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Posthuman and pandemic elements in the feminist retellings
of fairy tales in Marissa Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles*

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Abstract. Fairy tales have transcended time, space, context and their original media of propagation. Retelling or reworking familiar fairy-tale tropes has long been a literary tradition which still enjoys a position of popularity in contemporary times. This process revivifies seamlessly the literary endeavours of the ancient as well as the medieval authors. This paper explores how the *Lunar Chronicles* by Marissa Meyer, while being a feminist retelling of fairy tales, deals with posthuman concepts of biological warfare, genetic modifications, cyborgs and authoritarian autocratic regimes, set in the context of a raging pandemic sometime in the future retaining considerable literary integrity. The novels draw on the fairy tales of *Cinderella*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Rapunzel* and *Snow White*, and chronicle the eponymous female protagonists Cinder, Scarlet, Cress and Winter who take action, claim agency and collaborate to bring down the autocratic regime of the Lunar Queen Levana who in pursuit of sole ownership of natural resources, engages in murder, ruthlessly creating genetically modified hybrid super soldiers and a bio engineered pandemic. This study chronicles the posthuman facets which set the works in the foreseeable future. This paper also identifies and analyses the similarities between the strands of the fictional Letumosis pandemic and the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the significance in how fictional works can predict human response. These fairy tale retellings go to demonstrate that the tales sustain their relevance through reinterpretations and retellings that address contemporary concerns.

Keywords: Feminist retelling; Lunar Chronicles; Fairy tales; Pandemic; Posthumanism; Cinder; COVID-19

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Introduction

The number of contemporary fairy tale retellings, with the amalgamation of a feminist bent and science fiction, has increased dramatically in recent years, especially in the realm of young adult literature. While this expansion indicates change and combines formerly magical-based stories with technological progress, the impact of integrating science and magic warrants further exploration, especially in the light of the turn of events since 2020. The incorporation of cyborgs, androids, and other artificial beings into fairy tales is a relatively new phenomenon with a growth of considerable interest since 2010s, with the debut of Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*. The 'Lunar Chronicles' is a collection of Four Novels: *Cinder*, published in 2012, *Scarlet*, published in 2013, *Cress*, published in 2014 and *Winter*, published in 2015. She also published a novella titled *Fairest* in 2015, whose events place it chronologically before the final novel *Winter*; and the compilation of short stories *Stars Above*, both of which contain elements that tie in to the events of the novels or are standalone narratives which occur in the same universe. The two graphic novels *Wires and Nerve* and *Wires and Nerve Gone Rogue* are also considered to be under the umbrella of the Lunar Chronicles collection. The works are a postmodern, post-human and feminist retelling of fairy tales set in the context of a raging pandemic called 'Letumosis or the Blue fever'. This paper endeavours to explore the elements of posthumanism in the backdrop of the pandemic arrayed in the feminist revisioning in the four novels.

The plot of the Lunar Chronicles takes place in a future world a century and a half in the socio-political milieu of post-World War IV, where new empires and coalitions are founded and the moon is colonised. Each novel traces the lives of a fairy tale figure. *Cinder* (Cinderella) is a cyborg mechanic from New Beijing in the first book, *Scarlet* (Red Riding Hood) is a French spacecraft pilot in the second, *Cress* (Rapunzel) is a computer hacker in the third, and *Winter* is the Lunar queen's stepdaughter in the last

volume (*Snow White*). The moon, Luna, is governed by the charmingly tyrannical Queen Levana who intends to marry Prince Kai of the Eastern Commonwealth, the emperor of the Earthen Union's most powerful kingdom. She will indeed dominate both Earth and Luna should she secure this relationship. Lunars have particular abilities, like the capacity to alter bioelectricity or employ glamours, that allow them to appear attractive and manipulate people, which is one of the reasons the Earthens first oppose Kai and her alliance. However, in order to force Earth to comply with her goals, Levana engages in the unthinkable, as revealed in *Winter*:

We thought this war began when her special operatives attacked those first fifteen cities, but we were wrong. This war began when Letumosis was manufactured in a Lunar laboratory and brought to Earth for the first time. All these years, she's been waging biological warfare on us, and we had no idea (Meyer, 2015: 130).

