MULTIPPLICITY OF THE MIRROR: GENDER REPRESENTATION IN OYEYEMI’S BOY, SNOW, BIRD

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By
Rachel Marie Sebastian Rowe

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Name: Rowe, Rachel Marie Sebastian

APPROVED BY:

________________________
Tereza M. Szeghi, Ph.D.
Advisory Committee Chairman
Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and Social Justice
Department of English

_____________________________
Kara Getrost, Ph.D.
Committee Member
Lecturer
Department of English

_____________________________
Bryan Bardine
Committee Member
Associate Professor
Department of English
ABSTRACT

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Name: Rowe, Rachel Marie Sebastian
University of Dayton
Advisor: Dr. Tereza Szeghi

This thesis explores the spectrum of female representation and feminine experience in Helen Oyeyemi’s Boy, Snow, Bird, a postmodern fairy tale retelling of “Snow White.” Within the novel, Oyeyemi creates several female characters that represent various feminine experiences. The image of the mirror enables me to navigate these characters and their stories. As each character searches for her identity within the constraints of patriarchal oppression, she develops a voice through the act of storytelling. I contend that the novel, as a postmodern fairy tale, engages in social-resistance as it uses the mirror to expose and confront patriarchal constructions of women.
Dedicated to my husband and parents
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CHAPTER I:

BOY, SNOW, BIRD A POSTMODERN FAIRY TALE

“Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy. I’d hide myself away inside them...when I stood between them I was infinitely reflected in either direction. Many, many me’s” – Boy, Bird, Snow by Helen Oyeyemi

The fairy tale heroine, Snow White, may invoke a variety of images depending on the person’s experience with the story. From dancing dwarves to grotesque stepmothers, “hundreds of oral versions, collected primarily in Europe, but also in Asian Minor, Africa, and the Americas” exist (Jones qtd. Bacchilega 29). Rather than frame Snow White by plot, it is easier to approach this tale in terms of its reproduction of images: the heroine white as snow, the jealous stepmother and her mirror, etc. Within these narratives, the heroine is marked by her pure character and exceptional physical beauty. The villain is marked by her fading beauty and jealousy—coveting the young heroine’s youth in her desire to be ‘the fairest of them all.’ As Cristina Bacchilega explains, “‘Snow White’ versions vary greatly in details or allomotifs. The (step) mother attacks Snow White in a variety of ways; the girl finds refuge with robbers, assassins, giants, fairies, instead of with dwarves” (29). Furthermore, these fairy tales and their retellings tend to narrate a set pattern of female experience (Zipes 38). Citing
Walter Burket, Jack Zipes reviews a few of these patterns, which apply to Snow White, including “an eruption in a young girl’s life that causes her to separate from family and home” and “a catastrophe that drives the young girl from the idyllic setting due to her violation of a promise of her being violated” (38). In several versions of Snow White, the mother dies and the stepmother vows to violate, or end, her new stepdaughter’s life. Likewise, Snow White runs away from home to escape the stepmother’s jealous ploys. The mirror has become a symbolic representation of the stepmother’s jealousy. Images like the mirror, or these types of patterned narrative experience, become useful in framing how contemporary versions of Snow White are being retold. I intend to investigate how these images and narratives function concerning their representation of feminine identity. Bacchilega’s discussion of Snow White and its representation of gender will frame my own argument about one of the most recent re-tellings of Snow White: Boy, Snow, Bird. I contend that the novel, as a postmodern fairy tale, engages in social-resistance as it uses the mirror to expose and confront patriarchal constructions of women.

Helen Oyeyemi’s novel, Boy, Snow, Bird, captures the elements of Snow White—the mirror, the magic, the beautiful heroine, the stepmother—and repositions the fairy tale in 1960s Massachusetts. The story begins when Boy Novak, a twenty-year-old woman, sets out to escape her abusive father, Frank Novak, whom she calls The Rat Catcher. As she begins her new life, Boy settles into the suburbs. She finds a job as an assistant bookkeeper, befriends a journalist, Mia, and becomes acquainted with Arturo Whitman. Arturo, Boy
learns, is a widower and has a young and beautiful little girl named Snow. As Arturo and Boy enter into a relationship and eventually marry, Boy assumes her role as the stepmother. But she is not the wicked one-dimensional villain that seeks vengeance over her stepdaughter’s beauty. Rather, her love for Snow becomes complicated by the birth of her and Arturo’s daughter, Bird. Oyeyemi uses both Boy and Bird to narrate the novel and also incorporates letters from Snow. The three female characters and the motif of the mirror become pivotal in illustrating the complexities surrounding feminine identity and female representation.

Contemporary fairytales aim to re-vision the traditional, and often one-sided, stories of the past specifically in their representation of women. These modern re-tellings act as tools for questioning and exposing types of female experience. Christina Bacchilega’s work, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, has proven influential in its discussion of how various postmodern fairy tales reflect a woman’s experience. She uses the mirror as a way to navigate how contemporary fairy tales revise images of women. Their revisions are powerful in that they both reflect and question the social structures that construct perceptions of gender. Bacchilega’s definition of the postmodern fairy tale captures this:

> Multiple permutations produce postmodern transformations of fairy tales because their simultaneously affirming and questioning strategies re-double in a variety of critically self-reflexive moves [...] some postmodern revisions may question and remake the classic fairy tale’s production of
gender only to re-inscribe it within some unquestioned model of subjectivity or narrativity [...] Still other tales re-place or relocate the fairy tale to multiply its performance potential and denaturalize its institutionalized power. In every case, though, these postmodern transformations do not exploit the fairy tale’s magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings. (23)

The transformations of traditional fairy tales into the postmodern novel allows writers to construct revisions that encourage their readers to ask questions about the larger issues at work within the tale as well as issues related to the world in which they live. My project is inspired by this art of retelling. The retold fairy tales provide a space where authors can re-work traditional characters and plot lines into a narrative that achieves a new purpose or message. Bacchilega’s evaluation of the influence of the postmodern fairy tale is useful in considering how feminine subjectivity and gender roles are represented in Oyeyemi’s Boy, Snow, Bird.

I will explore how Oyeyemi’s Boy, Snow, Bird functions as a postmodern fairy tale. Bacchilega’s metaphor of the mirror has grounded my analysis on this subject: “Postmodern fictions, then, hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale, playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and expose its artifices” (23). The image of the mirror is two fold. First, the concrete image of the mirror appears as a narrative strategy to reflect issues of feminine experience. Second, Boy, Bird, Snow, as a postmodern fairy tale, acts as a mirror in order to engage the text with a larger conversation on gender representation.
Through this lens, I am able to navigate how the mirror works to expose and question ‘the magic’ of patriarchal framing.

First, I will use Snow and her biological mother, Julia, to demonstrate the social consequences of naturalizing beauty, when framed by patriarchy. Snow acts as a mirror to the detrimental consequences of the objectification of beauty for a female. In chapter three, I will demonstrate the multiplicity of the mirror—categorizing it as a fluid space to explore both objectivity and subjectivity. In its multiplicity, the mirror has the capacity to un-work the magic of the mirror. In chapter four, I establish stories and the creation of stories as mirrors to resisting patriarchal restraints on female identity. Through writing and sharing stories, women are able to participate in active resistance.
CHAPTER II

THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL: PATRIARCHAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATURALIZED BEAUTY AND OYEYEMI’S SNOW

Introducing Snow

In Oyeyemi’s retelling, Snow Whitman plays a significant role in her reflection of beauty and femininity. Snow is the stepdaughter of the main character, Boy Novak. Although Boy initially shows love and kindness toward Snow, this changes once Boy gives birth to her own daughter, Bird. Immediately after Bird’s birth, Boy recognizes how different she is treated compared to Snow. While Snow exhibits beauty and grace, Bird, in the eyes of all who see her, does not. Bird’s dark complexion reveals her family’s racial heritage, while Snow’s fair complexion covers it up. Boy reflects on the differences between the two girls,

Bird adored Snow; everybody adored Snow and her daintiness. Snow’s beauty is all more precious to Olivia and Agnes because it’s a trick...Olivia [Snow’s Great Grandmother] laps up the reactions Snow gets. From this I can [...] begin to measure the difference between being seen as colored and being seen as Snow. What can I do for my daughter? One day soon a wall will come up between us, and I won’t be able to follow her behind it. (139)

Boy calls Snow’s appearance “a trick” because her fair complexion masks her racial heritage. This allows Snow to have certain privileges that are based on
her appearance. The observations presented by Boy showcase Snow as a representative of how beauty has become correlated with race in the eyes of the grandmother, the great-grandmother, and many members of the community in which they live. Bird cannot handle the constant comparisons that are made between the girls. The line “What can I do for my daughter?” indicates Boy’s struggle over the realization that, over time, she will not be able to help Bird. Due to the stark differences between Boy and Snow, Boy is advised to send Bird away. However, she ignores this advice and sends Snow away at five-years-old to live with Arturo’s sister, Clara. Unlike traditional versions, Boy is not jealous of Snow’s beauty. Her decision is made out of desperation, as a means to shelter Bird. This switch from traditional plotline allows Oyeyemi to rework one of the basic themes of Snow White—female beauty—in order to explore the consequences of the patriarchal framing of beauty and representation of women.

