hints at the mother’s contrastive nature now gain meaning. The mother not only physically saves her from patriarchy but also plays a crucial role in directing her away from the role that the protagonist had “chosen”, because she feels her mother’s spirit driving her on. By rejecting the predominance of physical beauty and submission to the masculine persona or his wealth, the protagonist moves far away from the static roles she had begun with. Her determination to create her own life comes from the opportunity for her to make a career as a musician, yet another gift from her mother. This ending of the story also underscores the importance of understanding Beauvoir’s assertions about the independence of a worker and the role of individual work and financial freedom in a woman’s ultimate emancipation.

The entire process of change makes the protagonist aware that she is telling her own story and not the one narrated by the Marquis. This is re-enforced by the first person narration, instead of the stereotypical “Once upon a time there was a . . .” beginning. This shift from the authoritative, masculine figure of the omniscient narrator to the first person represents the shift from fixed perceptions to real experiences and is seen in many other stories of the collection too.

The protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber”, who oscillates between exploration and confirmation, gives way to a woman cast in a different mould altogether in “The Company of Wolves”, the last story of the collection. Lived experience has thus begun to take precedence over static roles at the very beginning in this version of fairytale of the Little Red Riding Hood. In the larger structure of the collection of stories as a whole, there is a transformation in the protagonist’s nature, from the woman protagonist of the first story who needs to recognize her individuality to this ‘woman-in-the-company-of-wolves’, who has made the journey from naivety to strength even before the action of the story begins.

The introductory description of the ferocious, all-pervasive wolves who cannot be kept out despite repeated attempts as well as the wolf killed by a hunter who later turns into a headless,



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footless man, is a clear metaphor for negative masculinity as a dominant presence around women. Amidst this savage, wolfish manhood, “children do not stay young for long”. On similar lines, the Red Riding Hood figure who is the protagonist in this story is not a fragile and naive girl. Instead, she is an unafraid, strong-minded child who “insists she will go off through the wood” even though it is “the worst time in all the year for wolves”. She is quite sure the wild beasts cannot harm her although, well warned, she lays a carving knife in the basket. (Carter 138)

Towards the end of the story, the girl has accepted her sexual attraction for the wolf and “since fear did her no good”, she is not afraid anymore. In the story, the young girl refers to her scarlet shawl as “the color of her menses”. Carter rejects the misogynist and essential connection of blood, red, sex and violence that is supposed to shame Little Red Riding Hood. She instead uses the red shawl to address the reality of the young girl’s sexual awakening through her awareness of her body and insistence on talking about blood and menstruation as a natural process (Snowden 170).

Through the girl’s final acts of undressing herself and the wolf-man and engaging in sexual intercourse with him, the complexity of female desires and sexuality within and outside the constraints of patriarchy are explored. The protagonist who is “nobody’s meat” is seen as a representation of “a libido and desire that are common to both men and women. Falling outside traditional constructions of both male and female sexuality” (Snowden 173), the protagonist in “The Company of Wolves” understands the pleasure of controlling her on desires and this is how she completely frees herself from male dominance.

Another contemporary work that shows the influence of heard, seen and lived experience slowly taking precedence over a static gender myth is the folktale-inspired-fiction of Rajasthani folklorist and author, Vijaydan Detha. Both Carter and Detha realize that it is difficult to attempt to narrate the truth and remain aloof from the dynamic interplay of power between the masculine and the feminine. They also clearly take advantage of the idea that folktales can be utilized “to reformulate cultural notions to comment critically and persuasively on social life” so that they



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“provide sites at the intersection of culture and human agency.”(Locke et al. xlv) Just like Carter, Detha too engages with the lived experience of womanhood, uses just the motif of the original tale and re-creates the folktale.

Detha’s portrayal of women is “the most fascinating aspect” of his story-telling. His women are shown as objects of control, regulation and exploitation but also simultaneously of resistance, promise and change. They are neither dumb and blind followers nor out-in-the-open leaders. More often than not, they are seen negotiating the static myths of womanhood at an individual level while fitting within the larger cultural contexts of family, home, their immediate surroundings and the larger society. “Despite being rustic feminine beauties situated in traditional, often conservative, social landscapes, they learn to be equally strong and assertive as their men, and with ease. They represent, at once, the invigorating incense of tradition and the charming spunk of modernity”(Singh).

