



Red Riding Hood: Re-visioning the Lesson

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The term *fairy tale*, now used as a generic label for magical stories for children, comes from the French term *conte de fées*, coined for a group of 17th-century tales written for adults. Creators of literary fairy tales from the 17th-century onwards include writers whose works are still widely read today: Charles Perrault (17th-century France), Hans Christian Andersen (19th-century Denmark), George Macdonald and Oscar Wilde (19th-century England). The Brothers Grimm (19th-century Germany) blurred the line between oral and literary tales by presenting their German “household tales” as though they came straight from the mouths of peasants, though in fact they revised these stories to better reflect their own Protestant ethics. The stories of all these authors have been taken and modified into versions that are suitable for children. This is how fairy tales have slowly become synonymous with children’s literature, which was not the case originally. At the end of the 20th century, the original tales were rediscovered, reappraised, and retranslated. Such tales provided inspiration for a whole new wave of fairy tale authors like Angela Carter, A. S. Byatt, Emma Donoghue, Margaret Atwood, Robert Coover, Tanith Lee, Delia Sherman and many others.

Fairy tales have all along been written, rewritten, interpreted and re-interpreted so many times in so many forms that it becomes difficult to pinpoint where it all starts from. Jack Zipes in his book *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, tries to unpack our fascination for this genre, which has inspired several adaptations over the ages,

I likened the evolutionary process of the specific form of the oral wonder tale and the literary fairy tale to a process of contamination and contagion- the motifs and plots of stories spread like viruses that eventually formed a clearly identifiable genre, species or virus that we generally call the fairy tale (Zipes, 3)

Jack Zipes also talks about Richard Dawkins’s concept of memes, which has led to the rise of memetics as a speculative theory,

The theory of memetics generally maintains that a meme is an informational pattern contained in a human brain (or in artifacts such as books or pictures) and stored in its memory, capable of being copied to another individual’s brain that will store it and replicate it (Zipes, 4)

Zipes finds the scope to apply the theory of memetics to fairy tales, specially to the most popular ones like “Red Riding Hood”. This ability to replicate is what makes fairy tales so timeless and this is also what makes

them prone to numerous adaptations. My paper will attempt to look at a few modern renditions of the timeless Little Red Riding Hood story and see how its message has changed over the ages.

The story of Little Red Riding Hood or simply Red Riding Hood is a popular fairy tale that we have grown up with. Though there is no intervention of actual fairies or magic, there are elements of fantasy involved in the character of the anthropomorphic wolf. Over the ages, this story has been modified to alter the message that it wanted to spread. Usually with a moralistic intention, sometimes this story warned the girls against sexual curiosity and sometimes, against disobedience. The wolf has also shifted forms, to represent various types of dangers at different points.

The origins of the story are widely debated, some saying that it originated from Charles Perrault's 17th Century narrative. But studies show that like most fairy tales, the oral narrative predates the written form, and the story existed much before Perrault wrote it down. As part of a National Geographic interview with an anthropologist, Rachel Hartigan Shea writes about how *Red Riding Hood* is said to have an ancient origin in an 11th century poem from Belgium, recorded by a priest (called Egbert). He wrote the book called *The Richly Laden Ship*, wherein he included lessons from the Bible or local tales from the peasants, to impart valuable lessons to young students. The story titled "About a Girl Saved from the Wolf Cubs" believed to be a precedent to the *Red Riding Hood* narrative, was one of the tales collected from the peasants. It is about a girl, wearing a red baptism cloak/tunic, who was attacked by a wolf. This story aimed at imparting religious lessons to the children, as the girl was saved by virtue of wearing her baptism cloak. From its very origins, this story was meant for pedagogical purposes, which later turned into a more cautionary tale. Except from the red cloak and the presence of the wolf, this brief story has hardly any other similarities with the popular fairy tale that we know it today.

Red Riding Hood's story is also said to have a close connection with another story narrated by the Grimms Brothers, titled, "The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids", which stems from an even older Asian version. In that story, a wolf impersonates a nanny goat and eats up her kids. The nanny goat returns and while the wolf is sleeping, she cuts open the wolf's stomach to free her children and fill it up with stones. The wolf drowns in the river due to the heavy weight. There are undeniably a few similarities that this tale has with Red Riding Hood's story, especially with the versions where a huntsman or woodcutter appears in the end, killing the wolf in exactly the same manner. Through a more detailed analysis of the other versions and adaptations, the changes that they brought to the classic fairy tale, will become clearer.