Despite being sent away, Snow is persistent in her attempt to make contact with her stepmother. For years, Boy leaves Snow’s desperate letters unanswered. The letters remain tucked inside a box, until Bird finds them while snooping in her mother’s room. Upon discovery of the letters from Snow, Bird decides to write to her half-sister. The letters reveal Snow’s character, both how others perceive her and how she perceives herself. They serve as a reflection of specific issues related to Snow’s feminine experience. As the novel progresses, Snow’s awareness of her beauty and how it has influenced her life is made evident. Her letters to Bird reflect the complexities surrounding her beauty.
I use Oyeyemi’s Snow to investigate how naturalized beauty is represented in this postmodern fairytale. By this, I refer to physical beauty that a daughter inherits from her mother through birth. For example, Julia, Snow’s mother, passed her physical beauty to Snow. Likewise, Julia received her beauty from her mother, Agnes, and Agnes received her beauty from her mother, Olivia. The biological process of conception and birth defines naturalized beauty. In this novel, naturalized beauty is intergenerational—passed down from mother to daughter, and, eventually, inherited by Snow.

Snow White as a character who reflects naturalized beauty is not a new concept. Bacchilega, in her discussion of Snow White, states, “Within the fairy tale’s narrative frame, Snow White is the crystallized image of the ‘natural’ woman. Examining the construction of such a frame can at the very least contribute to unmaking the power of that crystal” (29). Over time, Snow White has become this “crystallized image” of beauty. This happens through retellings of the story, all of which deem Snow White as an inheritor of natural beauty. Snow White’s categorization as a ‘natural woman,’ indicates her beauty has been biologically inherited. The issue with this image of naturalized beauty is that it is framed by patriarchy. It draws attention to and values the external appearance of a woman. Bacchilega further discusses the consequences of this naturalized beauty and its patriarchal framing: “‘Snow White’ claims to tell us the truth about the world: the human world mirrors nature [...] by silently assuming a set of social conventions the narrative strategy of mirroring sustains among many other social norms the re-production of gender construction” (35). Patriarchy instills “a set of social conventions” that require a set construction of what woman should
be. Snow, traditionally, and in Oyeyemi’s novel, is representative of this framing of beauty. The patriarchal influence of natural beauty affects how a woman might see herself. Through the male gaze, the external image of the natural woman becomes internalized in a woman’s mind. When a woman internalizes this patriarchal image of beauty, her perception of identity becomes skewed. This transmission of external to internal beauty—how woman perceives beauty—and its consequences on female identity is represented through various female characters. I use Snow’s character to distinguish how naturalized beauty is represented and how its social construction affects how beauty is internalized, which ultimately influences how a woman perceives her own identity.

*External and Natural Beauty in Snow White’s Mother*

To further understand Oyeyemi’s interpretation of Snow and naturalized beauty, I would like to review how other scholars have interpreted this trope of mother-daughter relationships and natural beauty. Bacchilega’s chapter “Framing ‘Snow White’” explores how authors use this tale to show the link between mother-daughter relationships and constructions of beauty. The mother produces her ideal image of beauty through her daughter. Bacchilega demonstrates this process by using Zipes’ interpretation of the Grimm Brothers *Snow White*. In this version, the Queen expresses her desire for a beautiful daughter, stating, “If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame!” (32). The lines associate beauty with physical traits—for example, skin that is “white as snow.” The mother’s
expression is typically categorized as ‘the mother’s wish.’ Bacchilega notes that the mother desires her own internal perception of beauty to be produced in her daughter. As the tale goes, the wish comes true and her daughter is born, “white as snow, as red as blood, and her hair as black as ebony” (32). Like the Queen, the daughter, Snow White, is marked by her physical beauty. This traditional tale captures the occurrence of the daughter inheriting natural beauty from the mother.

Naturalized beauty is not the only type of beauty at work in the text. Internalized beauty is also present. The patriarchal frame links these two types of beauty. Bacchilega demonstrates this relationship between natural and internalized beauty in her discussion of the mother and Snow White’s birth:

Snow White’s birth as a character and the narrative that produces her are both legitimized through mirroring [...] Snow White’s mother gives birth to the image of woman she has internalized, what appears to be the heroine are the beauty and purity of white, the transformative powers of red or gold, the ritual—and sexual—death of black (33).

The relationship between daughter and mother is a strategy that enforces the naturalizing of beauty. Bacchilega’s discussion of these elements emphasizes that the mother passes on both her external and internal images of beauty. Furthermore, Bacchilega emphasizes the influence of the King’s own wish for a particular type of beauty to be represented in his daughter (whether he is present or not). She states, “These symbolic ingredients suggest that the ‘good’ mother actually gives birth to the absent King’s wishes” (33). Bacchilega’s insight is important, because she draws attention to the patriarchal influence of the
mother’s wish as described earlier. The wish now becomes an internalized version of beauty that is rooted in the king’s own perception of beauty. Therefore, the male gaze directly influences the Queen’s internalized version of beauty. The process of naturalizing beauty, then, influences how the mother’s wish is answered. The daughter’s conception and birth manifests both internal and external beauty influenced by patriarchy. Bacchilega’s discussion of naturalized and internalized beauty is useful in providing context to my own analysis of Snow and her mother, Julia. Snow and Julia become mirrors for looking at how the male gaze influences a woman’s internalization of beauty.

To understand how Julia’s beauty frames Snow’s beauty, it is necessary to understand how the mother is characterized in Boy, Snow, Bird. The reader only gains information about Julia through other characters’ comments, because it is assumed she has passed away before the novel begins. Therefore, my analysis of Julia’s relationship is largely based on Boy’s perspective. Boy’s narration of Julia begins from her desire to know more about her significant other’s first wife. As she learns about Arturo’s past, Boy seeks a history of Julia, knowing that she will be the second wife as well as a stepmother. Through Boy’s commentary, Julia’s external beauty is made clear. Boy defines Julia by her unattainable beauty, stating: “Julia and I wouldn’t have been friends. She looked like a bashful Rapunzel, dark hair pinned up high, doe eyes always down turned or gazing off to the side” (Oyeyemi 68). In this description, Julia is represented by her external beauty. It is worth noting, though, that Boy is projecting her own internalized perception of beauty on to Julia, as she draws attention to Julia’s physical traits. Boy does not question the validity of Julia’s described appearance, but rather
complicates how Julia, as a mother, is categorized by those who view her picture as Boy does. The photograph captures Julia as a fairy tale character—“a bashful Rapunzel.” Her physical attributes are captured in her “dark hair” and her “doe eyes” (68). Such characteristics mark Julia as representative of externalized beauty, which is significant in that she will eventually pass this beauty on to her daughter Snow.

Oyeyemi’s interpretation of the mother’s death reworks a significant trope in the *Snow White* narrative. This scene highlights naturalized beauty—external and internal beauty passed from mother to daughter. Arturo describes Snow’s birth and Julia’s death to Boy: “She had to have Snow by Caesarean, and she came home, she got a fever...Two days, she kept saying, *I’ll just sleep it off*, Arturo...She died in the night, Boy. It seemed impossible. She was laughing and singing to Snow in the afternoon...” (102). In the process of giving birth to naturalized beauty, Julia passes away. Snow, her daughter, then inherits this beauty. Her death and Snow’s beauty show how Oyeyemi has re-visioned this scene. It would be tempting to see how the novel might suggest the mother must die in this process of passing out beauty. I argue, however, that since both Julia’s mother and great mother have lived, Oyeyemi is suggesting something else through this trope of the mother’s death. In this version, Oyeyemi seems to be bringing death to the patriarchal cycle of naturalized beauty due to her development of Snow’s character. Rather than support the patriarchal frame, like traditional versions of Snow White, Oyeyemi exposes and questions this structure by demonstrating the consequences of naturalized beauty on feminine identity.
Generational Interpretations of Naturalized Beauty

Oyeyemi explores how naturalized beauty is generational. In the novel, beauty has been passed down from great-grandmother to grandmother to daughter to granddaughter, and so on. Boy observes the beauty of Olivia, Snow’s great-grandmother and Agnes, Snow’s grandmother: “But Agnes’s frailty aside, she and Olivia were pretty good examples of lasting beauty, right down to the creases that ran around their foreheads and lips, some soft, like folds in cream, other deeply scored” (78). Boy categorizes Agnes and Olivia as having a “lasting beauty.” Despite the wrinkles of age, they still maintain their natural beauty. Boy, almost cynically, states that Olivia “clearly intended for Snow to be part of her lasting-beauty club...Most people who say beauty fades say it with a smirk. Fading is more than just expected; it’s what they want to see. I don’t” (79). The premise that external “beauty” will eventually fade is framed from the male gaze’s assumption that woman is defined by her beauty, which is why passing on this natural beauty becomes seemingly necessary. Both Olivia and Agnes have held on to their beauty; it is what allows them to survive in the patriarchal society in which they live. The descriptions of their external beauty points to the generational effect of naturalized beauty.