Detha’s “Chouboli” in *Baatanri Phulwari* is a string of eight interconnected stories based on a narrative of the Indian folktale of Chouboli. The folktale of Chouboli is commonly heard in various forms in Rajasthani oral culture and in handwritten manuscripts. The original title of “Rani Chouboli ri Baat” gives hope of a narrative that revolves around a woman. However, the tale has a typical fairytale like structure of a powerful king who wins over an intelligent princess with his wit and some deceit. The women’s smartness, as displayed in her apt replies to all the riddles in the stories-within-the story, is completely outshone by the king who is on a mission to win her. She is talented enough just to be worthy of a king’s prize but not more than that.

Detha did not rewrite that above version even though it is more common. He chose to rewrite this particular version that was narrated to him by Shree Sawalram not just because of the deeply interwoven Rajasthani folk life and culture in this tale but also because its spirit was close to his agenda of “nurturing the dynamism of these traditions from the roots as a source of ongoing, vibrant resistance” (Merrill,9).



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The eponymous heroine of the story, Chouboli, is a mesmerizingly beautiful and intelligent princess who would marry a man on the condition that he could make her speak four times. This is a seemingly impossible task as three hundred and forty men have unsuccessfully attempted it and now, they are “sitting in a dungeon grinding fodder for the horses.” (Chouboli 39). The seth’s⁴ niece, a shrewd, young woman gets married to a thakur⁵ who traumatizes his first wife, the thakurani⁶, by shooting a hundred and eight arrows through her nose ring every day. In response to a challenge and during an attempt to show his bravado, the thakur ends up being thrown in the dungeon, doomed to grind chickpea fodder for life. Then, it is the seth’s niece within the process of freeing her husband from the dungeon not only makes Chouboli speak but also frees the thakurani from the suffering due to the abusive practice of arrow shooting. She dresses up like a man and narrates four intriguing stories that compel Chouboli to speak up every time. Chouboli and the seth’s niece, by virtue of their cleverness, frame a plan so that Chouboli is married to the thakur and all of them live happily.

The story can be seen as a feministic inversion of the dominant fairy-tale structure where a prince rescues a princess. “Chouboli” is an inversion because here a husband is challenged and instigated by his wife to go for a test. Having been embarrassed and tortured, he is rescued by his wife who finally wins the same challenge at which the husband has failed. Analysing the characteristics and actions of the three female characters in this story provides interesting revelations.

The thakurani, as presented by Detha, is a woman who could possibly have no right to object to the obnoxious and lamentable custom of the thakur forcing her to let him shoot a hundred and eight arrows through her nose ring every morning. The “stress and worrying” as she escaped

⁴A type in Indian folktales, he is the male head of the family of a successful merchant and moneylending community.

⁵A historical feudal title for a landowner.

⁶The wife of a thakur.



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death everyday led the thakurani's body to be "wasted away as a skeleton" and her "rosie complexion turned sallow" (32). She is akin to the submissive, suffering and waiting woman that Beauvoir talks of, one who conforms to the heavy burden of 'becoming a woman.' She can neither register her protest vehemently nor put her foot down against the thakur. She has to function within the limits of her strength as the wife of a rich and powerful man who "had to learn to walk through life with her head bowed" (36). However, within her own limited means, she attempts to convince her "lord" to stop. Instead of voicing her husband's critique directly, she cleverly quotes the shocked seth's niece's reaction:

"If my rogue of a husband ever did that to me, I'd feed him roasted chickpea fodder and serve him water that I'd washed my feet in. Then I'd climb onto his back and ride him around the bed seven times. If a husband shoots an arrow through his wife's nose ring a hundred and eight times a day, he deserves a wife who treats him this way!" (36).

Fortunately, it is this pretext of narrating the seth's niece's words that strike the thakur's ego. The thakur commits to showing his bravado by winning Chouboli's hand and the actions that follow, lead to the fulfillment of this vow by the thakur's second wife. Finally, the thakurani does not have to retrogress to her earlier state as she, within her limited capacities, has played an essential role in her own emancipation.

On the other hand, the seth's niece is shown as an honest and simple-hearted girl with an "unsullied tongue", an intelligent mind and a strong resolve. Right from the beginning, she is bold, outspoken and determined enough to stand by the abovementioned vow and marry the thakur. While mocking his false bravado in traumatizing his first wife, she introduces the idea of Princess Chouboli's vow as part of a well-thought plan and then instigates him to be "something truly remarkable" (39).

