SUBVERSIVE HEROINES. REDEFINING THE FEMALE HERO'S JOURNEY IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF KATHY ACKER, ANGELA CARTER, AND MARGARET ATWOOD

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Abstract: *This essay will examine the transformative female hero's journey in the works of Kathy Acker, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood, who redefine the concept of heroism in their narratives by challenging patriarchy and cultural archetypes. In Acker's Don Quixote and Empire of the Senseless, in Carter's The Bloody Chamber, and in the revisions offered by Atwood in The Handmaid's Tale and Surfacing, the female protagonists break away from or modify the linear development of the monomyth into journeys of multiplicity, fragmentation, and agonistic reappropriation of agency. Through tropes of violence, sexuality, and metamorphosis, these writers unravel the female journey as a force of destabilisation against conventional frames of femininity and power.*

This work highlights how each author reconfigures the narrative of heroin by rejecting moral oppositions and rigid gender roles, allowing her protagonists to confront social constraints and inner conflicts. Acker's protagonists refuse any coherent identity for self-invention; Carter's heroines reinvent fairy tales through their proactive agency in both seduction and survival, while Atwood's women, such as Offred, transform personal resilience into acts of political defiance. Taken together, all these different versions suggest a nonlinear, cyclical journey with the main emphasis on self-discovery rather than conquest.

By positioning the heroine as both creator and destroyer, these authors challenge the female hero to continually redefine herself, thereby crafting a new archetype for twenty-first-century heroines. This chapter argues that the modern heroine's journey, as seen in these works, embodies resistance, self-definition, and fluidity, making it a powerful tool for confronting and transcending patriarchal narratives.

Keywords: *empowerment, fragmented identity, journey, patriarchal resistance, self-invention.*

Introduction

I aim to demonstrate that the developmental cycle of a woman constantly scorned, trampled, and oppressed cannot be aligned with a universalised monomyth that continues to be defined in instrumental relation to male socio-political matters. There is a distinct need to move from a single heroic journey to an understanding where many types of transformation and resulting societies are possible. While the transformative journey has been attended to in relation to male power and identity, the female journey, as discussed by early women theorists, has been dramatically overshadowed and undervalued. From early on, the works of women authors show a radical incorporation of other concerns, such as the questioning of societal order, the initiation of the female character outside of traditionally male spheres, breaking the

prohibition of knowledge and vocality, critiquing and transforming the narrative, freeing the body from imprisonment, and transforming culturally ascribed body images.

Different female characters go through different transformative points: from their hero's starting point, through many layers of trials and connection, whether mothers, pregnant, miscarried, raped, and ultimately to their graffiti or death, as well as a subsequent recovery, resurrection, or rebirth. Each transformative stage expands the character's knowledge of herself, her situation, her oppression, and her agency in coping with them. With the help of the other heroine, the first heroine's wishes were achieved. Each story expands the discourses in which the female reader and society recognise the heroine and other womanly characters, offering alternatives to oppressive ideologies and fictional ways society could be restructured. A society is growing or changing alongside the heroic journey, and these guides could explain why people react to changes so differently.

The term *hero's journey,* popularised by *Joseph Campbell* in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949),* refers to a mythological tradition of a complex ritual initiation. A hero ventures forth from the world of ordinary day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are encountered there, and a decisive victory is won; the hero returns from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. In simpler terms, the hero's journey can be thought of as elevating an individual from mere survival to a role that benefits humanity as a whole. The hero's journey is a model for an individual's growth toward empowerment because it defines the stages through which personal transformation occurs. These stages are brought about or triggered by some outside force or entity; as such, this event is essential in setting the hero's journey in motion.

The work with the hero's journey produced a model for the search for identity: a quest for self-revelation and self-fulfilment through self-acceptance. The stages of the hero's journey can be grouped into several categories: separation from the known world to undertake the trip, coupled with the call to adventure (Campbell 45-88); initiation - inner and mystical experiences (Campbell 89-178); return or the emergence as a transformed individual (Campbell 179-226); and the subsequent boon - the ultimate reward for enduring the journey. The journey involves encounters with spiritual forces, spiritual teachings, and archetypal symbols, allowing participants to access their unconscious minds and transcend their perceptions of reality. Drawing on these insights, the transformative hero's journey requires examining archetypal images and the unconscious to find elements that bring about an expanded and globally connected sense of self, linking the activities of touching into the unconscious and reconnecting with broader cultural themes to the alteration of self and existence.