Now that we can see this beauty as a cyclical process—passed on through generations—we can navigate Snow’s beauty and the consequences of her representation. The cycle of passing on naturalized beauty is relayed in a conversation that Boy has with Snow’s grandmother, Julia’s mother, Agnes. “When I left, it was Agnes who saw me to the door. ‘Snow’s the spitting image of
Julia when she was a girl,’ she said, leaning close, as if she were letting me in on classified information [...] I said, ‘And Julia was the spitting image of you when she was a girl” (78). Snow as a “spitting image” of Julia draws attention to the girl’s physical appearance. This shows how Julia fulfilled the traditional ‘mothers’ wish’ and passed her beauty to her daughter.

Even at a young age, Snow demonstrates naturalized grace and beauty. All who see her cannot help but notice it, pointing to her external features. Boy narrates how Snow’s grandmother and great-grandmother observe Snow:

I watched the women watching Snow. Their reverence was over the top. Sure, she was an extraordinary-looking kid. A medieval swan maiden, only with the darkest hair, and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost. She was like a girl in a Technicolor tapestry... (78)

Every time a person sees Snow, she or he is in awe of her being. In terms of her physical features, Snow is not only reminiscent of Julia but also the traditional character of Snow White. Her features seem to be so ‘extraordinary’ that they are difficult to capture in words, like the difficulty in capturing every color in a “Technicolor tapestry.” Beauty, then, marks Snow, just as it marked her mother, Julia. This inheritance of beauty has social consequences in how Snow is represented and how she is expected to function within society.

**Naturalized Beauty and Socially Constructed Consequences**

The naturalization of beauty plays a thematic role in the novel, specifically in how beauty is perceived, internalized, and represented. Bacchilega’s
interpretation of Snow White helps to frame my discussion of Oyeyemi’s Snow, specifically in how she reflects beauty and female experience. According to Bacchilega, “Snow White” is “a constructed child-woman whose snow-white features and attitudes are assumed to conform to nature in a powerfully metaphoric way” (35). Here, Bacchilega emphasizes how Snow White “conforms to nature,” which then makes her a representation of naturalized beauty. While traditional versions of Snow White might only reflect the patriarchal structures at work that influence how beauty is interpreted, Oyeyemi’s version of Snow seeks to expose and question these structures. A postmodern fairy tales ability to expose and question representations of gender and the structures that enforce these images is explained by Bacchilega:

...Postmodern fairy tales seek to expose this state’s generic and gendered ‘lie’ or artifice. Assuming that a frame always selects, shapes (dis) places, limits and (de) centers the image in the mirror, postmodern retellings focus precisely on this frame to unmake the mimetic fiction. (35-36)

Even though Snow never knew her mother, Snow recognizes her expected role through the other women in her life as well as through societal expectations. Snow, therefore, exemplifies Bacchilega’s primary argument in that the postmodern fairy tale is able to navigate through institutionalized structures, like patriarchy, and influence gender roles. Snow’s representation of naturalized beauty hints at the consequences of patriarchal framing of female beauty. Through Snow, Oyeyemi scratches the surface of the institutionalized structures of gender.
Bird’s section helps to break down some of the social consequences surrounding Snow’s externalized beauty. As a twelve-year-old who aspires to be a journalist, Bird’s observations indicate a budding awareness of how Snow is treated upon her arrival home. Bird is troubled by how those around her respond to Snow’s upcoming visit: “Everyone who remembered Snow seemed glad to hear she’d be back. ‘So pretty,’ I kept hearing. ‘So well behaved.’ No one said they’d missed her” (Oyeyemi 241). Such statements portray Snow as a symbol of a “pretty” and “well-behaved” object. Bird’s comments indicate a lack of perceived humanity in Snow, especially when she states, “No one [...] missed her.” The dialogue here demonstrates that Snow is not perceived as a person to be “missed.” Rather, Snow is remembered by her objectified attributes. Even though she does not have an awareness of gender representation, Bird’s observations prove significant in analyzing the treatment of Snow. She is troubled, because the comments made by family members and town members appear non-genuine and emotionless. Bird provides her thoughts on the matter in the lines, “It wasn’t the kind of reaction you’d give to news about someone who’d really been part of your life” (242). Through Bird’s observations and her subsequent anger, Oyeyemi begins to “expose this state’s generic and gendered lie or artifice” (Bacchilega 35). Bacchilega’s insights confirm the deconstruction of institutionalized gender representations reflected in the character Snow.

Oyeyemi’s Snow also demonstrates awareness of how her external beauty has social consequences. Oyeyemi gives Snow voice and agency, which exposes how her external beauty has set a specific set of expectations on her life. As a girl,
when she was still dealing with Boy’s choice to send her to Aunt Clara’s, Snow explains to Bird how that felt and how it developed her perception of beauty:

But then there’d be nights when that turned me over and lay me on my side like a doll that had been dropped on the floor. I began to know what dolls know. It felt like I’d been discarded for another toy that was better.

[...] People sometimes said, ‘What a beautiful little girl,’ but I thought that beautiful was bad. (230-231)

At a young age, Snow demonstrates an awareness of how others see her as “beautiful” (231). Unlike her grandmother or great-grandmother, Snow views this as a negative thing and deduces that being beautiful is “bad” (231). She also compares herself to a “doll”—an object. Yet, Snow personifies this object and explains, “I began to know what dolls know” (231). Snow understands how her community categorizes her as a doll, which leads her to relate to this image.

Snow, then, is illustrating her consciousness of how her community sees her as an object, nothing more than a doll. In these lines, Snow is demonstrating her awareness of her own beauty and its influence on her perception of self. In this growing understanding, Oyeyemi’s Snow becomes more than an objectified representation of beauty. Her voice in those letters resists the patriarchal framing of her beauty and identity.

By giving Snow a voice and creating her into a developed character, Oyeyemi is combating the objectified and naturalized beauty represented in the traditional figure of Snow White. Snow, then, becomes an image of resistance to the objectification of a woman’s external appearance. This resistance has consequences. Snow identifies as a “deceiver” because of the way she lies in order
to live a life that is not dependent on her physical appearance. She writes, “The one thing I’d tell you about me is that I’m a deceiver” (231). Snow considers herself a “deceiver,” because she lives a life hidden from her family and her hometown. She writes, “Aunt Clara thinks I transcribe interviews at a newsroom in the city. Uncle John thinks the same, and so does everybody else except Mouse. Mouse knows I didn’t even make it past the first day of secretarial college” (233). While her beauty would surely land her a job at “secretarial college,” Snow lives a life counter to what her family believes. Mouse is never mentioned again, but we can see from the text that Snow keeps the details of her alternative life private. She does not ever reveal the complete truth in her letters. I see Snow’s deception as a resistance to the patriarchal constraints on her life. She resists by lying and living a hidden life, but she cannot yet know herself as a subject. Through Snow’s letters, we see that resisting social pressures is not an easy task. Oyeyemi demonstrates an awareness of how specific oppressive structures influence the feminine experience.
CHAPTER III

FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND THE MULTIPLICITY OF THE MIRROR

Multiplicity of the Mirror

In postmodern versions of “Snow White,” storytellers have revisioned the mirror. According to Bacchilega, “…the tale of the magic’s controlling metaphor is the magic mirror, because it conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires) and, framing (artifice)” (10). The mirror has the unique capacity to reflect, refract, and frame, which makes it useful in discussing feminine representation and experience.

Given the mirror’s historical patriarchal framing, it is necessary to recognize how past scholars have discussed the male gaze and its influence on female identity. Due to the “particularly fixed and mimetic narrative” of Snow White, many re-tellings still work from a patriarchal framework within the texts—even if its aim is to resist that social structure. Veronica Schanoes references Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who describe the mirror as “a figure for patriarchy, for women’s oppression by men’s ideals and fears” (6). The mirror then becomes the oppressive, authoritative voice of the male. Gilbert and Gubar show how the King influences the Queen’s own perception of beauty in their discussion of Snow White: “the patriarchal...judgment that rules the Queen’s—and every woman’s—
self evaluation...the woman has internalized the King’s rules: his voice resides now in her own mirror, her own mind” (qtd. Schanoes 6). When the Queen hears the voice in the mirror, she is really hearing the King. When she sees her reflection, she sees it through the King’s eyes. This establishes the mirror as producing the male gaze, and as a result, it influences woman’s perception of her own identity. Rather than becoming a sight for female self-reflection, the mirror has traditionally reflected the male’s vision of female.

