Power Dynamics of Sex Work in “The Company of Wolves”

For enchantresses of fantasy and sensuality, Angela Carter’s feminist retelling of the classic Little Red Riding Hood, “The Company of Wolves,” functions as a cautionary tale of the power dynamics of sex work. Despite the popularity of online sex work formats like OnlyFans, popular discourse on sex work is simplistic and under-developed. Society remains anti-sex and whore-phobic. Awareness of sex work does not eliminate harm if the discourse remains under-developed and simplistic. The internet popularity of sex work, along with simplistic views of empowerment and consent, gives potential providers false expectations of the industry—making them naive of the realities of entering the industry and more susceptible to harm and violence. The simplistic idea that bodily autonomy is empowerment takes away from the complexities of power dynamics within the sex industry. It diminishes the dangers and stigma providers face. On the other hand, the savior-perspective of pitying the traumatized providers and the perceived immorality they partake in to survive is also rooted in whore-phobia. As exemplified in “The Company of Wolves,” society must understand that power dynamics change under different conditions. Power is nuanced. It depends on the interplay between circumstance and one’s intersectional identities.

Power is nuanced and ever-changing. Power exists in perpetual duality. There cannot be power without exploitation. Survival cannot exist without danger. It is a perpetual battle between opposing forces. A similar duality of power and survival is seen in the plight of the story's antagonists, the werewolves. Although they are strong, they are starving. Although they are feared, they are desperate to survive. The reality of their strength and ferocity is that they are starving, desperate, and alone. They must compete with the other wolves for food. “They are grey as famine, they are unkind as plague,” describes Carter. They are abhorred by humans, yet are still human themselves. Carter writes, “That long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its fearful resonance, some inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition.” While the concepts of the werewolves' strength and survival oppose one another, the duality of both is the reality of the lives of the werewolves. In sex work, both the customers and providers display this dynamic. Much like the wolves, the men who are customers in the sex-industry exist in duality. Men are physically strong yet emotionally stunted. Society conditions them to be aggressive and entitled, yet these traits prevent the social creature that is a man from developing and maintaining healthy relationships with others and themselves. As analyzed by bell hooks, “…patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves.” Much like the werewolves who are starving, desperate, and alone, men who buy sex are seeking immediately gratifying sexual and emotional release and intimacy. Just like the werewolves were originally humans like anyone else in the community, men who buy sex are your friends, brothers, cousins, fathers, grandparents, etc. Some of them are pleasures to work with, respectful and understanding of boundaries. Some of them are immediately aggressive and demanding. Others are wolves in sheep’s clothing—like the handsome, charming, and helpful hunter that would later reveal himself as a werewolf to the main character by killing and eating her grandmother (Carter). While full-service sex workers can take precautions like screening potential clients, the most cunning of monstrous humans successfully prey on the most vulnerable without anyone ever knowing. “Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems.” The duality of power and survival of the wolves also parallels the providers of the sex industry. Providers must survive in a capitalist system that exploits them. They use their bodies to sell sex and fantasies by exploiting the expectations of a patriarchal, misogynist, capitalist society. Despite the power of entrepreneurial ingenuity, providers know that to exploit this society, one must accept the risks of life-threatening danger and life-long stigma by the same anti-sex, whore-phobic society in which the industry exists. Like the wolves who are powerful yet starving, sex workers are empowered yet vulnerable. In the capitalist concept of business, a duality of profit and exploitation exists in anything that is commodified. This tug-of-war is the root of exploitation. Customers want to pay the least for the most, while sellers want to be paid the most for the least. This dynamic can never be escaped in capitalism—especially patriarchal capitalism.The tug-of-war between providers and customers in the sex industry is furthered catalyzed by a misogynist environment where providers must accept that they will be sexually assaulted, especially when the commodity is sex. Sex workers must take on big risks to reap big rewards. They must navigate the darkness of vulnerability and secrecy common to ladies of the night.