In *Myth and Reality* (1963), Mircea Eliade extends the concept of the mythic journey by exploring how myths reconcile the sacred and the profane. In this view, for Eliade, myths are understood as the orientation of people in sacred time and space, providing a way for individuals to understand themselves and address more significant existential questions. Eliade's concept of the mythic journey places a great deal of emphasis on the ritualistic elements of myth, which people experience as a return to origins in their quest for something timeless and universal. The hero's journey, from this perspective, is at once a personal quest and a repetition of cultural truths in shaping collective understanding.

Furthermore, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Myth and Meaning* (1978), approaches myth through structuralism, focusing less on the journey itself and more on the role of myth as a framework for organising human experience. Lévi-Strauss suggests that myths reflect the binary structures through which societies understand reality, such as the oppositions of good versus evil and life versus death. He argues that myths are not merely stories of individual transformation but are fundamental structures that maintain social order and cohesion. In this sense, the hero's journey might be viewed as a narrative form that helps societies reconcile contradictions and tensions within their cultural worldview.

I aim to analyse the subversive variety of female heroism in the works of the chosen authors. Three modern and contemporary female authors — Kathy Acker, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood —redefine normative representations of the feminine and the masculine, as well as their relationships. Throughout their multi-generic oeuvre, they propose their vision of empowerment and question the structure of the hero's journey. We are dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach, examining literature from the perspective of feminist theory. My goal is to deconstruct the critical effort to simplify the authors' vision of issues and distil their thoughts about female empowerment into a comprehensible, concise hero's journey. Taking a broader perspective on their understanding of femininity, we analyse the lives of literary characters, providing an extended list of secondary thematic foci, such as the issue of language, that cannot be outlined here. Upon examining these writers closely, we offer tools for their integration into the current feminist discourse.

I argue that the literary heroines these authors portray command modern women, and we suggest subversive narrative strategies to encapsulate this thesis. The study is structured around the three authors who encapsulate their critical theses of femininity and their respective narrative strategies. Carter's and Acker's characters and narrative strategies align with their feminist thought, bringing the heroines into line. They challenge the established values, mainly the masculinity attributed to men, which is often

portrayed as the villain. My primary objective is to explore how these characters can be understood within the framework of the hero's journey, ultimately leading to a life of command.

Hero's journey stories are the epitome of mythic stories. The work analyses a variety of myths and finds that they all follow a similar structure, known as the monomyth, or the hero's journey. Hero's journey stories follow a particular pattern, including a call, a refusal of the call but a return to it, a trial, a crisis, and a resolution. Many modern stories, found in various films and books, display the hero's journey. The monomyth narrative pattern is evident in every corner of literature and is subconsciously employed in many television shows, films, advertisements, and books that populate our everyday landscape. Many people are familiar with the remarkable variation of the heroic journey, one of the most dominant recurring plots in myths, fairy tales, fables, and legends. The narratives follow a similar pattern, and this cycle of events is known as the monomyth. With this singular myth, the form and structure serve as the primary blueprint, building block, and foundation for the heroic journey's diverse functions and applications. It reflects the values and beliefs of different societies throughout recorded history. However, some critics have pointed out that certain aspects of the model are reasonably questionable, particularly concerning gender issues. In *The Heroine's Journey* (1990), Maureen Murdock critiques Campbell's model for excluding the female experience. This is because the hero's journey paradigm, which underlines separation, conquest, and individuation, is often perceived as masculine and inadequately represents women's experiences, which frequently centre on connection, inner transformation, and relational identity. Murdock introduced the concept of a heroine's journey as an alternative framework underlying a woman's quest for self-empowerment and integration. Equally, in *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* (2021), Maria Tatar critiques Campbell's monomyth as a restrictive framework that does not account for female protagonists and experiences that often do not follow linear, conquest-based arcs. Tatar's work reveals the limitations of Campbell's model in explaining the complexity of women's stories.

Connections between Western society's literature and the hero's journey gain their foundation in male protagonists experiencing events and transformations meant to bring them outside the ordinary world. This stereotypical narrative and Western society's inherently patriarchal nature have resulted in literature with female characters seen through the lens of masculine expectations or else disenfranchised from the dialogue of the hero. Specifically, there are challenges associated with defining heroism through confrontation, fighting, companionship, discovery, mentorship, and adventure. Women's ordinary and extraordinary existences have been and continue to be subject to unique societal expectations, enabling them to

undergo exceptional personal and emotional transformations. Female journeys are heavily context-dependent on women's perceptions of identity and self.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of abjection, developed by Julia Kristeva, especially within the framework of *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (*Pouvoirs de l'horrreur*, 1980), is one of the most robust frameworks for analysing Acker's fragments of transgressive narratives. Abjection is the condition of being "neither subject nor object" (Kristeva 1) and embodies some liminal space of rejection and repulsion. For her, abjection is a psychic reaction to the failure of the distinction between self and other, manifesting as a feeling of disgust, horror, and rejection. Hence, this concept becomes vital in feminist discourse because challenging the borders imposed by patriarchy has to do a lot with the body and identity.