Given its tradition of patriarchal framing, several postmodern fairy tales have responded by confronting the man in the mirror. Despite the history of the male gaze as an authoritative construct witnessed in the mirror, Schanoes premises that the “the mirror has the potential to fulfill far more positive functions for women” (6). Schanoes suggests the mirror can have a positive influence on women by using one of the most popular feminist fairy tale re-tellings, *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter. Schanoes explains how *The Bloody Chamber* un-works the patriarchal magic of the mirror. Carter’s incorporation of stronger, more independent female roles allows the mirror to transform into a space of feminine self-reflection. Bacchilega also emphasizes Carter’s re-writing of the mirror: “Carter’s demythologizing narratives have exemplified the transformative powers of postmodern magic and its interpellation of women” (Bacchilega 141). This is an example of how the image of the mirror can now reflect the exploration of a woman’s perception of identity amidst various socio-cultural contexts.

In this chapter, I explore how *Boy, Snow, Bird’s* demonstrates the mirror’s multiplicity. The mirror becomes a space where several different female
characters in the novel interact with their own reflection and undergo some type of transformation. This transformation is contingent on how the character experiences her reflection. In the novel, Boy’s friend, Mia, and Boy’s mother, Frances prove useful in further investigating how the woman’s sense of self is influenced by the patriarchal framework of the mirror. Oyeyemi uses multiple feminine narratives in her novel to navigate the consequences of this framing. For example, the male gaze, often reflected in the mirror, disrupts the female search for subjectivity. Therefore, many women are featured as objects or recognize their perceived objectivity in their own reflections. At the same time, Oyeyemi also creates characters, like Boy, who are working toward seeing themselves as a subject.

I will demonstrate how Oyeyemi achieves this multiplicity by reflecting simultaneous perceptions of feminine experience. The mirror’s multiplicity is its magic. Given its multiplicity, it can reflect varied social constructions, identities, and perceptions. Through the postmodern mirror and varied feminine experience, Oyeyemi explores spectrums of objectivity and subjectivity. This allows her to participate in a resistance to patriarchal frames of female identity by exploring varied feminine experience.

*Consuming the Female: France’s/Frank’s Experience and Patriarchal Oppression of Identity*

To understand the spectrum of interactions with the mirror and how patriarchy influences a woman’s perception of identity, I will use Frank/France’s story. In its multiplicity, the mirror can reflect the violent consequences of male
oppression to the female body and self.

To understand how the mirror influences Frank/Frances, one must understand context to this character. Before learning about Frances, the reader is introduced to Frank. Boy explains that at twenty years old, she chose to run away from home to escape her abusive father, Frank Novak, whom she calls the Rat Catcher (which defines both his character and profession). Once she leaves, Boy never looks back on her old life. Years later, her friend, Mia, decides to write an article that explores different explanations of why parents abandon their children, or as she puts it, “I want to describe what someone goes through when they refuse to be a mother, or when they realize they just can’t do it” (288). Since Mia knows that Boy’s mother left shortly after she was born, Mia begins her research in Boy’s hometown. In order to locate Boy’s Mother, Mia interviews Boy’s father, Frank, which is when she discovers the truth about Frank Novak: he was originally known as Frances Novak—a young, intelligent woman. The person that Boy knew as her abusive father was actually her biological mother, which then leads Mia on a search for Boy’s father. Eventually, Mia shares her findings with Boy. She explains that one night Frances was raped by an acquaintance. After this traumatic experience, Frances began to see “Frank” in the mirror. Over time, Frances becomes the reflection she sees. She becomes the Rat Catcher, the violent male.

Frances sees this violent oppressor in the mirror and is transformed until her own body and identity reflects the very animal that looks back at her. Although the reader is unaware of the origins of the Rat Catcher’s identity in the beginning of the novel, this transformation into the violent oppressor is
presented in Boy’s narration of the abuse she endured: “He imitated them [the rats]: ‘Krrrr. Lak lak lak lak.’ And he laughed. The unpredictability of his fist didn’t mean he was crazy. Sometimes he got awfully drunk, but never to a point where he didn’t seem to know what he was doing” (Oyeyemi 8). Frank’s imitation of the rats and his violent abuse of Boy reveal that, in his mind, he is the violent oppressor. Through Frank/France’s story, narrated by Mia, Oyeyemi demonstrates the mirror’s capacity for reflecting male violence and oppression. Oyeyemi, through Frank, makes the consequences of the mirror’s patriarchal frame clear: the mirror not only reflects the male, it also has the ability to consume the female self.

The mirror reflects the violent consequences of rape, specifically in its destruction of the feminine self and consciousness of the self. Mia explains to Boy that Steven Hamilton (an acquaintance of her mother’s), raped her mother, Frances. As Mia puts it, he “broke her life in two” (294). France’s sense of feminine self becomes fractured. In response to the rape, Frances went to a women’s shelter under the alias Francine Stone (294). Eventually, Frances was asked to leave, because “She was...demoralizing the other women who ‘had suffered their own violations but were determined to continue their lives as women in spite of them’” (294). Frances could not cope with her rape the way that other women dealt with their “own violations.” Frances could not continue her life as a woman anymore and became “distresse[d] and hardened” (294). It was in this distress that Frances began to transform into Frank.

Through Schanoes’ commentary, I can frame France’s experience of split identity in the mirror most effectively. Schanoes states, “Mirrors not only turn
the narrator into a caged animal, but they also estrange her from herself” (7). The mirror represents an estrangement from the feminine self as a result of male violence. France’s estrangement results in her new identity as Frank. Mia explains how this occurred: “You know how Frank says he became Frank? He says he looked in the mirror one morning...and this man she’d never seen before was just standing there, looking back” (294). In the mirror, Frances saw a man: she saw her oppressor. When Frances looked in the mirror, she could no longer see her own body or recognize herself in the mirror. The rape was a violent affront on both her body and identity. Her own reflection was removed from the mirror, making it impossible for Frances to use the mirror as a sight of self-knowledge. France’s transformation into Frank and her experience with the mirror becomes a reflection of the violent consequences of rape on the feminine self.

As a sight that reflects violent patriarchal oppression, the mirror conquers the feminine self. Before the permanent transformation, Frances’s identity has split into two identities: Frank and Frances. Frank, initially, lives within the mirror, which not only echoes the patriarchal framework, but also demonstrates the mirror’s embodiment of the male. In his mirror, Frank reflects a male—his body, his voice—as shown in the lines, “He [Frank] said one word to her to announce his arrival. What he did was he flicked the surface of his side of the mirror with his finger and thumb and he said: ‘Hi.’” (295). Frank’s voice from “his side of the mirror” indicates his power and control. Frank is destructive to Frances’ feminine identity. She changes her voice, appearance, and actions to match Frank until she becomes him. The disappearance of her own reflection in
the mirror marks the disappearance of her subjectivity as a woman. She can no longer see herself as a woman or draw awareness from her own feminine experience, rather she assumes the role of the conquering, violent male.

In assuming this role, there are consequences. Unlike Julia and the birth of Snow, Frank/Frances counters the tradition of “the mother’s wish”—a desire for a beautiful girl. Rather, Frank calls his daughter Boy, suggesting that since she has assumed a male role she disassociates herself with having a daughter. Furthermore, naming her Boy is a haunting reminder of the acquaintance—just a ‘boy’—who raped Frances. Perhaps, this is why Frank rages at the sight of a young boy, named Charlie, calling his daughter, beautiful. After Charlie leaves, the Rat Catches verbally and physically abuses Boy: “...he scraped away at me a little more with his dull nickel gaze. ‘So you’re a beauty, hey?’ He slapped me. ‘Or are you not?’ ‘I’m not.’ ‘So you’re ugly?’ I [Boy] nodded. Another slap, harder. ‘You have to say it.’ ‘I’m ugly’” (121). These lines show Frank as the Rat Catcher, the violent male oppressor who asserts his authority over Boy, the helpless victim. Frank’s wish is that Boy would believe she is ugly and would ultimately stay in a place of victimhood. In Frank’s violent attacks on Boy, we see that Frances no longer exists. The permanence of the transformation from Frances to Frank demonstrates the magic of the mirror and its ability to expose the male consumption of the female identity.