Only gifted Lunars are immune to this disease. While Levana has created an antidote, its availability to those affected and in dire need around the world depends on the young emperor Kai's consenting to marry her and making her an empress of the Eastern Commonwealth. Levana thus wields significant influence over earth and the Eastern Commonwealth in particular.

Feminist Retelling of Fairy Tales

"Stories that survived centuries, such as epics, myths and parables, often entail extraordinarily rich elements, with their narrative values widely recognized since the emergence of the field of psychology e.g., Freud's Oedipal Complex and Jung's archetypes" (Zhu and Zheng, 2021: 1). These tales provide insight through imagery and themes that serve as means for meaning construction rather than by explicitly stating any truths or doctrines. Throughout recorded existence, heroic tales notably have been recounted and retold several times, yet with each recounting comes a fresh and current viewpoint, according to Campbell and

Neimeyer et al (2010). "The fairy tale genre is old and closely intertwined with folk tales, myths and stories of wonder. The fairy tales we know now have evolved from multiple cultures and are sometimes centuries old. At first, a fairy tale was a simple, imaginative oral tale containing elements of magic and miracle. Before they were written down and became fixed texts with conventions of narration and reading" (Kersten, 2018: 19), these wonder or magical tales underwent many transformations. Even then, and up to the present day, fairy tales have been rewritten (Zipes, 1988: 135). The fairy tale is a nebulous and fluid genre due to its various intertextual borrowings among authors and iterations. The word "fairy tale" is a broad concept, and it's complicated to encompass all of its plotline patterns, common motifs, and narrative functions in categorising it as children's stories (Carney, 2012: 5).

"Through these fairy tales, the unsettled fantasies, fears and ideologies of the male members in societies have been transformed across generations... transcribing moral and social messages mostly with respect to androcentric ideologies, perpetuate the self-admiring, self-stimulating and self-congratulatory masculine point of view and push women to the side of the HISTORY by keeping them on the kitchen side and/or the bedside" (Nazlipinar Subasi, 2022: 427). The romantic constructs of fairy tales could hold sway, not only among children and adolescents but also in "adult women's experiences, who internalize romantic patterns from ancient tales and continue to tailor their aspirations and capabilities to conform with romantic paradigm" (Haase, 2000: 17). The feminist literary scholar Carolyn G. Heilbrun in 1979, offered 'Grimm's Fairy Tales' as an example of cultural texts whose models of male selfhood could be adopted and reinterpreted by women in light of their own search for identity (Haase, 2000: 19). But it is the books, movies, and television shows that completely reimagine traditional folk and fairy tales for a new generation that are the true "revolution"

in folk and fairy tale retelling. Folk tales are adaptable by their very nature as a form of storytelling, and fairy tale retelling "symbolically seeks to represent some unquestionable natural state of being, [and] postmodern fairy tales seek to expose this state's generic and gendered 'lie' or artifice" (Bacchilega, 1997: 93). Bacchilega asserts that while fairy tales present a distorted mirror image of our world, postmodern fairy tales attempt to expose the distortion.

Many academics and authors have begun to challenge the androcentric depictions of women in fairy tales, which typically show them as pliable objects for male desires. They do this by "creating a new world for wo/men where they can articulate their unspoken desires and feelings. Within this scope, the number of the feminist/queer criticisms and re-writings of fairy tales has accelerated since 1960s" (Nazlipinar Subasi, 2022: 427), and the patriarchal stereotype of the woman as a "passive, victimised, destroyed, or asleep" (Dworkin, 1974: 48) waiting for her Prince or a Knight in shining armour has been deconstructed. Subsequent generations see the emergence of a "self-assertive woman," aware of her own value, capable of choosing her own path, and able to forge her own future, in these subversive fairy tales, which take place in the present or foreseeable future (Nazlipinar Subasi, 2022: 428).

The stock phrases "once upon a time and they lived happily ever after are well-known fairy tale tropes, popularised by Disney" (Kustritz, 2016: 5), are now synonymous with fairy tales and its elements of a quest, a princess, princes, supernaturally charged negative and positive elements or magical creatures and so on. Rife with recognizably well-known story lines, allusions to canonical fairy tales and their popular adaptations and employing lines verbatim, The Lunar Chronicles novels are obvious retellings of the fairy tales that traces the life of a fairy tale princess.