Abjection characterises the female protagonist's journey in Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* and *Don Quixote*, where the narrative seems to blur the conventional boundaries that keep the self from others, the subject from the object, and even language itself from dissolving. Acker used abjection to disrupt the patriarchal narrative and the social norm, portraying her protagonists as fragmented beings oscillating between positions of power and positions of attack. Her protagonist reflects an intense desire to dismantle societal and internalised constraints, as shown in the line, "We're still human. Human because we keep on battling against all these horrors, the horrors caused and not caused by us. We battle not to stay alive, which would be too materialistic, for we are body and spirit, but to love each other. My child. I shall never part with you; my own arms shall carry you with me to death." (Acker, *Empire* 69) This passage describes the struggle against inner and outer atrocities, yet it is also a search for love and connection beyond mere survival. Although it does not directly represent the will to escape one's own thoughts and emotions in favour of men and sexuality, it encapsulates Acker's exploration of personal and social emancipation.

For instance, in her work *Empire of the Senseless*, she presents Thivai and Abhor as abject characters, reflecting their resistance to society's rigid categorisations. This transgression is located within the fragmented identities of Thivai and Abhor, which tear down the hegemonic values defining "acceptable" femininity and masculinity. These grotesque and abject meetings through violence, sexuality, and changes in the body address the critique of social order and place the abject heroine beyond the circumference of socially expected behaviour.

Abjection in Acker's texts extends to language. Her fragmented prose, typographical play, and use of disjointed narrative structures resist more traditional and cohesive forms of storytelling. The destabilised form reflects

the protagonists' journeys of symbolic and literal self-deconstruction, which parallels Kristeva's sense of abjection as a refusal of social boundaries. In other words, situating Acker's protagonists within Kristeva's theory, her heroine does not attain coherence or reintegration; she assumes an identity based upon fluidity and resistance. This reconstitutes the feminine journey along the lines of dislocation rather than any search for stability.

It is precisely within the context of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, as elaborated most famously in *Gender Trouble* (1990), that the subversion of Angela Carter's archetypes from within *The Bloody Chamber* can best be understood. Butler postulates that there is no innate or stable gender identity (4-9), but rather, it is an acquired series of performances through reiterated acts and behaviours. The performative element of gender (33) cuts against essentialist views and proffers that gender identities are fluid, contingent, and determined through societal norms and expectations. Therefore, there is a more profound understanding of the societal expectations that Carter's heroines fulfil in their performances of traditional stories and gendered archetypes. Carter's heroines play out scenes of seduction and survival in "The Tiger's Bride" and "The Company of Wolves," both of which subvert traditional notions of feminine and masculine characteristics. These characters play their roles in such a manner as to destabilise old binary notions of male and female, thereby dramatising Butler's understanding of performativity through resisting and reshaping their narratives. By reframing fairy tale tropes, Carter employs performativity to challenge the authenticity of traditional gender roles.

Most of her heroines are aware of their roles in the patriarchal narratives of the fairy tale genre. They proactively press against those expectations by adopting attributes usually ascribed to males: agency and aggression.

For example, in "The Bloody Chamber," the moment of confrontation between the protagonist and Bluebeard navigates her through the expectations of female passivity and obedience, ultimately reclaiming agency through survival and awareness of the constructed nature of her role. As Butler summarises, Carter's heroines are figures subverting the performance of gender because the script provided by culture for femininity and masculinity is somewhat more fluid than fixed. Furthermore, Butler's use of gender as a series of performative acts echoes how Carter positioned sexuality as a site of resistance. Carter's work treats sexuality as an act: the acting through which her characters could trespass against patriarchal structures. As a result of reappropriating their sexuality, the sexual act becomes, in Carter's heroines, an empowering rather than oppressive act, a place of massive disruption to normative discourses of gender and sexuality, according to Butler.

Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, especially her work on female subjectivity and otherness, is beneficial to the analysis of all three writers, especially Carter and Acker. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (*Ce Sexe qui n'en pas un*, 1977), she examines traditional Western thought, which she sees organised around a single dominant male logic; this logic, she writes, denies female subjectivity insofar as it has conventionally been defined either concerning male subjectivity or as its absence. Irigaray claims an "other" female identity and rejects its incorporation into one male-defined norm, which means that women's identity and desires can only be conceivable independently.