Reflecting the Male Gaze: Mia’s Experience

Oyeyemi creates Mia’s character to be strong, independent, and witty. Even though her moments are limited in the novel, they are powerful. In the 1960s,
Mia chose to pursue her career in journalism. She deals with the guilt of living a life that resists stereotyped gender roles that were especially relevant in this particular time period. She sees her aged face and is reminded that marriage and children will not be included in her life story. While Mia’s reflection does not become consumed by patriarchy, she still feels the weight of the male gaze when she interacts with the mirror. Both Bacchilega and Schanoe establish the influence of the patriarchal framing of the mirror, which I will use to analyze Mia’s experience with the mirror. Oyeyemi’s re-working of the mirror is founded in several other versions of *Snow White*, which engage with beauty and the process of aging—both framed by patriarchy. In her discussion of the Italian revision of *Snow White*, “Bella Venezia,” Bacchilega demonstrates this relationship between the patriarchal frame and a woman’s beauty in the lines, “Whether speaking with the women’s collusive voice or the men’s, it is a patriarchal frame that takes the two women’s beauty as the measure of their (self) worth” (34). Bacchilega’s insights show that men do not need to be present to influence the framing of the mirror. While Bacchilega’s reference is to Snow Bella and her stepmother, the message of a woman measuring her worth by her appearance can be seen as a collective experience of any woman who struggles to see herself separate from the male gaze. When Mia sees herself in the mirror, she is “measur[ing]” her appearance reflected in the mirror. Her awareness of growing old suggests that she is upholding the patriarchal frame.

Given the patriarchal framing of Mia’s interaction with the mirror, I can establish the male gaze at work within this scene. Even though no physical male is present, Mia’s association with age and beauty objectifies her reflection. Her
interaction with the mirror and the influence of the gaze is reflective of Veronica Schanoe’s commentary. She uses both Angela Carter and Laura Mulvey to further evaluate the ramifications of the presence of the male gaze within the mirror and a woman’s perception (or lack of) of self:

Unlike Lacan’s formulation, in which the (male) subject's sense of self is formed by the coherent image of himself that he sees in the mirror, here the female subject's sense of self is undermined by the reducing effect of that image, a comment perhaps on how often women have been reduced to objects of the gaze, rather than subjects in their own right [...] Carter suggests that the mirror is not an indifferent reflector. (8)

Mia, even though no male is present, feels the gaze as she looks at her own reflection. She cannot look at the mirror and see an “indifferent” reflection. By demonstrating a concern over her aged appearance, she sees herself as an object, not a subject. She, then, becomes “an object of the gaze” reduced to physical beauty in this specific interaction with the mirror.

Mia represents a pre-conceived notion of beauty. The instance occurs on her way home from a Journalism conference, to which she asked Bird to tag along. As she stares at herself in the rearview mirror, Mia asks, “Do I look forty? [...] Well? Do I look forty?” (Oyeyemi 200). Bird narrates the scene, so it is difficult to identify Mia’s internal motivation. As discussed earlier, Mia has internalized a patriarchal framing of beauty, which is why she questions her appearance. In Bird, she looks for affirmation. Mia’s need for affirmation shows her internalized view of herself has become skewed by the patriarchal framing of the mirror as shown in the dialogue between Mia and Bird: “Well? Do I look
for forty?”

“Yeah.”

She muttered something in Italian. I think she was cursing.

But aren’t you older than forty anyway?”

“...this ice you’re skating on is very thin”

I told her she was obviously gorgeous. She’d heard me calling a grilled cheese sandwich gorgeous last week” (201).

Repeating the lines “Do I look forty” demonstrates Mia’s heightened awareness of her aged appearance. Rather than looking toward the mirror as a source of identity or self-reflection, she sees her own reflection through the male gaze, which would instead emphasize a woman’s fading looks. Mia’s concern is rooted in her age, which is why she looks to Bird, a young girl, for affirmation. When she gets an honest answer from Bird, she is not pleased, hence her response “this ice you’re skating on is very thin” (201). Even though Mia asks questions of Bird, it is clear that Mia is requiring affirmation from another source, which is why Bird’s assertion that Mia is “gorgeous” is not enough. Furthermore, Bird’s use of the word “gorgeous” has lost meaning, because of how often she uses it to describe seemingly mundane objects, like a grill cheese sandwich. Rather than looking to Bird for assurance, Mia is ultimately looking to her own reflection. The mirror, as a reflector of the male gaze, inhibits Mia from achieving a sense of self.

The mirror has proved a powerful image that has been re-visioned throughout several interpretations of “Snow White.” For Oyeyemi, the mirror functions in a variety of ways. For Mia, the mirror represents the power of the male gaze and how it frames the mirror. Even in the context where a male is
absent, the gaze remains present. Mia’s perception of her own reflection and her dialogue with Bird allows Oyeyemi to explore the patriarchal framing of the mirror and its influences of a woman’s perception of self. Her experience with the mirror demonstrates how the male gaze exposes itself within a woman’s perception of her own reflection. She sees herself as an aging object. This is inhibiting her ability to see herself as a subject.

Working Toward Subjectivity in the Mirror

Like other postmodern fairy tales, Boy, Snow, Bird represents a variety of female characters who experience the mirror and its magic. Oyeyemi’s construction of Boy provides a central groundwork in discussing the multiplicity of the mirror. In the novel, Boy demonstrates awareness of the patriarchal structures reflected within her perception of identity. Awareness becomes the first step toward resistance. When she moves toward subjectivity, Boy struggles to see herself separate from patriarchal constructions of woman. There is a tension between Boy attempting to perceive her identity and her hyper-awareness of the male gaze.

Through the multiplicity of the mirror, Oyeyemi can deconstruct and revision the image of the mirror, which allows her to both create strong female representations and resist traditional gender roles. Rather than eliminating the construct of the male gaze, Oyeyemi uses Boy to draw awareness to this patriarchal framework that not only exists in the tale, but also accompanies feminine experience.

Boy’s experience represents the tension between seeking subjectivity while
not being able to escape objectivity. Her relationship with her husband, Arturo Whitman is useful in discussing this struggle. In many ways the relationship between Arturo Whitman and Boy reflects a partnership more than a romantic involvement. Although there is a sort of fondness, and maybe even love, Arturo and Boy enter into marriage primarily for companionship. In light of this relationship, Boy’s narrative demonstrates acute awareness of the patriarchal constructs that are projected through the mirror. In an early interaction between Boy and Arturo, she is struck by what she calls “a misunderstanding between Arturo and me. An unspoken one, and how do you correct those?” (Oyeyemi 20).

In this “misunderstanding,” Arturo ‘catches’ Boy smiling at her own reflection.

I was smiling. My eyes came back into focus and that was what I saw—a face I recognized, smiling […] The smile turned wry, I scanned the room without turning around, and there was Arturo Whitman […] there was a look of steady dislike in that left eye of his. He seemed to think he’d caught me practicing being fascinating (21).

Boy recounts recognizing her own smile; in these moments, her reflection becomes her own—only Boy sees and knows herself. For a few moments Boy breaks the patriarchal magic of the mirror. However, Oyeyemi also maintains Arturo’s gaze follows Boy with a “steady dislike” (20). Through Arturo’s witness of Boy’s interaction with the mirror, Oyeyemi is both calling attention to patriarchal constructions while also questioning them. Oyeyemi navigates this tension between Boy knowing herself but also having to simultaneously acknowledge Arturo’s gaze.

Boy’s self-consciousnesses of the male gaze results in shame. In this
moment, Boy cannot ignore or even resist the male gaze, which keeps her from seeing herself as a subject. Instead, she allows the magic of patriarchy to dictate her perception of the mirror and its purpose. The mirror is no longer a space that encourages female subjectivity and becomes a space dictated by the male gaze.

Oyeyemi explores Boy’s negotiation of the mirror’s meaning to further unveil the influence of the male gaze and its resistance to feminine subjectivity. Boy eventually looks to the mirror as a symbol of vanity, because she believes that is how Arturo views it. Therefore, Boy feels it necessary to justify the experience to not only herself but also Arturo, which illustrates her shame about being caught looking at her reflection. Boy’s self-consciousness becomes clearer in the lines, “Our misunderstanding worried me. I thought: I would talk to him. I should tell him it isn’t vanity. If it was vanity, I’d been able to disguise it [...] Other women did it all the time; it was just that they didn’t get caught” (21).