All characters have clear references to their recognizable and original stories.

For example, Cinder lives with her stepmother and stepsisters since her father has died, and she is invited to prince Kai's royal ball, where she loses her foot. Scarlet lives with her grandmother, but when her grandmother disappears, she goes looking for her and meets Wolf. And princess Winter is the most beautiful person on Lunar, although she does not use her glamour to appear this way. To become the most beautiful and beloved queen, Levana asks one of her royal guards to kill Winter... Cress's love interest is Captain Carswell Thorne, who has stolen a spaceship called The Rampion and who becomes blinded when he tries to save her from her satellite (Kersten, 2018: 52, 53).

Both the traditional powers of fairy tales, such as magic, and the modern capabilities of science fiction, such as technology, are entangled in moral perils and probable corruption: we use them at our peril, but we are justified in using them to defend oneself and those loved.

In the Lunar Chronicles, Meyer challenges gender stereotypes by featuring two fierce female heroines, Cinder and Scarlet, as well as two demure princesses, Cress and Winter. Their male romantic partners are also categorised: Kai is the caring individual, Wolf is the rugged warrior, Thorne is the renegade reject, and Jacin is the knight in glorious armour. She also changes the sex and gender of her fairy godmother persona to male and gives her androids gender. In providing the princesses tolerant and protean conclusions, Meyer challenges the patriarchal viewpoint. Cinder turns out to be the last Queen of Luna as she willingly abdicates the throne and transfers the government into a republic. Only much later at end of the short story collection, after years of being a diplomat, activist and sorting out gubernatorial issues, does Cinder accept Kai's proposal to become the Empress of the Eastern Commonwealth and his wife. Scarlet

chooses to marry Wolf only after they settle down on her farm as equal partners of a horticultural endeavour. Cress and Thorne choose to be crew aboard the Rampion on the mission to deliver antidotes for the letumosis outbreak and decide not to be in a romantic relationship until they both feel ready. Winter, unlike the prototypical Snow White, does not wake up to the kiss of Jacin but rather recovers gradually due to the medical facilities. She chooses to help the technological development of the devices that would allow lunars to make choices without compromising their mental health and it is Jacin who wants to be at her side. The Android Iko goes on to have her own adventures (Insenga, 2018: 64).

The Posthuman

Fairy tales have remained so ubiquitous across millennia, that the premise of these stories may be leveraged to acquaint mankind with new characters, concepts, and circumstances that the world may meet in a modern, technologically sophisticated, and posthuman future. The Lunar Chronicles series by Marissa Meyer is a modern incarnation of fairy tales that presents readers to the idea of living in a posthuman world. Whilst science fiction is the most often utilised genre to portray notions of posthumanism, The Lunar Chronicles mixes features of science fiction and fairy tale motifs to create hybridized fairy tales. Fairy tales are recounted, retold, and reworked for a variety of reasons in literature and entertainment. Meyer crafts multifaceted and hybrid characters to reflect posthumanist ideals and urge readers to explore various types of beings, which makes these stories stand out.

With the inclusion of technology and science connected with posthuman and transhuman ideals, several modern young-adult fairy tale books are entangled in the propagation of ancient anxieties such as isolation and political intrigues; nevertheless, they disclose and comment on more deeply embedded cultural worries while also lauding science and technology. In addition, the

subversive and transformative essence of both fairy tales and technology generates a schism between creators and created. To fully realise the relevance of these statements, one must first grasp three concepts:

The human, the posthuman, and the transhuman. The idea of the human has the simplest definition; it is often identified as *homo sapiens* in the scientific community and is without any alterations, additions, or implants to the body or mind from outside sources. The posthuman, however, relies on the modification of the human body in some way, whether implants or prosthetic limbs, in order to make up for a loss or lack of ability, whether perceived or real, which gives way to the transhuman (Scholz, 2018: 12).