Carter's subversive re-imaginings of female characters align with Irigaray's critique of traditional representations of women. In *The Bloody Chamber*, her heroines resist being defined by male narratives, instead embracing aspects of themselves that defy patriarchal categorisation. This is, of course, most explicit in "The Tiger's Bride," where the heroine's animalistic transformation signifies her reclaiming of her identity as "other" on her own terms. Her transformation reflects Irigaray's call for a differentiated feminine subjectivity yet coexistent with male identity. In Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, the protagonist's fragmented identity fully stipulates Irigaray's *feminine multiple*: a self that can never be placed or defined. Acker's portrayal of women as at once fragmented yet whole challenges the notion of a unitary self, the so-called evoked woman of Irigaray's theory, whose identity is fluid, plural, and resistant to reduction to a masculine paradigm.

Another robust framework to situate these authors, particularly in terms of Carter's and Acker's narrative styles, is Helene Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*. For Cixous, conventional language and the structures of narration are fundamentally patriarchal in construction and inevitably constrict women. Feminine writing aims to break through the structures of traditional narration with a fluid, nonlinear style that resists masculine constraints, addressing the human intuition and body. In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter puts into practice the precepts of *écriture féminine* by rewriting fairy tales entirely against linear, male-centered storytelling. Her prose is rich with symbolism and sensory imagery, immersing readers in a world that utterly negates patriarchal logical argumentation. Adopting a style that speaks to subjective experience over objective narration, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* provides an example of *écriture féminine*, which gives voice to suppressed aspects of womanhood.

The narrative structure in Carter's stories resists the conventional fairy tale archetypes, allowing her heroines to assume multifaceted, intuitive identities and be free from male-conceived constraints.

Her prose, with its disjointed, fragmented narratives that radically disregard conventional grammar, is another version of *écriture féminine*. She would thus fragment language as a means for her to disrupt the readers' expectations and defy the logical structure of male-dominated language. Her characters, whose identities are similarly fragmented and fluid, reflect the resistance to a singular leading narrative voice. The multiplicity in the narrator's structure and character identifications echoes Cixous's view of the feminine mode of expression as complex and multiple.

While Atwood's narrative style is more traditional, her themes of dystopia and exploration of female agency are more closely aligned with feminist theories of subjugation and resistance. Through the same work, The *Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood represents a totalitarian society that silences women's voices - a theme very much cognate to the feminist critique of patriarchy and institutionalised control.

Atwood draws on radical feminist theories of power and autonomy, thus joining the voices of authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, as seen in *The Second Sex*, which have traditionally conceptualised women as the "other" in relation to men, deprived of agency and voice. Offred in Atwood personifies feminism as a redefinition of the hero. This individual would take no action or engage in minimal acts of rebellion, struggling to regain her identity within society. This naturally comes into play with Butler's theory of performativity. Offred complies, but at the same time, she asserts herself. Her story, in text, then reflects Kristeva's concept of abjection. Her body is both worshipped for its reproductive capabilities and resented for its autonomy. Offred manages a precarious balancing act of submission to agency; hence, her story encapsulates the most essential feminist critiques of patriarchal oppression.

Applying feminist theory to such writers creates a challenge and redefinition of the conventional heroic journey within each. The theoretical backbone provided by Kristeva's abjection, Butler's performative feature, Irigaray's *différénce sexuelle*, and Cixous's *écriture féminine* gives substance to the transgressive, multi-identities evident in Acker, Carter, and Atwood's protagonists. Using feminist frameworks enables an understanding of how each author engages with and manipulates narrative elements, linguistic choices, and character development in deconstructing patriarchal narratives while establishing the female hero's journey as a specific agent of subversion and self-creation. Acker, Carter, and Atwood exemplify possible transformative paths that illuminate the complex nature of identity, agency, and resistance to societal norms through the theoretical views put into practice.

Kathy Acker. Deconstructing Myth and Masculinity

After publishing her first novel, *Politics, in 1972, Acker established herself as a pioneering avant-garde literary figure*. Much of Acker's fiction, particularly

her first seven novels, imitates and comments upon male writing conventions. Along with incorporating devices such as brackets to suggest one of her narrative games, Acker also employs metafictional patterning, which acknowledges its fictionality and addresses the bonds between writing and male sexuality. In her most masculinist text, Acker creates a character who tells the story of his quasi-gay, sadomasochistic relationship with his sister/cousin and his homosexual relationships with others. These intentional strategies conspire to create a powerful sense of gender confusion.