Arturo’s disapproval weighs on Boy as she desires to clear up the confusion by talking to him. Her need to justify the occurrence to Arturo is repeated: “I would talk to him” and “I should tell him” (21). The repetition indicates the power of the male gaze—its authority subjects the female to conformity. Boy, in her desire to explain to Arturo, actually re-instates the mirror as a patriarchal space, which reflects woman as object. Only in the eyes of the male, would a woman’s choice to see herself be construed as an act of vanity rather than a search toward identity. Boy’s conformity to the male gaze’s authority is shown in the line, “I should tell him it isn’t vanity. If it was vanity, I’d been able to disguise it” (21). Vanity is questioned and not encouraged within patriarchy, because it implies the woman is looking at herself for herself. This disrupts the objectivity of the
woman’s reflection. A fear of vanity or the need to “disguise it” indicates a history of interactions between women and the mirror. Boy knows that “vanity” is associated with a woman’s acceptance or even pride in her own self. Within a patriarchal frame, this will not work. Therefore, the male gaze becomes a reminder that a woman will look into the mirror, and if she accepts what she sees, she must “disguise it” (21). Such awareness of the woman’s self in the mirror disrupts the patriarchal frame. What is important to not here is that Oyeyemi uses the mirror to both reflect and resist the patriarchal structure, because while Boy feels self-conscious about her experience, she also engages with her reflection in ways that are not undermined by the male gaze. Boy, although it is only for a brief encounter, does recognize her own smile in the reflection, which suggests she attempting to see herself as a subject. She narrates the experience: “I was smiling. My eyes came back into focus and that was what I saw—a face I recognized, smiling. I’d been looking at myself in the picture frame the whole time” (20). Before she notices Arturo, Boy sees nothing wrong with “smiling” at her own reflection. In just a few moments, Boy sees herself as “a face I recognize,” suggesting that Boy notices her reflection apart from any patriarchal structure that might influence her own gaze. In the contrast between when Boy sees her reflection and when she notices Arturo observing her, the mirror becomes a fluid space, a space where both consciousness of the self and consciousness of the male gaze can occur.

The mirror’s varied reflections indicate its multiplicity. While it might represent patriarchy and the authority of the male gaze, it can also represent a woman and her search for self-knowledge. Oyeyemi, then, explores the
multiplicity of the mirror, by creating moments of solitude where Boy works toward seeing herself separate from the patriarchal construction of herself. In privacy, Boy can bypass the male gaze and work toward seeing herself as a subject. It will be helpful to frame Boy’s experience by reviewing how the mirror has been perceived in relation to subjectivity within the postmodern fairy tale genre. In the article, “Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book: The Significance of the Looking-glass in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales,” Veronica Schanoes references Kathleen Manley’s interpretation of the mirror. Manley explains how the mirror “provide[s] opportunities to see herself as others see her, allowing the protagonist to begin to have a more complete sense of herself as subject” (9). While I have issue with Boy, or any female character, needing to know how “others see her” to have a clearer “sense of herself as subject,” I do agree with Manley’s point that the mirror holds the capacity for subjectivity to occur. Schanoes builds from Manley’s commentary of the mirror by arguing that sexual maturation is necessary in order to gain “consciousness of oneself as an object” (9). Whether it be through sexual maturation or awareness of the self through others, both Manley and Schanoes echo the capacity of the mirror to be a space where subjectivity is possible. I intend to analyze how Boy’s awareness of her reflection becomes a means to self-knowledge.

Oyeyemi’s development of Boy’s interactions with her reflection indicates that the mirror as a space where “consciousness of oneself” as either an object or a subject can occur. While I have already shown how patriarchy framing results in a seeing the self as object, I would now like to further investigate the mirror as a space for seeing woman as a subject. In the novel, Boy begins her narration, her
story. Throughout the novel, Boy’s perception of mirrors transforms. As a child, she was fond of them, later she would distrust them. Boy’s skepticism of the mirror as a young adult is presented in the opening lines, “Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them…I’d hide myself away inside them, setting two mirrors up to face each other so that when I stood between them I was infinitely reflected…Many, many me’s” (Oyeyemi 3). Boy reflects on her childhood, explaining “no one ever warned me about mirrors,” which suggests that mirrors can be something a woman might fear. This shows her awareness of the mirrors tendency to reflect the male gaze. Had she known this as a child, she might not have hid herself inside them. At the same time this very obsession with mirrors as a child points to her seeking out her identity. She does not know exactly who she is, which is why instead of one reflection she sees a series of “many me’s.”

As Boy matures, she shows a growing awareness of how the mirror functions. In her earlier interactions with the mirror, she uses it as a way to confirm her physical appearance. Growing up, Boy explains, “mirrors showed me that I was a girl with a white blond pigtail hanging down over one shoulder; eyebrows and lashes the same color; still, near-black eyes; and one of those faces some people call “hard and others call “fine-boned” (3). The mirror reflects Boy’s image, and she uses this as a way to confirm her physical identity. Later, her view of the mirror shifts; Boy expresses how mirrors expose or reveal. She states, “Mirrors see so much. They could help us if they wanted to. In those days I spoke to every mirror in the apartment. I questioned them, told them I didn’t know what to do, but none of them answered me” (123). Rather than confirm
what she sees, mirrors now serve as a source to gain answers. Because she recognizes that “mirrors see so much,” Boy looks to the mirror to guide her thoughts and actions. She is looking toward the mirror for answers. Who is she? How should she look? Act? Even in Boy’s own experiences, there is multiplicity in the mirror. Depending on how Boy interacts with the mirror, she makes different conclusions on its function.

As an adult, Boy uses the mirror to work toward seeing herself as a subject, which confirms the mirror’s capacity as a sight for feminine self-reflection. Earlier I explained how both Schanoes and Manley identify the mirror’s capacity for being a space where a woman can know herself via others (9). Schanoes explains that “Manley is picking up on an important function of the mirrors: for women under patriarchy, sexual maturation is intertwined with the consciousness of oneself” (9). As Boy has become conscious of her objectified self in the mirror, specifically in her experience with Arturo, she can now work toward subjectivity. For Boy, her sexuality is reflected in the mirror: for only her to see. Boy is alone with her reflection. Again, the magic of the multiplicity of the mirror proves useful in discussing Boy as she works toward subjectivity. Manley’s key association with sexuality, consciousness, and the mirror can be applied to following pivotal experience between Boy and the mirror. Boy takes advantage of the private bathroom, which has the only mirror in the home. “I ran a bath and walked back and forth before the mirror as I tugged at my buttons, slowly removing my clothing piece by piece” (40). In solitude, Boy interacts with the mirror freely: she has, momentarily, escaped the male gaze. Boy sees her reflection as a lover:
“My lover wasn’t shy. Her motions were calculated, intent. Naked, I gather the white mass of my hair up in my hand [...] trying to see what Charlie, Or Arturo, or Mia, or anyone saw. Then I moistened my lips with my tongue and walked toward the mirror [...] I kissed the glass with my fists against it, kissed wantonly until I felt an in ache in my breasts and a throbbing between my legs. There was a taste of blood where my mouth met my mouth, as if our lips were blades” (40)

First, Boy attempts to see what others see. She is curious to how Mia, Arturo, or Charlie see her. This, then, parallels with Manley’s assertion that mirrors provide ways to show a woman how to see herself, but also how others see her.

Furthermore, the sexual nature of the interaction with the mirror is significant, because it is no longer framed by the male gaze. Boy’s consciousness of her sexuality has removed the patriarchal magic. Rather than being categorized as sexualized object, she now sees herself as a sexually desirable subject. Boy’s intimate moment with the mirror allows her to only see herself. The mirror, then, becomes a space where feminine subjectivity. Oyeyemi’s specifically uses Boy’s character to illustrate a varied a simultaneous experience with the mirror: while it certainly can have the capacity to empower feminine subjectivity, it can also be a source of destruction.

Multiplicity in the Mirror: A Working Reflection of Feminine Experience

The former magic of patriarchy is replaced by the magic of the multiplicity of the mirror. By incorporating a multitude of narratives of the female and the mirror, Oyeyemi participates in the questioning of patriarchal framing of the
feminine experience. The mirror and its reflections are not concrete, but subject to individual feminine experience. Within this space, a woman can engage with both her perceived objectivity and subjectivity. Oyeyemi’s mirror contains the capacity to either empower or destroy feminine consciousness of herself.
CHAPTER IV
RE-VISIONING THE MIRROR USING FEMININE NARRATIVE

Storytelling and Feminine Experience

In the previous chapter, I defined the mirror as a fluid space where a woman can explore the self as object, subject, or both. Given the traditional framing of the mirror, each female character has individual experiences that uphold, question, expose, or resist patriarchal construction of the feminine identity. Using Bacchilega and Schanoe’s commentary, I have shown how Boy, Snow, Bird un-works patriarchal framing by creating multiplicity in the mirror. I would now like to transition to another type of magic that replaces the formally known patriarchal magic: the magic of storytelling. Storytelling becomes a means of creation for the female characters in the novel. This process of creating stories becomes pivotal for the female character to see herself as a subject. Telling stories is not independent, but collaborative. The female characters interact with one another to tell stories that resist the patriarchal constructions that inhibit their sense of self. These stories in themselves become mirrors as they reflect a resistance to oppressive patriarchal tradition and an embracement of the feminine self.