The underground world of the sex industry is the ominous forest in the story. The main character in the forbidden part of the forest parallels the most vulnerable of sex workers, like those who walk the blade (sex workers advertising themselves on streets and providing services to customers who drive by). She is exactly where the rest of society forbids—a dangerous place no one dares to enter. Carter starts the story with a background of tales and warnings of the starving, ferocious werewolves in the forest. If you go into this forbidden forest of hungry wolves, everyone assumes that you will face danger. No one will be there to save you. One must, at least, carry a weapon to defend oneself. Carter writes, “You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are…step between the gateposts of the forest with the greatest trepidation and infinite precautions, for if you stray from the path for one instant, the wolves will eat you.” The tales of the wolves parallel the underground sex-industry. Vanilla society views the sex-industry as forbidden because of its perceived immorality and deviance. If a sex worker is sexually or physically assaulted—even killed—society does not care about her justice because they never cared for her safety. Just as the main character must accept danger and violence because she went to the forbidden forest to visit her grandmother (Carter), sex workers who are physically and sexually assaulted are not seen as victims of violence because of the nature of their work. The danger involving the sex-industry is created by an anti-sex, whore-phobic society that has nothing but disdain for the perceived immorality of a deviant, under-ground trade.

Despite the perils of vulnerability, sex workers have mastered the magic of their innate sensuality to survive in a world created for women to suffer. Patriarchy makes it so that women must rely on men for protection and safety. The background of the werewolves tells of many instances of men killing werewolves. However, one of the tales was that of a witch who “turned an entire wedding party into wolves because the groom had settled on another girl. She used to order them to visit her, at night, from spite, and they would sit and howl around her cottage for her, serenading her with their misery” (Carter). Men used their physical strength to protect themselves, while the one woman who could control the wolves was a witch that used magic. Sex workers have commodified the magic of their sexuality to survive. They use their sexuality to be in control—exploiting the objectification of women’s’ bodies to make money—just as the witch used magic to control the wolves. Overcoming adversity is powerful, resilient, and magical. Like a rose that grows from concrete, sex workers exemplify ingenuity because they exploit the patriarchy and misogyny of a capitalist society to profit. While women in vanilla society struggle to demand equal pay, sex workers set the price—practicing a form of wealth redistribution. In its nature, sex work is making lemonade out of lemons. The feminine bodies that society uses to justify inequality and injustice are reclaimed as bodies of resilience and opportunity. Sex workers are a garden of roses that grew from concrete. Like the magical witch who controlled the wolves, sex workers can use their sexuality to have customers willingly give them their rent money and savings. That is magic. This magical control over men as seen through control over the werewolves is also depicted in the main character by being able to control the wolf with the enchantment of her sexuality and confidence. She burned the clothes, preventing the werewolf from turning human and preying on someone else. “The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing,” writes Carter. The main character is able to control the wolf like the witch through her innate, human form of magic instead of supernatural powers. The magic of sex work is reclaiming one’s body and using it to control rather than be controlled by society. The main character exemplifies this when she laughs hysterically at the threatening wolf because she is “nobody’s meat” (Carter).

Despite the magic and empowerment of reclaiming one's body to survive, Carter uses the main character to depict the nuance of ever-changing power dynamics in sex work. The main character, a pubescent girl, is depicted as naive—representing her vulnerability. This parallels the vulnerability of sex workers and the naivety of new providers entering the industry, similar to the girl’s innocence of the danger of the forbidden forest. Though guileless and vulnerable, the girl uses her intuition to save her life. Her instincts tell her that she is in immediate danger after coming across the wolf in her grandmother’s home (Carter). This parallels a sex worker’s intuition and instinct as their first—and sometimes only—line of defense, like the main character using the magic and intuition of her sexuality to save her own life. Carter describes the girl’s intuition, when she writes, “She wanted her knife from her basket but she did not dare reach for it because his eyes were fixed upon her.” The role of intuition depicts how sex workers must be keenly aware and adept at risk-management, body language, and conflict resolution to survive monstrous customers. This illustrates the vulnerability to predation, yet the heightened intuition and instinct function as another magical, resilient component of reclaiming one’s body. The very nature of sex work is surviving in the face of danger to thrive financially. This, itself, is another example of the nuanced power dynamics within sex work.