Although her fiction is filled with characters whose gender is often confused, female protagonists are consistently the most successful. Indeed, she would later state that she found it impossible to write about male characters at all. Even in her mind, people with phallic economies were still perceived as men. Her three semi-autobiographical works primarily focus on images of a girl who must live a life in disguise, whether legally or illegally. These female protagonists undergo experiences that male fiction writers have traditionally attributed to their men, yet it is with explicit genitals alone that Acker's heroines truly succeed. With other characters or external genitalia only, they fail, causing narrators to conclude their stories in frustration and failure.

As a result of the ongoing instability that characterised Acker's life, she became suspicious of any organised system of reality. One of the leading features of her writing is her remarkable ability to carefully dismantle patriarchal narratives into shards, through which she constructs an alternative narrative. Indeed, her radical use of language is passionately intertwined with multiple dimensions of popular culture, philosophical exploration, literary theory, and feminist discourse. This is further transmuted and tempered by her own life experiences, which were formed by membership in the growing commercial sex industry of the sixties as she came to first grips with repudiated homosexuality and her parachuting into the alternative art scene of late sixties and seventies New York.

As a writer, she navigates no clear-cut path. Sympathies may wax and wane, but her words never paint a clear map of empathy or sentiment. Instead, her goal is to explore the abstract will, a need to unearth the id and unshackle it from knee-jerk morality. Acker wished to push our faces back into the concrete, back into a world where the things one has must be encountered outside the well-trod grounds of consensus. It is not the beauty of banal horror that Acker gives a space to grow into. It can potentially leverage the unbearable and move beyond infamy untethered by consequences. Acker's protagonist employs this mobility to journey from text to flesh, subverting any line of thought, not as a final act but as an action that must be repeated.

In her adaptation of *Don Quixote*, quixotism is not out of place in a colonial world or a world of disrupted meaning. We might also argue that the post-colonial subjects in the novel are no more lost than any other group. *Don*

Quixote is designed to trigger an upheaval in the entire decision-making process, and the novel elicits a series of transformations as characters become crazed seekers rather than knowing subjects. *Empire of the Senseless* is an example of the cartographic work of postmodern quixotism. In the novel, the grand oppositions of good and evil are as polarised in *Don Quixote*.

Due to her nihilistic scope, the author has long been overlooked as a proper *revisionist of Don Quixote*. The brazen reprobate Quixote seemingly defies all regimes and, therefore, comes off as an existential inexistence intermittently on a scripted spacetime-suffering Möbius strip. Written in fragments of cyber-intertextual cut-up reality, flipping erratically without reason, the Dreamer switches gears into a seething rot, eventually convincing us she is not Don Quixote but the continually reappearing physical manifestation of a sinister period's abhorrent fears of empowerment. Moreover, the sheer tendency for a frail, naïve human – who so ardently aspires toward the goal of exceptional purpose (heroism) because of desire – to suddenly undergo hysteria necessitates neurosis because the solid attachment for desire is not 'normal' in patriarchal economies. As a voyeuristic mirror for the reader, the text asks us to take off our biased blindfolds and embrace relentless, undying, diseased 'nonpathological' abjection.

Further, the novel appeared in the years when the neo-colonialism of military regimes throughout Latin America resulted in blatant murder, arbitrary jailing, and the 'disappearing' of critical voices. In this political atmosphere, challenging the old white men who control the fate of the globe seemed a *Quixotic act* – an act with historical legs and imperial fingers. Rather than focusing on the loss of power by one class, in *Empire of the Senseless*, the inability to counter imperialism becomes a manifestation of the widespread, systematic destruction of identity, geography, and time.

Her *Empire of the Senseless* is deeply concerned with the symbolic representation of the self and the myriad societal oppressions that frame this self. The novel comprises 129 fragments, none of which are labelled with consecutive chapter numbers, narrative indications, or quotation marks. Voice jumps are frequent, and several unnamed personalities exist alongside the principal power of an 18-year-old girl of no fixed nationality. *Empire of the Senseless* is a hysterical narrative of two girls orphaned in an oppressive, nightmarish city, making strides to abscond from its influence and be free. It is a brutal story of personal transformation that must also take on political resonance to attain the highest form of symbolic freedom. The bodily experience of personal transformation always incorporates political language: stressful, unrestrained, demanding, and fierce sexual subjugation and domination represent the commitment to individual freedom beyond political force.