The modern discussions regarding this popular fairy tales revolves mostly around the latent sexuality present in the narrative. Jack Zipes says, " "Little Red Riding Hood" is a tale about rape and the survival or non-survival of a rape victim" (Zipes, E-book). It has always been a story rich in metaphors and with the potential of being interpreted in various ways. This story has also influenced quite a few poets. Roald Dahl in his poem *Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf*, creates a modern girl who refuses to be a victim. She does not need the intervention of any woodcutter and shoots the wolf herself. The end shows how the experience had simply made her stronger,

A few weeks later, in the wood,

I came across Miss Riding Hood.

But what a change! No cloak of red,

No silly hood upon her head.

She said, 'Hello, and do please note

My lovely furry wolfskin coat.' (Dahl, Web.)

In the end, she even sheds the colour of victimhood and wears her victory as a badge of honour. *The Wolf's Postscript to 'Little Red Riding Hood'* is another thought-provoking poem by Agha Shahid Ali. This reads like a letter from the wolf to Red Riding Hood, as well as the readers. It has a wonderful opening,

First, grant me my sense of history:

I did it for posterity,

For kindergarten teachers

And a clear moral: (Ali, Web.)

This poem shares the wolf's story and his motive for the first time. With clear logic, he argues that he has been a willing scapegoat for the edification of the society. Two short stories must also be mentioned in this aspect- "Little Red" by Wendy Wheeler from the anthology *Snow White, Blood Red* and "Riding the Red" by Nalo Hopkins, from the collection *Black Swan, White Raven* (both the anthologies are edited by Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow). These short stories have approached the classic fairy tale from entirely different viewpoints.

"Riding the Red", by Nalo Hopkins, is an interesting take on the fairy tale, told from the perspective of the grandmother. Rather than looking at the confrontation with the wolf as an isolated incident, Hopkins looks at it as a perpetual cycle, which goes on for generations. This might have been inspired from the Grimms' version, where a wolf appears for the second time. The entire story is like the grandmother's monologue, addressed to the reader. It could also be understood as a series of thoughts crossing her mind. She complains about how her daughter does not listen to her and does not let her warn her granddaughter. She tells her granddaughter, "Pretty soon now, you're going to be riding the red, and if you don't look smart, next stop is wolfie's house, and wolfie, doesn't he just love the smell of that blood, oh yes." (Hopkins, Kindle Location 893-895). "Riding the red" could be taken as a metaphorical expression for puberty and its direct connection to blood reminds the reader of menstrual blood, marking the girl's foray into womanhood. The

figure of “wolfie” highlights how the budding sexuality of a woman exposes her to unwanted approaches, maybe even rape.

“Riding the red” is an experience that every girl has to go through when they are young and it becomes a rite to passage for them. During this journey, the meeting with “wolfie” is also inevitable. Through the grandmother’s account of her meeting with wolfie, it is not an innocent little girl who is a complete victim, “My turn was the dance, the approach and retreat, the graceful sway of my body past his nostrils, scented with my flesh” (Hopkins, Kindle Location 905-906) If wolfie is thought of as a young man with a strong sexual appetite, the girl is someone who is enjoying her sexuality and enticing him to an extent. This is not an innocent little girl lost in the woods, but someone who understands and responds to the strong masculine appeal of wolfie.

But this is an experience one must leave behind and move on, with some help from the woodcutter (here, it is a woodcutter who saves the little girl). Though the rescue is attributed to the woodcutter, the grandmother has not forgotten the contribution of wolfie, “They say it’s the woodman saves us, me and my daughter’s little girl, but it’s wolfie who gives us birth, oh yes.” (Hopkins, Kindle Locations 928-930). The wolf is taken an agent of rebirth; he can be thought of as a metaphor for experiences that make us more matured in life, turning us into new personas. The grandmother eventually marries, gives birth and does all the chores meticulously. In living a conventional life within the bounds of womanhood, she understands that there is no place for the raw passion with which she once “rode the red”,

I forgot wolfie. I forgot that riding the red was more than a thing of soiled rags and squalling newborns and what little comfort you and your man can give each other, nights when sleep doesn’t spirit you away soon as you reach your bed (Hopkins, Kindle Locations 916-918).