As Emily Jones simplifies, “Transhumanism is a form of posthumanism that seeks to use science and technology to extend humans (usually men) beyond their human limits” (Jones, 2022: 3). Critical posthumanism – a convergence of post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, with the latter seeking to challenge the human subject's hierarchical position in dominant Western thought over, for example, technology or non-human animals and the environment. To intervene in the posthuman state, posthuman feminism is a stream of critical posthumanism that relies on a long heritage of feminist work, from intersectional feminism to queer feminism, cyberfeminism, ecofeminism, and xenofeminism (Jones, 2022).

Cinder veering from typical divestitures – a lack of lineage, parental neglect, hardship, and the associated societal enmity, is a good example of a hybrid human being in Meyer's characters since she is a cyborg – a blend of biology and technology and is rejected as a human by the bulk of society inside the novel's environment: ‘the socio-political atmosphere of post-World War IV New Beijing’. “I am not human. I am a cyborg. I am a mechanic. That's all I am... right?”

(Meyer, 2013). The Letumosis outbreak and an uneasy peace between Earth and the malevolent Lunar Queen cause unrest 126 years in the future. Cinder's existence merely adds to the residents' fear because she is 36.28 percent cyborg in a world that is mostly unaccepting of biotechnological augmentation. Readers might ponder the possibility of tolerating various sorts of creatures in a technologically evolved society that are not typically “human” through rooting for Cinder's success. This narrative provides a context for how people are fusing with technology by using it as an efficient instrument in their daily lives, demonstrating that mankind is not really all that dissimilar to the cyborg “other.” Cinder evidently has the most complex identity considering that she's not earthen rather an alien or ‘Lunar’, in the context of the novel, a mutated form of humanity capable of unnatural powers or the gift of glamour (Caban, 2019: 6).

Meyer's novel *Scarlet* includes motifs from Jacob and William Grimm's tale best known as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’. Rather than emphasising the wolf's deliberate malice and reinforcing the terrible consequences of trusting strangers, Meyer's story invites readers to be cautious while being open-minded and empathetic to those who do not reflect the standard definition of humanity. The character Ze'ev Kesley called Wolf (a Lunar-wolf hybrid) demonstrates how his hybridity affects human nature owing to the fusing of human and animal nature. In addition, to accepting a posthuman future, the themes of agency and choice are examined. Iko, Cinder's loyal android transforms into many kinds of physicality during the series, including a refurbished android, a space freighter, and an escort droid. These transitions represent the flexibility of different states of existence. Iko presents a scenario that shows how humans might become socially hybrid with technology by embracing a posthuman being by accepting herself and being mutually welcomed by her constructed network of equally nonconformist companions (Caban, 2019: 7).

Circumstances of the Pandemic: Letumosis and COVID-19

The pandemic in the *Lunar Chronicles* evokes comparison with the very real pandemic that has wracked our world as we know it, since 2020. "In 2020, a single virus changed many of the worlds in which humans live. From restrictions on immigration, movement and gatherings, to changes to public health policy, through to economics and housing, the SARS-CoV-2 virus restructured laws and lives" (Boulot et al., 2021: 3). "It should be noted that the "coronavirus" concept has gone far beyond medicine and its terminology and has become a phenomenon of our everyday life, as well as economic, socio-political and media communication. Being a global social phenomenon and affecting all aspects of human life, changing reality at everyday and global levels" (Voyakina, 2022: 2). COVID-19 much like Letumosis in the novel, is highly contagious, fatal and capable of mutation. The origins of COVID-19 remain a cause for debate with aspersions that it is not a natural virus but one that was created in a lab and that it had dubious agendas linked to its spread, is very much reflected in the novel. The mutative nature of the virus in the books easily create parallels with the real-world scenario. The hectic dire straits caused due to the pandemic due to quarantining, lockdowns being enforced, forced separation from loved ones, unideal gubernatorial sanctions, the political, economic and social crises due to suspension of trade and lack of resources are dealt with in the novels. "Letumosis. The blue fever. Worldwide pandemic. Hundreds of thousands dead. Unknown cause, unknown cure" (Meyer, 2012: 38), is how the disease's nature is described in the first novel. On reading the novels one is able to glean that Letumosis is an airborne infection that has killed millions of people worldwide. These aspects allow one to easily draw parallels to the nature of the corona virus causing COVID-19. Letumosis features four stages: the first is an incubation period, followed by a blotchy rash. The visible indicators of the

bluish lesions being the reason the disease is called the blue fever. In the third stage, the weakened patients develop a fever. In the fourth and final stage, their skin turns yellow and flaky, and the patches engulf the patient's torso. Patients swiftly meet their end on approaching the fourth stage. Lunar shells are initially theorized to have brought and spread letumosis to Earth but have in fact been unwitting carriers of the infection much like the international travellers of our world. The leading political concerns in the novel are tied to finding a vaccine, cure or antidote to the pandemic. Much like in our world, the underprivileged were at an unfortunate end especially with regard to being entailed to go in for clinical trials for the development of vaccines.