Acker's work is a landscape in which many characters efficiently summarise each other. In that world, the reedited selves, collecting numerous ideas about themselves in their various personifications, begin to become somewhat continuous and familiar to one another. She is building characters who are initially unrecognisable and whose everyday experiences compound. They each make tentative forays into experimental lives, experimenting with novel lives, recognising the existence of the parts that form, together, the bodies they are, where "I" hides in pettiness, big and small. In the shape of the novelty, it turns into temporality, an ideology of resistance from the ragged vestiges of the self. Those new unities must carve out more time for a life rather than the mechanical axis of the cycle the seasons bring, the passage filled with desires and drives. Exercise is problematic. This is not Women's Liberation in the Acker universe, but so much as the slow process of regrouping and enlarging.

Angela Carter. Subverting Fairy Tale Archetypes

Subverting fairy tale archetypes essentially involves overturning physical and moral anatomy. Reversing established anatomy can take various forms. Carter's heroines often learn to subvert traditional roles by adopting attributes of strength and agency, transforming themselves to survive in a predatory world. "The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers" (64). This line from *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* encapsulates this transformation and speaks to the fierce adaptability of Carter's protagonists. This aligns with Butler's theory of performativity, as her characters adopt survival strategies that subvert and destabilise traditional gender roles, embodying resilience in spaces typically dominated by patriarchal power.

The author presents ostensibly traditional stories, adding the required refrains of inverted form to be seen as original tales. Morality is no longer considered a feminine, passive virtue, while breath and speech are liberating practices with food for thought. "I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab." (11) Here, Carter's protagonist in *The Bloody Chamber* becomes acutely aware of her objectification, critiquing the commodification of women's bodies and aligning with Luce Irigaray's views on women's roles as "objects" under the male gaze. This metaphor underlines the patriarchal perception of women as objects of aesthetic and economic value rather than autonomous individuals.

In her story collection, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Carter radically reimagines classic fairy tales, such as "Little Red Riding Hood," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Bluebeard." Deconstruction is a central element of Carter's process, and the feminist message of the stories is one of its most

essential components. In the original tales, the woman is always economically, socially, and politically dependent on the man. She is condemned to play a secondary role and is a passive instrument of male power.

For Carter, the roots of patriarchy and gender persuasion are formed in the very patronage of oral customs. Nevertheless, she has a few choice words for women who perpetuate the fatal myth of female innocence or who accept the unkind coding of women in traditional tales as a justification for women's "inferiority." Throughout her work, Carter offers the skill, mental extravagance, gall, and wisdom of a grand exception. She makes us reexamine these myths. Awareness recovered equals power, according to the legends of our own age. If women have been incarcerated in mythic gardens as paragons of chaste mystery or trapped in cannibal-sadist kitchens as culinary grace victims, Angela Carter has called for a jailbreak.

Margaret Atwood. Dystopian Realms and Female Agency

While dystopian societies often represent an outward threat that challenges traditional masculine power, the idea of female characters subverting current norms in oppressive worlds has thoroughly intrigued speculative fiction. Traditionally, the female hero's journey explores the change of the female identity and the reconsideration of her role. All the main characters of these stories experience inner conflict; however, they all revolt against their societies' norms, becoming more aware of themselves. Ultimately, though revolting against what society forces them to be, they transform their relationships and become less alienated from their social selves. These narratives serve to acknowledge the reality of gender power dynamics in various cultures and move beyond stereotypes, providing space for female specificity and focusing on the unique experiences of women.

Atwood's protagonist in *Surfacing* emphasises personal agency in a hostile world. This refusal to "be a victim" aligns with the non-linear, self-defined journey of the female hero, where survival depends on rejecting societal victimisation:

> This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others, but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (191)

Speculative and dystopian fiction provides a unique environment for redefining narrative structures. As one of the most binary genres, it ultimately

interrogates the intersection of gender, power, prejudice, and opposition. The novel presents a world where women have limited opportunities to shape their own destinies. Women are reduced to the position of wombs-on-legs, their bodies appropriated and forcibly trained for their reproductive role. The identity, voice, and ambitions of women are completely stripped away while the state foregrounds biological reproduction for its continuing survival. This story, in a way, is not rooted in speculative reality, and the presence of such institutions today is often denied or downplayed. The story, centering on the protagonist's resistance against oppression and submission, shows that there is always a choice, no matter how seemingly circumscribed the situation. The "afterword," delivered as an academic study, comments on the purpose behind the inscription of the story.

It ultimately interrogates the intersection of gender, power, prejudice, and opposition. Atwood's female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* often find themselves on the margins of society, existing outside the traditional centers of power. "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (196) Atwood writes, highlighting this marginalisation and the potential for subversion by occupying "the gaps." This aligns with Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, where women create alternative narratives that exist outside male-centered discourse, thereby challenging the dominant narratives that attempt to erase them.