The story ends with the grandmother awaiting the cycle of riding the red to unfold again, this time around her granddaughter and herself, “Well, it’s time for one last measure, yes, one last, sweet dance. Listen: is that a knock at the door?” (Hopkins, Kindle Location 933-935) If we do not take the entire story as the ranting of a senile mind, then the end confirms her apprehension for her granddaughter. It also allows a glimpse into a woman’s heart, who had been held down by her domestic life and was never able to stray from her path, except once.

The blurb of the anthology *Snow White Blood Red* says, “These are stories that bite-lush and erotic, often dark and disturbing mystical journeys through a phantasmagoric landscape of distinctly adult sensibilities...” The short story, “Little Red” by Wendy Wheeler surely lives up to this tag. It is a deeply disturbing, cleverly told story of lust, perversion and deceit, using the characters from the fairy tale, but in a completely different manner.

This story transports us to a contemporary setting where the “wolf” is a suave, urbanized man, with the wild traits buried inside him. When he meets the daughter of his lover, those traits start overpowering him. Rather than rewriting the “Red Riding Hood” story from an alternative viewpoint, Wheeler narrates a different story, with elements from the fairy tale flashing intermittently between the lines. Keeping the original story in mind, Wheeler shows how it could still be prevalent in the modern times without the sparkle of fantasy that fairy tales allow.

The story begins with an adulterous relationship between a married woman, Helen and Josef Volker. The story is from the “wolf’s” perspective as Mr. Volker is the narrator. The reader knows him much better than his lover, Helen. As he earnestly entreats Helen to spend more time with him, his thoughts are quite different, “I would have to cut back time with my other women, perhaps drop one or two” (Wheeler, 131). From the very beginning, the readers can spot his wanton carnal appetite, which Helen is quite oblivious of. This cultured, chillingly deceptive and virile Mr. Volker is the “wolf” that Wheeler is cautioning girls against.

In a narrative that strongly reminds me of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Mr. Volker talks about his sexual attraction towards Helen’s fourteen year old daughter, Regina. “I think it began with the hat” (Wheeler, 138), he tells is right at the beginning. He has still not set his eyes on Regina, but is buying a red hat for her to please Helen. He spends some time describing the crocheted red bud on the hand, which becomes symbolic of Regina’s virginity and foreshadows the course of events, “Those tightly curled petals held an almost unbearable promise” (Wheeler, 132) “Little Red” is what Mr. Volker decides to call Regina, associating her with the hat and the sexual connotations attached to it. While the character of Helen invokes pity and sympathy (as we understand that she is being tricked), the character of Regina is a rather interesting one. Helen had been quite indulgent towards her and she actually took pride in the fact that Regina attracted boys’ attention. Surprisingly astute, Regina seems to have an idea of what is going on between Mr. Volker and her mother, even before things are revealed to her. Regina is shown as a girl with budding sexuality, who wears lipstick, attracts boys and has a great fascination for riding (the sexual innuendo here is unmistakable). She is definitely more in possession of her sexuality than the naïve Little Red Riding Hood of the old fairy tale. She apparently watches the sexual union between her mother and Mr. Volker that he intended her to watch. She has an aura of innocence about her, but we are never sure whether she was feigning that. When she observes Mr. Volker’s physical appearance openly, it could either be taken as the innocent curiosity of a child, or the sexual advances of a girl already aware of his interests in her. Regina’s intentions are purposefully left ambiguous so that when, in the last scene, Mr. Volker is seen striding towards her room hungrily, we are not sure whether it would be a scene of rape or consensual lovemaking.

The allusions to the original fairy tale become very important to this story. Interestingly, Helen is married to a priest, which somehow reminds me of the earliest version of “Red Riding Hood”, written by a cleric, consisting of Biblical references. The grandmother figure is simply a memory in Wheeler’s narrative and has died some time back, leaving her house to her daughter, Helen. Her bedroom becomes a site of lovemaking for Helen and Mr. Volker, reminding us of the image of the wolf in grandmother’s bed. Certain

features of Mr. Volker help us relate him to the wolf figure. He is mentioned as a hirsute man, “My swarthinness usually pains me; I have even plucked the black hair from the backs of my hand” (Wheeler, 131). In another union with Helen the comparison is made more evident, “Helen was stroking the hair on my chest-my pelt, she called it” (Wheeler, 136). The description of his lovemaking with Helen is done cleverly and at one point, we are not sure whether she is his lover or his prey,

It gave me a moment of chagrin to see the red abrasions on her skin, then I decided I liked leaving my mark on her, and nuzzled her again. Helen’s pulse leapt in her neck. Later, later I would kiss her there, open my mouth and feel her heartbeat against my teeth (Wheeler, 135-136).