Through the interactions between different female characters, Oyeyemi represents the power in creating stories as a collective feminine experience.
Storytelling and re-telling has been a necessary means of gathering collective feminine experience. Often the stories told are revised versions that at least one of the woman characters has heard from a woman from her past—a nanny, a family member, etc. I will use Adrienne Rich’s commentary on the art of revising stories and feminine identity to frame the occurrences of storytelling in *Boy, Snow, Bird*. Adrienne Rich’s insight into re-visioning stories in the article “When We Dead Awaken” emphasizes the power of women telling, and re-telling, stories. Rich’s discussion of revision illuminates *Boy, Snow, Bird’s* representation of the influence of writing and telling feminine narratives. In her article, Rich states, 

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. This self-knowledge, for woman, is more than search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (19).

Through revision women can re-create an “old text from a new critical direction” (19). Through telling stories, the characters demonstrate an awareness of the social constructions they live in. Furthermore, as they create stories, the characters participate in a search for self-knowledge as they simultaneously resist the “self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (19). This search for knowledge of the self parallels one of the primary functions of the mirror: “self-reflection” (33). Therefore, I argue that Oyeyemi uses the female characters and their re-telling of stories as “mirrors” to reflect feminine experience.

> Since stories become mirrors, those very stories become “instrument[s] of
self-reflection (physically and mentally)” (Vanessa Joosen 234). In this chapter, I aim to evaluate how storytelling becomes an “instrument” for subjectivity and acts as a mirror for several female characters. Through telling stories, Boy, Mia, Snow, and Bird demonstrate varying levels of awareness of the social constructions of beauty and femininity. This awareness points to an understanding of woman as a subject. In their stories, they refuse to let patriarchal interpretations of beauty and identity define them. Ultimately, the power that comes through sharing these stories acts as a type of resistance for the female characters. Through telling stories, they resist the socially oppressive norms that influence their day-to-day lives.

*Exploration of Voice in Storytelling*

In the novel, Mia, a female reporter, expresses her disappointment in consistently being asked to write the stories that have been normatively ascribed to women. For example, in the beginning of the novel, she was required to write a piece on what it’s really like to be blonde—do they really have more fun? etc. Despite the fact that men are also blonde, Mia is directed to specifically discuss how blonde females have fun, thus linking female blondeness to frivolousness but not male blondness. She has become the token representative of her gender, and she is tired of it. Refusing to write the article would mean losing her job; therefore, in her work, Mia appeases the patriarchal authority. However, in private, Mia expresses dismay over being forced to write trivial assignments. She confides in Boy, which is when the two friends decide to create their own story. When Boy puts pen to paper, she decides to re-tell a story that she has heard
before. This is powerful, because Boy is participating in Rich’s definition of revision: she enters an old tale and creates something new. In addition, Mia collaborates with re-writing the story; therefore, they both are re-visioning the original story. This story contradicts the type of articles Mia would have to write; therefore it resists the male influence on both storytelling and women.

Mia and Boy engage in the revision process, which is evident by their negotiation between the original tale and the tale they write. Throughout the process of writing the tale, Boy negotiates the story she heard in the past, and her revision. She ponders Mia’s ability to see through her obvious creative rendition, knowing that Mia likely knows the original tale. When Mia asks if Boy remembers the tale, she responds: “Sure... ‘I mean—not. Sure I remember.’ I [Boy] made my handwriting much smaller than usual, in case I was wrong” (56). Boy is worried that her revision of the tale will be seen as “wrong.” However, her fear is unwarranted in that Mia is also revising the story as they go along. Mia also seems to be concerned about the acceptance of her portion of the tale, “she continued writing in silence, cupping her hand over the page as though she were the imposter and not me” (56). Mia’s “cupping her hand over the page” indicates a secrecy involved in writing her part of the story. Boy’s assertion that they are “imposter[s]” suggests that they are out of their depth with the task ahead of them. In the process of writing, they are finding their own voice—a voice that is not subject to adhere to patriarchal structures. Their hesitancy in writing demonstrates a consciousness that they are participating in a form of resistance. They know their version of the tale is different, and that is what scares them. Despite this fear, they continue writing together. As two females, collaborating
and revising, they confront the patriarchal framing of feminine representation.

In the revised tale, the magician’s character encompasses the patriarchal power. He uses his power to define and create what he perceives to be beauty. The magician’s power exists in his distinct ability to create through language. For example, Boy writes, “He spoke to the things around him, and as long as the thing he addressed had life in it, it obeyed him” (52). At the magician’s word, barren trees yield fruit and horses grow wings (52). His most well-known trait was his ability to “improve women’s looks for a fee...He’d look into a woman’s eyes and say ‘You are a beauty’” (53). By his word, the magician both defines what beauty is and creates it. This ability marks the influence of patriarchal and socially constructed perceptions of beauty as shown in the lines, “soft harmony or heartbreakingly strict symmetry—whichever suited her better” (53). The magician manipulates a woman’s appearance based on what he decides will “suit” her better. His decision is reminiscent of the male gaze and its ability to objectify a woman based on her physical appearance. The magician’s control and influence over women and their beauty parallel the traditional function of the mirror given its metaphor for patriarchy, specifically in relationship to the male gaze and objectivity.

The plot’s turning point marks the beginning of social resistance. The writers, Mia and Boy, construct a strong female character that possesses both agency and voice. She refuses to adhere to the men around her. The story takes a turn when a farmer comes to the magician on behalf of his wife. The farmer explains, “I tried to bring her with me, but she wouldn’t come” (Oyeyemi 54). This line introduces the wife as a powerful figure who is able to resist the control
of her husband; she is not defined by his requests. The husband, in desperation, comes to the magician in hopes finding help with controlling his wife. By creating a female character that cannot be controlled, Boy and Mia resist the unchallenged power of the patriarchy.

The tale un-works the controlling nature of patriarchy by allowing the wife to resist the magician—both his words and power. When the magician approaches the wife, he longs to define her beauty, and speaks: “Come, woman, be more beautiful,” but to his surprise, “nothing happened” (55). The magician’s inability to make the woman more beautiful disrupts the patriarchal structures at work within the narrative. The magician, for once, shows weakness in his lack of control over this particular woman. After repeatedly commanding the woman with no results, the magician declares the woman a “formidable witch” (56). In the story, and the lives of the storytellers, men cannot understand a disruption of patriarchal authority.

Rather than being defined by her perceived beauty, the wife’s character redefines magic. No longer is magic indicative of patriarchy. The woman’s own voice confronts the magician’s ‘power’ to create beauty. In her mockery of the magician and his magic, the wife refuses to be defined by her perceived beauty and/or physical appearance. This revealing dialogue is a privilege that neither Mia or Boy would have. While they cannot speak against the patriarchal structures that oppress them, they can resist them in writing. Mia creates the woman’s response: “‘It isn’t magic,’ she [the wife] said. ‘It’s just that I’m well dressed. You men who try to tell me I’m a scarecrow or try to grab my arm but can’t mange it, don’t you understand that you’re not really addressing me? It’s
more as if you’re talking to a coat I’m wearing” (56). The wife speaks of the male’s tendency to know a woman by her appearance. Her rhetorical question, “don’t you understand you’re not really addressing me?” indicates that the male gaze cannot see past the “coat” or a woman’s outward appearance. The gaze does not extend past the physical female body. Both Mia and Boy have experienced objectification based on appearances. However, they are not able to resist the magic of patriarchy as openly as the wife did in the story. Therefore, writing narratives act as a medium for these women to resist their objectification. In their creation of the wife, who re-frames magic through her voice and action, Boy and Mia are participating in the “refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (19). Creating stories becomes a mirror for feminine resistance of patriarchal framing of beauty.

Spiders and Mirrors: Bird’s Coming of Age and Storytelling

Approaching thirteen years old, Bird’s narrative largely reads as a coming of age tale. She is learning to navigate the world, but she also is not yet aware of the social constructions at hand, which causes her much confusion. Bird resides in an in-between space where the mirror reflects neither an object or a subject. Although Bird seems to be searching for an understanding herself, the mirror does not provide the answers that it did for her mother, Boy. Bird’s reflection disappears in the mirror, which is representative of her lack of consciousness of both the patriarchal framing of her identity and of seeing herself as a subject. I will show how storytelling becomes a mirror for Bird: it is a space where she can more easily create a consciousness of self.
If we continue seeing the mirror as a fluid space, then Bird’s first awareness of her inability to see her reflection becomes especially significant. She is caught in this in-between stage of girl and womanhood and lacks the ability to fully see herself as a subject. At the same time she is aware of particular shifts in her perception of self, even though she cannot necessarily navigate them. Her inability to see herself in the mirror indicates the difficulty Bird has in exploring herself in this transitional period. Bird explains the occurrence in the following lines, “I walked past my bedroom mirror and something was missing, some tiny, tiny element. I stood still, chuckling; it didn’t seem serious at first. The gap grew and grew. It was me. I wasn’t there” (Oyeyemi 157). What starts as a small detail transforms into a very large gap. Bird no longer sees herself in the mirror, which shows her understanding that changes are occurring, and she finds it difficult to comprehend the reason behind these transformations.