Sex workers consensually enter the industry but are coerced by a patriarchal, capitalist society that makes it their best option. In places outside the United States where there are military bases, a red-light district is exploited by and benefits from the capitalist, imperialist conquest that providers partake in consensually. While some providers can make more money in sex work than a vanilla career, the nature of the industry can negatively affect one’s physical, mental, and emotional health. While some sex workers are equipped to handle the stress and trauma, others’ trauma response can be to fall into illicit substance use. It is important to note that the sex-industry encompasses a variety of sub-industries that each have different factors relating to safety and visibility. For example, there are providers who walk the blade and take dates (customers) that they cannot screen for lower rates, with a blue-collar customer base. There are also high-end escorts who have strict screening policies and higher rates, with a white-collar customer base. Cyber sex work prevents the potential danger of in-person, physical services yet leaves a digital footprint that cannot be escaped. A stripper’s experience depends on the culture of the strip-club she works at—whether management creates a safe environment, the customer base, expectations of “extras” (oral sex, hand-jobs, etc.), etc. Sugar babies must provide an emotionally draining girlfriend experience and are at higher risk of being stalked by their sugar daddies, but they do not have to experience the physical demands of dancing at a strip club or having sex with multiple clients like full-service sex workers. A sex worker who is fortunate to have respectful clients will have a different experience of empowerment than one who is often sexually assaulted by clients. Similarly, the economic class of the sex worker will affect their feelings of empowerment. Rich, white, cis sex workers who can screen will feel empowered; while survival sex workers, like trans-women who are escaping family abuse and have no other job prospects, may not feel empowered at all. Despite surviving by using the magic of intuition and sexuality in reclaiming her body, the main character still faces the trauma of her grandmother being murdered, having sex with her grandmother’s killer, and being surrounded by hungry wolves still (Carter). This parallels the changing power dynamics of sex work. It exists in duality, just as the wolves and main character’s power and survival exist in duality. Sex work is consensual and coerced, empowering and exploitative. While the main character consensually had sex with the wolf, she was also coerced because she did it to save her life. She is empowered for turning the tide, regaining control, and saving herself, yet is also a victim and survivor under monstrous conditions. In fact, Carter writes about how they had sex to the smell of her grandmother’s hair burning, on a bed hiding her grandmother’s bones underneath. The dynamics change based on the circumstances and forever persist in the duality of power and survival, similar to the werewolves’ and main character’s plight.

Within duality exists a complex grey area that is never black or white—like the power dynamics of sex work. Carter ends the story with a depiction of the main character cuddling in bed with the wolf that just killed and ate her grandmother:

She will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and

perhaps she will put die lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony…See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.

The ending is contentious as some readers believe that the girl is exhibiting a trauma response of fawning as seen in Stockholm Syndrome; others believe that the girl is consensually enjoying the encounter and is in a loving relationship with her grandmother’s killer. I would argue that neither of the readings are wrong. In the context of sex work, this dynamic reminds me of the boyfriend-pimp relationship. The provider is in a romantic relationship with her pimp. Vanilla society stigmatizes full-service sex workers who sometimes believe that love is only possible with men who are in the industry, pimps. Some sex workers consensually choose to enter a relationship with a pimp and become a part of his stable (the sex workers that work for him). Other sex workers are in a complicated interplay of intimate partner violence/abuse, consent, and coercion. Some enter a relationship without the awareness that the man is a pimp until they get pimped out. Just as vanilla society is aware of how many attempts and how much time it can take for a woman to leave an abusive relationship, the same pattern happens in relationships where sex work is involved. For some women, it was and is always trafficking and coercion. For other women, it is a complicated, toxic relationship where being introduced to sex work was coerced then later becomes consensual. This dynamic also exists with girls who were trafficked at a young age and consensually choose to participate in sex work in adulthood. Much like power, consent is sensitive and nuanced—it is ever-changing based on circumstance and context. Within a patriarchal, capitalist society, our notions of consent would indicate that all workers—in every industry—are exploited. Did you consent to be born as an indentured servant to Master Capitalism?

Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” creates an interesting conversation in the nuances of power and consent. Under the lens of sex work, it is a cautionary tale of the power dynamics of using sexual agency to survive. With the growing prevalence of sex work on the internet and economic insecurity, it is important for potential providers to understand the nuanced power dynamics of sex work to prepare for and reduce potential harm. Society, along with many self-proclaimed feminists, believe that sex work is an easy, fallback plan. How many times have you heard someone joke that they would just quit college and become a stripper? Yet the reality is that not everyone is cut from the cloth—one of grit and skill set—required to be resilient in sex work. Most people use sex work as a stepping stone to finance their survival and dreams, yet the reality is that some providers cannot cope with the realities and tragedies of the industry. Instead of thriving, they remain surviving. The nuanced dynamic of power in sex work in the “The Company of Wolves,” can be interpreted as a cautionary tale of power dynamics within the sex industry. Sex work is a trap: a hustle that is a safety net for those of us born without one—a hustle that simultaneously seeks to ensnare you in the perils of vulnerability. As Diamond from the movie “Player’s Club” said, “Make the money, don’t let it make you.”

Works Cited

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