It is helpful to interpret stories from multiple angles and to strive to see questions and experiences from many standpoints. One approach to reading literary texts is to apply the hero's journey pattern. Such critical lenses may deepen our knowledge about experience and identity. Since hero stories and mythemes are often gender-biased, one may re-envision and democratise the classic model. Thus, another critical lens worth examining in the stories is the updated and rejuvenated heroine's journey model, specifically designed to suit the critical interpretation of female stories. The narrative voices of the authors address feminist experiences related to victimisation, exploitation, and invisibility. Heroic postures evolve from emotional and cognitive conditions, building resilient personalities. In their works, female authors also advocate rebellion or revolutionary tendencies. Such hero paths might inspire us to regard the feminine gender and its journey more respectfully.

The story in *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays the female experience within an unjust and totalitarian state. Her female characters discover, treasure, and mature their identities in these unbearable conditions. Amidst the regime's constraints, Offred finds a hidden message from a former Handmaid: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum." (69) - meaning "Do not let the bastards grind you down." This mantra manifests as a quiet act of resistance, representing her persistent resilience and internal dissent. It corresponds with

Butler's notion of performativity, whereby Offred externally adheres to her assigned position while simultaneously upholding an inner opposition, discreetly undermining the regime's authority.

The narrative is formalised into three stages: resistance, commitment, and transformation. For example, serendipitously, Offred finds her contemporary sister's name secretly scribbled in the cubbyhole of her closet. This banal action initiates the stage of resistance. The author breathes original life into the details, and her characters gradually learn to add resistance to total silence. In the aftermath of hopeless devastation, they can quietly, furtively hope.

While Acker explores subjugation and resistance through the depiction of fragmented bodies, Atwood takes up the subject of female resistance to oppressive reproductive control regimes in a more traditional dystopian literary narrative. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a horrific society in which a radical religious regime maintains its power base by using the bodies of women who have been contained, rendered voiceless, and repurposed. Its protagonist, who adopts the name Offred, offers a slightly different presentation of resistance, working slowly to breach the regime's control over her own body in both conscious and unconscious efforts to regain her own sexed body.

Nevertheless, Offred may appear to belong more to moments of earlier heroines in her restricted role and lack of self-awareness; however, she does exhibit some rebellion, albeit briefly and minor. Moreover, Offred's act of rebellion grapples with something essential about female resistance when bodies – specifically, reproductive capacities – become a focal point of struggle, especially in societies that lend importance to such a biological aspect. In today's political climate, many governments are examining and legislating the ways women and other capable-bodied individuals can use their bodies and reproduce, making *The Handmaid's Tale* an immediately important work in investigating such procreative power dynamics. Through Offred, Atwood also forcefully universalises historical and contemporary feminist struggles against such constraints on the body.

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Comparative analysis. Feminist Redefinitions of the Heroic Journey

The focus of this chapter is to provide a comparative analysis of the selected works by Acker, Carter, and Atwood, identifying the critical points at which they converge or diverge. The three novelists share common themes and motifs, such as the eroticisation of violence, the fluidity of identity, or the body as a battlefield. However, their interest in embodying and visually representing the subversive female hero diverges. While Acker reappropriates pre-existing texts of the Western canon, twisting them into a proto-postmodern potpourri, Carter and Atwood use their original storytelling skills. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* persists in her efforts to resist and assert individuality through interior monologue and fragmented, nonlinear narration. At the same time, Carter's visitations disrupt the psyches of both the characters and the readers through her storytelling. The authors' two narrative techniques are closely related to unfolding their selected thematic core, as we will see specifically in the context of the concept of freedom and its various interpretations.

The works discussed in this chapter present their female protagonists whose journeys represent the core of the argument. The authors have focused on the struggle at the heart of every woman's condition to provide a comprehensive portrayal of the recurrence, resilience, and strength of the so-called 'feminine hero.'

Consequently, the present study aimed, firstly, to write about the subversive heroine in the light of her conflict with a specific social and artistic context, to stress the break that she represents within the history of literature, and secondly, to present three critical examples of feminist literature within a broader web of social implications. By examining their aesthetics, the aim was to demonstrate how the chosen naturalistic, surrealist, and hyperrealist tales remain relevant to our time. Their heroines might have fallen into oblivion and become marginal figures, yet these facts make their case more exciting and

noteworthy. In a way, these works also contribute to redefining the literary canon. This strategy enabled the authors to diversify narrative techniques, altering the course of literary public discourse and a reader's approach through the use of irony. They ultimately reshaped their presence within their surrounding societies.