Despite her clear dislike for the thakur, the seth's niece is aware she needs to preserve the honour of the same man that she is criticizing. (Locke et al. xl) She knows that the thakur's honor will be at stake if he is unable to fulfill the vow that he had taken before his new bride.



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Therefore, she operates within those confines and devises her “clever stratagem to free him” (Chouboli 43). Her actions echo the following observation,

“...the North Indian women who...take to heart the common Hindi proverb “The woman who preserves the honor of her husband is the ornament of the house”... are thereby complicit in the preservation of a system of inequality, since “honor” is so clearly part of an ideology that contributes to the power of men over women. But these same women may nonetheless be moved... to resist this ideology in subtle ways.” (Raheja and Gold xxii) When the thakur is utterly dismayed to find out that it is his second wife who has performed the seemingly impossible feat that she had challenged him to, she does her socially imposed duty as a wife and reassures him, “There’s no cause for worry. You stop breathing, and three women will become widows. Chouboli belongs all to you. She was wedded to your sword”(82). She is thus able to save her husband and his honour as well as free his first wife from “spouse abuse” (Merrill 8) at the same time. She inflicts final punishment in the form of pornographic domination of horse-riding on a humbled husband. She rightly “had enough sense to accomplish what (s)he had set out to” (70). The seth’s niece is thus, a woman who does not conform to her pre-determined feminine destiny but emerges as an independent woman.

Princess Chouboli is the most powerful girl in the kingdom by virtue of her social position. Three hundred and forty men, including the thakur had been unsuccessful at making Chouboli speak. It is only another woman, although in the garb of a man, who is able to vanquish Chouboli by accomplishing the challenging task and making her speak. Chouboli is elated and satisfied to know that “...no man could live up to the challenge of the oath that I took (80). This emphasizes the intelligence of women and shows that one woman’s smartness outweighs that of hundreds of men from all around the kingdom. Despite the fact that the seth’s niece is disguised as a man to win over the coveted heroine, the coveted prize still does not go to the conventional vanquisher and benefactor, a Prince Charming, but to a smart, passionate and powerful woman. This movement from the fixed role predestined by the myth of womanhood to the flexible experience of life highlights the unbecoming of women.



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In providing a solution to Chouboli's concerns about living out her married days with the ridiculous thakur who is as good as a buffoon, she draws a generalized conclusion, a harsh critique of the superfluous masculinity that Beauvoir so often criticizes:

“For women, there's no great difference between one man and another except how they look. These big, self-important men are all cut from the same cloth. They've got so many different ploys for making woman do their bidding...It's no small matter in this day and age for a woman like you to have conquered so many men and fulfilled such an oath. Men great and mighty would go to war over a woman. While the weak would willingly bow and scrape before them, truce straws in their teeth.” (81).

Detha presents a beautiful picture of sisterhood between these two women as they have found apt companionship with each other. For the society, they have the thakur as their husband but actually, “he is there to watch over... as a scarecrow” (81). The two women are subordinated by patriarchal rules but at an individual level, they “subvert these rules from within” (Tyagi) as equally matched sisters who rule over a kingdom. It is herein that the reader can see Beauvoir's hopes of “the myth of woman being phased out” gaining concrete existence because “the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvellous quality of Other dies in them”(196). Through its unique ending, Detha's “Chouboli” becomes a story where the subjective experience and living realities of apparently gullible women take over the static myth of womanhood that has earlier defined their role.

In explaining the static myth of woman, Beauvoir calls it as one of “the traps of objectivity into which the spirit of seriousness falls headlong.”(322). However, as seen in the above analyses and observations, both Carter and Detha have successfully evaded this fall. These three stories begin with fixed roles that accept the static myth of woman. In the beginning, they all seem to reaffirm Beauvoir's fear “of replacing lived experience and the free judgments of experience it requires by a static idol.” (322) and “becoming” the women that sociocultural norms have predestined them to. Nevertheless, this fear vanishes as each of these works progress.