This story also lifts an expression from the original fairy tale and uses it in an interesting way, “Helen looked in my face as though something in my smile disturbed her. “I’ve never noticed before what white teeth you have, Josef,” she murmured. “So large and white” (Wheeler, This observation comes at a point when Mr. Volker had met Regina for the first time, indicating the beginning of a stalker-prey relationship. Right afterwards, we see Regina intent on plucking flowers, which again marks her entry into the woods and her initial acquaintance with the wolf. In the last scene as we see Mr. Volker walking towards Regina’s room, we can imagine him as a “werewolf” whose transformation is complete. The story leaves us wandering about who the actual victim is? If a rape ensues, is it Regina? Or, is it Helen, with all her naivety? In the course of the narrative, both of them seem to be the “wolf’s” victim in different ways.

These different retellings of a well-known tale not only make us think of aspects we have never noticed before, but they also subtly change the lesson which had been attached to the story for a long time. The moralistic intention of the classic fairy tale is slowly unravelled to include bravery, deception, lust and a whole new way of looking at womanhood/girlhood. Just as the villain/wolf has changed forms, the heroine/little girl has also undergone transformation in these modern adaptations. By highlighting these changes, I want to show that these adaptations also contribute to the body of popular fairy tales in a significant way, by giving us more nuanced perspective on some of the themes. Each adaptation is judged by people differently. Sometimes, the very activity of adaptation is criticized for being a lesser form than the original. But, Julie Sanders in her book, *Adaptation and Appropriation* supports the act of adaptation and tells how everyone from Edward Said to Roland Barthes have acknowledged the importance of intertextuality and rewriting in literature. Works of literature usually draw inspiration from other previous and surrounding literary traditions. Linda Hutcheon also states how “art is derived from other art, stories are born from other stories” (Hutcheon 2). These rewritings are not poor forms that keep borrowing from the canons in an attempt to gain popularity. They keep on adding to the original text and create a web of meanings.

Linda Hutcheon in her *A Theory of Adaptation* gives a nuanced three-pronged definition. For her adaptation is simultaneously,

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work/works

- A creative and an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work (Hutcheon 5)

She opens the first chapter of her book with a quote by Tagore which says, “Cinema is still playing second fiddle to literature.” (Hutcheon, 1) She also quotes the novelist John North about how adapting a great novel into a movie is primarily “a labour of simplification”. Just like Julie Sanders and Kidnie, Hutcheon also points out the flaws in such arguments against adaptation. The biggest accusation against adaptation is of copying ideas. But, Hutcheon makes it clear that, “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon, 4). Julie Sanders in her *Adaptation and Appropriation* also comments on this, “The aim is not replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than contraction” (Sanders, 1). Adaptations should also be seen as acts of creation, rather than acts of imitation.

Both Hutcheon and Kidnie talk about how an adaptation’s quality is determined by degrees by which it differs from the original. They state the importance of moving away from this viewpoint and judging adaptations independently as adaptations. It is important to go beyond judging the fidelity of the works of adaptations and acknowledge them as important contributions to the field of literature, as well as to the original work. Hutcheon says how it is acceptable to adapt a classic story like *Romeo and Juliet* into a respected high art form like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie, specially an updated one, like Baz Luhrmann’s production. These distinctions also have to be done away with- adaptations cannot be compared to each other, assuming that one form is higher than the other. This stance runs the risk of ignoring the writer’s or the director’s vision that has gone into the act of adaptation.

Fischlin and Fortier, term adaptations as “recontextualizations” and this is very similar to Julie Sanders idea of “appropriation” in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, where she suggests that appropriation is a process that deals with the source text by appropriating it into a different blend of cultures. This is true of the two adaptations I have discussed. These adaptations contribute to the original work and carry forward what Kidnie calls the “literariness of literature”, “how art creates art or, how literature is made by literature (Sanders, 1).

For me, adaptation becomes a two-way process. It is definitely borrowing from the so-called “original” text. But, if we consider these adaptations as a form of translation, according to Walter Benjamin’s claim in the essay, *The Task of the Translator*, these adaptations also constitute the afterlife of the original narrative. Sanders firmly states the importance of the category of adaptation, “...as readers and critics, we also need to recognize that adaptation and appropriation are fundamental to the practice, and, indeed, to the enjoyment of literature” (Sanders 2).

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