If we recall the patriarchal framing of the mirror, Bird’s disappearing reflection can additionally point to man-made construction of woman. In the section, “Performing Wonders,” Bacchilega relies on Simone de Beauvoir to position the relationship between feminism and fairy tales. She states, “by showcasing ‘women’ and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/them into man-made constructs of ‘Woman’” (9). Given how the male gaze in the mirror influences other female characters’ perception of self as well as Bird’s inability to see herself as a subject, Bird’s reflection has not yet been re-constructed by the male gaze. Instead, it disappears. Fairy tales so often “produces the artifice of femininity” through their representation of women characters (Bacchilega 9). Oyeyemi, then, un-works and re-visions the “man-
made constructs of ‘Woman’” by further exploring the ramifications of subjectivity, objectivity, and the mirror (9).

Bird cannot navigate the social constructs of objectivity or subjectivity, and therefore explains her interaction with the mirror with child-like conclusions. She makes varied conclusions about “the reasons why a person might show up in the mirror,”—the most significant being her proposition of not being human (Oyeyemi 162). Although she finds herself to be normal compared to other children her age, Bird still presents “I’m not human” as an option (162). Since she concludes that physically, she appears human, this hints at Bird’s difficulty in constructing her identity. So while she rules out the possibility of her not being human, Bird struggles to understand herself in the mirror. This is noted in another section when she states, “I begged that missing slice of me—hair, cheek, chin, and the top of my arm—to appear…but the mirror didn’t care…or it was my reflection that didn’t’ care” (200). At this point, Bird requires her physical body to be present in order to fully understand her “reflection.” However, her “reflection” continues to remain absent, which gives the mirror some unspoken authority or control over the girl’s reflection. It is unclear in terms of the reasons for this authority, but regardless Bird is left helpless. For her, the mirror is not a space conducive to reaching consciousness. Instead she is left in the dark, left to her own conclusions. It is worth noting that Bird additionally wonders if “this is something that happens to everybody but they deny it” (163). Bird wonders if other women have also struggled to see themselves in the mirror, which points to a collective female experience that she assumes has gone unspoken. This demonstrates the traditionally silent feminine narrative when it comes to sharing
experiences.

Telling stories acts as a mirror for Bird’s character as well. Bird participates in storytelling, when she tells stories to Snow about the spiders in her room. The story mirrors Bird’s difficulty understanding the ramifications of the socio-cultural constructs and also where she fits within those constructs. The story begins with Bird telling stories to the spiders in her room, who become dismayed that there are stories about spiders that are not true. To soothe the spiders, Bird tells a story that she heard from a maid. Bird re-visions the story and re-tells it to the spiders and shares this experience with Snow through a letter. Bird admits her creative re-telling from the very beginning, “I’ve forgotten her exact words, but here it is as I remember it, except for the parts I’ve added because she told me that each time a story like this one gets retold the new teller should add a little something of their own” (Oyeyemi 223). Adding “something of [her] own” demonstrates that Bird is participating in the re-vision process.

Bird’s narratives are complicated by her young age and imagination. When she tells her stories, they are ingrained with truth. Her stories blur the lines between reality and fantasy, because her sense of the world is also blurred. Bird’s narration and her participation in storytelling point to her awareness of the power of sharing stories.

Snow’s Voice: Claiming Agency Through Storytelling

Although Snow lacks voice in traditional versions of the fairy tale, Oyeyemi gives Snow agency through her letters, as well as through her stories told to Bird. In correspondence, Snow explains she has also heard the story about La Belle
Capuchine, but Snow’s version is very different. For Snow, her version correlates to her own issues concerning objectivity and beauty.

Snow’s story mirrors her disappointment regarding the way patriarchal beauty has framed her own life. Through the story, Snow demonstrates an awareness of beauty as object. She writes, “La Belle Capuchine is beautiful like her flowers, but she’s a poison damsel...I don’t think Mother Nature likes us much. If she did, she wouldn’t make things that are deadliest so beautiful. For instance, why does fire dance so bright and so wild? It isn’t fair” (231). For Snow, her own beauty has become a “poison” to her life. Both men and women comment on her purity, good nature, and above all, her beauty. She mirrors the traditional Snow White—‘the fairest of them all.’ However, Snow, is not blind to the social construction she must survive. While patriarchy frames the mirror and Snow’s beauty, storytelling is powerful in that its commentary can resist such social constructions. Snow connects the story to her own life stating to Bird, “People sometimes said, ‘What a beautiful little girl,’ but I thought that beautiful was bad. I must have come up with my Belle Capuchine around that time” (231). Snow’s creation of her own Belle Capuchine allowed her to survive at different points of her life. Belle Capuchine becomes a tool for her to navigate the world she lived in. Without these stories, Snow, following Rich’s commentary on re-vision, would not have been able to survive or understand her own self. Storytelling, in the novel, becomes a mirror that leads Snow to self knowledge which enables her to not only begin to see herself as a subject but also resists “the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Rich 19). Through the story of “Belle Capuchine,” Snow demonstrates her awareness of how objectivity is
destructive. Snow experiences this destruction firsthand in that she must construct a double life to both appeal society’s expectations and give herself room to work toward “self-knowledge.” Telling stories creates that ‘room’ for Snow. Through Snow’s story, we see how stories are used as mirrors of the internal self and also the external social constructs. Snow also mirrors Belle Capuchine in that she has effectively deceived her family, friends, and neighbors. She appears to be the beautiful doll, an object of desire. However, in reality, she lives a double life. Snow’s story is representative of the power of the collaborative female experience of telling stories and searching for the self.

_Fairy Tales and Storytelling_

Stories mirror human experience. _Boy, Snow, Bird_ utilizes stories within stories in order to further de-construct representations of gender in terms of both subjectivity and objectivity. These framed stories, told by the female characters, become mirrors of the internal feminine experience. The image of the mirror is bound by its patriarchal frame—it reflects physical appearance; therefore, always placing object at the forefront. While women can resist what the mirror projects, it is an on-going, fluid process of resistance, negotiation, and awareness in order to work toward subjectivity. However, re-vision, re-telling stories, provides a by-pass. These re-visioned stories reflect the overarching purpose of postmodern fairy tales. As Bacchilega states, “postmodern revisions may question and remake the classic fairy tale’s production of gender...[or] expose the fairy tales complicity with the “exhausted” forms and ideologies of traditional Western narrative, rewriting the tale of magic in order to question and re-create the rules
of narrative production, especially as such rules contribute to naturalizing subjectivity and gender” (23). Oyeyemi is further “re-writing the tale of magic” by placing fantastical stories within her fictional novel. She use magic in these framed stories as a way that enables the female characters to un-work the social-constructions, reflect subjectivity, and share collective feminine experience. Boy, Snow, and Bird each create their own re-telling of traditional tales. Participation in this creation leads to their stories becoming mirrors.

Conclusion

Oyeyemi’s retelling of Snow White is a powerful postmodern fairy tale in its ability to produce varied feminine experience in relationship to the mirror. Although the traditional image of the mirror, and fairy tales themselves, have been dictated by patriarchal authority, the magic of the postmodern fairy tale, according to Bacchilega, is its ability to re-work these stories into something new. In this work, I have aimed to suggest the multiplicity in the mirror which coincides with multiplicity in feminine experience as demonstrated eloquently by Oyeyemi’s Boy, Snow, Bird. Oyeyemi, in some ways, draws attention to the mirror’s past, specifically in her construction of Frances/Frank. The man in the mirror and his oppressive consumption of France acknowledge the violent affront to the female body and self. Such patriarchal oppression cannot be ignored. Simultaneously, though, the postmodern mirror has the capacity to reflect the feminine search to see herself as a subject. This search is not linear, which is why so many female characters can be in different points in their journey as reflected in the mirror. Seeing Mia, Bird, Snow, and Boy alongside one another and yet at
different points is what makes the postmodern mirror a collaborative image for varied feminine experience. Furthermore, it is the stories that these women tell that become a looking glass. These stories, over time, become retold and revisioned as each woman develops her voice and her own story. Within these telling of stories and re-telling these stories, there is resistance.
WORKS CITED