A closer examination of their narrative strategies and how they portray their protagonists reveals that they address the theme of empowerment or resistance to patriarchal power, challenging traditionally held gender roles. The interaction between femininity, sympathy, and victimhood is pretty complex, with the limits of transgression being quite blurred. While the texts often explore similar thematic concerns, their narrative structures and other motifs differ significantly.

A woman with a double identity, determined to find her authentic or new self, considers her body a shield against men and develops her body and immune system, which is reflected in her work. One author dedicates her novel to her body image and the concept of the woman-as-an-artist. The central theme, which is the theme of self-identity, has been explored by the three authors, who also incorporate another theme, that of the body, within the context of feminist thinking. The text, therefore, presents the three fictional narratives as a group and infers their common themes from a feminist perspective, as well as how these themes are reflected and represented by the three female authors who share similar opinions.

Whereas one author's writings entail a clear influence of cut-ups, coupled with the use of intertexts that predate other feminist novelists' subversive re-appropriation of canonical texts and items of mass culture in the pursuit of a mythical and/or feminist imagination of reality, the experiments with form enabled others to reinvigorate storytelling itself. Their attraction was motivated by a desire to engage public interest and a sense of wonder, capturing the essence of something enchanting while addressing women's issues.

Conclusion

Contemporary society requires more female hero's journeys in art, in general, and in the form of the fantastic in the broadest sense. It seems essential that a variety of such stories should be in circulation as they unite society. They work to construct the experiential basis of our lives by which we and our society are measured. As witnesses, they address audience members. The transformative, completed female hero's journey lays the experiential basis for the existence of an individual, artist or not, who styles herself as free of oppressive male-centered patterns. Moreover, by providing the blueprint for a non-male-centered world, the journey facilitates the construction of a world in the image of that experiential basis.

The transformative completed female hero's journey in contemporary women's novels offers relief and real resolution. The works provide parallel, fantastic explorations of the transformation process and observations of various forms of transformation. Their studies acknowledge the more extensive, male-dominated world as the basis of their creative reality. The experience of the completed cycle, its reality, brings the opportunity —and indeed, an obligation — to bring the world back to something more in line with that experiential base. Such an obligation is not a purely individual concern; it does not merely deal with personal space and personal liberty, for personal freedom, by its very nature.

The selected cases of Carter, Acker, and Atwood present independent, individualistic attitudes toward writing subversive, transformative women. The analysis of their novels offers examples of elements that form their new heroine model. By concentrating on the female hero's journey, traditional narrative norms are redefined, and a genuinely modern feminist struggle is documented. While the primary goals of each post-war text appear to differ significantly, all subversive heroines oppose the patriarchal order and achieve self-awareness, as well as internal, external, and processual emasculation, thereby denying the division of men and women into distinct, rigid categories.

It is paramount to remember that the plurality of women's experiences about structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and further aspects does not and cannot begin to be fully represented within the framework of a single essay. The fictional females serving as case studies are inherently Western in culture, with Westernized thinking and predispositions. The issues tackled can and are intended to operate on a broader scale, drawing from the human experience beyond a narrow, white, capitalist scope.

Through their various works, Acker, Atwood, and Carter release femme feats in literary guise. The creation of multidimensional, extra-choices illegal women reflects a society where individuality and self-expression are often limited and unacceptable. Their existence is rejected since they trespass upon class, gendered, intellectual, and linguistic norms. Their stories, the oppressed *her-stories*, too, are disregarded. Therein lies the vital need for continued exploration into women's narratives and *her-stories*.

In a nutshell, through the works of Acker, Carter, and Atwood, the heroine's journey reconfigures the traditional hero's tale into a profound reimagining of the strength of a female character: harrowing, resourceful, and subversive. While many classic hero tales are of conquest, separation, and ultimate return, these authors more often describe a heroine's journey with cycles of self-reconstruction, confrontation with societal constraints, and fluid rather than fixed self-assertion. Through this reframing, the heroine's path refuses to provide closure. Instead, it opens up spaces where fragmented identities, reappropriated mythologies, and transgressive embodiments

redefine what it means to be a "hero" within a patriarchal context. In this sense, Acker's broken heroines, Carter's reframed fairy tales, and Atwood's futuristic protagonists all gesture toward the new heroine as a figure of work in progress—a symbol of self-possessed power that pushes against traditional stories. By putting the protagonist in a state of non-conquest, but rather one of continuous resistance and change, these stories open up a space for redefining what heroism truly is. Such redefinition enables the construction of a schema that celebrates diversity, persistence, and profound reconfigurations of identity. The entire journey of the protagonist is a powerful feminist statement and a symbol calling out for change in the structures of society, epitomising the persistent strength found between the cracks of oppression and independence.

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