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Even though Detha's women differ widely from Carter's in setting and context, the common spirit and determination to dispel myths about womanhood is what unites them and makes them stand apart from others. The movement of women characters from the state of victimization to the state of self-determination in stories by both these writers is what makes them active creators of meaning in their turns of storytelling and not just passive circulators of ideology. The gap due to the lack of “mysterious” women in literature is lessened. Carter has successfully moved from the commonly perceived static gender binary of the heroines of fairy tales, Detha has done so by depicting ordinary Rajasthani women in extraordinary situations. In the case of both the authors, a carefully crafted combination of interrogation and negation is used to reach this end. The questioning is rooted in the relatable discomfort of the ‘lost sex’ that the contemporary woman is. What if reality is not what our beliefs, myths, stories and fantasies tell it is? What if the incompatibility of “felt experiences” and static beliefs is because the commonly believed and unquestionable reality is a falsehood?

However, the discursive cultural heterogeneities of these women are also indicative of the distinct realities of their lived experiences. The lenses of Western feminist assertion on one hand and non-Western values and cultural mores on the other, can be utilized to better understand the reflection of human experiences in the articulation of resistance to dominance. Chandra Talpady Mohanty's contestation of “the assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference which can be applied universally and cross culturally”(337)needs to be taken into consideration here.. Instead of simply assuming a unity between these women “based on a generalised notion of their subordination” (344), I would delve a little deeper into the differences of their actions by making more contextual analyses. Raheja and Gold's observations about Rajasthani women are noteworthy in this regard. Rajasthani“...women of rural North India impress us overwhelmingly with the sense of their own power, dignity, and worth. This worth was not something nourished secretly in defiance of a



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degraded existence. Rather, it was integral to their daily lives, labors, relationships, and to the religious and cultural performances that imbued those lives with meaning.” (xv)

The protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber", who thought she had ceased to be her mother's daughter once she had become a wife, finds complete emancipation from male domination as she is "widowed at seventeen" and saved from death owing to the "maternal telepathy" that she is eternally thankful for. On the other hand, the women in "Chouboli" take hold of their life and destiny but are not completely free. All three of them not only end up functioning under the social constraints of marriage but also their husband's honor. His life and happiness are of utmost importance to them because if he stops breathing, "three women will become widows" (Detha, 82). Despite their alternative actions, the false assurance of Chouboli belonging to him is important to keep their "lord" happy.

Even the three women characters of the same story, within the same socio cultural milieu of rural Rajasthan are not a "homogeneous oppressed group" (Mohanty) who share oppressions and articulate similar resistances to male dominance. Each of them acts in different ways to change the myths of womanhood that bind them. The thakur's wife is most accommodating and least assertive. However, her actions of compromise do not mean that there is no desire for liberation. The seth's niece, even though smart, daring and determined, has to win Chouboli's challenge while she is cross-dressed as a man. She has to resort to acting under the garb of a man and then, later, not take public credit for her accomplishment. This action is symbolic of the social constraints under which talented women have to function. Finally, even Chouboli, the most powerful of them, ends up asking the question "To whom do I belong?", thus iterating the stereotypes of feminine myth of a woman belonging to a husband.

This creates a completely different kind of narrative that is marked by ambivalence. Jassal has explained the binary terms "resistance" and "subordination" as being unable to "capture the range of goals women have" (14). Their successes are accompanied by longing, hope, criticism and anxiety in equal measures. Thus, subversion is the only means of resistance available to



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these women. It may seem that the bold expression and explicit superiority in certain women's voices does not culminate into the ultimate betterment of the position of these women. However, these voices are not without any consequence. The importance of this complex process should not be undermined as it gives an indication of the turmoil at the beginning of a movement. For those women "...who live under the pressures of a patriarchal system that requires them to conform to the rigid demands", their agency is exhibited in their abilities to "survive within a system of inequality" and to flourish despite its constraints" (Mahmood, 167).

The portrayal and analyses of the women characters through new lenses advance a more complex and diverse understanding of modern-day feminism, femininity and womanhood. The potential for both subversion and inversion assures that women can save themselves while raising themselves on the ladder of the ideology of feminism. These explorations in the stories provide recommendations for behaviours that are human and not simply feminine. Once readers are finished with either Carter's or Detha's stories, they will not only be thinking about the stories in terms of macro-dynamics but will also be looking askance at their individual realities. While absolute postfeminist ideology would assert that women should be either a 'babe or a bitch', these stories show survival with acceptance of a renewed understanding of womanhood that breaks the shackles of the static nature of the myths surrounding femininity. The rewritings of the folktales give concrete voice to Beauvoir's final assertion that, "woman is the victim of no mysterious fate; the singularities that make her different derive their importance from the meaning applied to them; they can be overcome as soon as they are grasped from new perspectives (858).



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