Subjects had been carted in from provinces as far-reaching as Mumbai and Singapore to act as guinea pigs for the antidote testing. It was made out to be some sort of honour, giving your life for the good of humanity, but it was really just a reminder that cyborgs were not like everyone else. ... It's only right that they should be the first to give up their lives in search for the cure (Meyer, 2012: 24).

The state of affairs on earth as described in the novel due to a pandemic, such as being in a state of paranoid caution, the youth in a state of hopelessness, loss of avenues of structured education and a condition that makes people willing to do anything to get a normal life again, despite the state of a pandemic induced emergency slowly becoming the new normal serves as a prediction. This bears an eerie connection to the results of the real-life survey conducted by the United Nation representatives in Geneva. "The global survey 'Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being' aimed to capture the direct physical and mental impact of this virus on their everyday lives" with the results showing that that 65% of young adults claimed they had learned less than they had before the COVID-19; 51% thought their educational

trajectory had been impeded; and 9% anticipated they would fail their courses. One out of every six students would no longer be able to attend school or a training centre as a result of closures. The impact of disadvantaged female young adults in certain areas of the world, where being trapped in their homes means sliding back into a cycle of conventional family responsibilities and forced marriages, is significant. Instances here include shutdown of schools, colleges, and training centres as well as a lack of tools to live at home, such as access to the internet. But for all the bleakness of the scenario, much like in the series, the youth of the world despite their hapless circumstances were proactive. The survey also reveals “1 out of 4 young adults have acted as volunteers in their community and are not afraid to speak out and fight for equality and safety during this crisis” (De Vos, 2020)¹. While the pandemic reinforces inequities through automated process-based discrimination and surveillance, it also provides opportunities for progressive transformation toward the humanization of the posthuman via human–nonhuman assemblage and greater reliance on technological advances in Artificial Intelligence in general. As a result, COVID-19 is more than just a catastrophe marking the denouement of the ‘old normal.’ It is the recent instance in which existential crises spark creativity in society, resulting in new discourses, behaviours, and infrastructures. Much of this begs the question: “What are the implications for pandemic-era’s cultural shaping of the digital?” (Qiu, 2022: 1).

Observations

The Lunar Chronicles, like several other retellings from the preceding two decades, demonstrates how people unite together to defeat despotic leaders like Levana. Because of Cinder's prior insurrection against Levana,

which shows that the opposition may prevail against Levana's government, the disadvantaged and marginalized residents of Luna trust her resistance in *Winter*. To thwart deadliest threat, People of earth and Lunars, who have been secluded and divided for aeons, must work together. *Winter* reveals how the characters of the three preceding books aid Cinder/Selene in seizing control of Luna. Despite the danger, the other characters stand beside Cinder. This story emphasises free will and individual agency. The characters voluntarily assist Cinder; they are not required to. Cinder allows individuals to choose whether or not to help her, as opposed to Levana, who manipulates them.

In the story's resolution, the cooperation between the characters is shown to the reader to continue even after Cinder abdicated her monarchy, proving that collaboration to bring about social, political, or cultural change does not end with the fall of an authoritarian. All of the protagonists enable Cinder/Selene get the power she needs to re-establish Luna, become its new ruler, disseminate the leptomosis vaccine across Earth and Luna, and restore the cities that the Lunar army devastated. (Lykissas, 2018: 312). Though at first glance, collaboration against tyranny may seem utopian, it has occurred throughout history. Most notably by the Allies in World War II, how most Asian nations reclaimed their independence and sovereignty. These cases use collaboration to resist the tendency to separate rather than unite.

Unlike the original tale generating phallogocentric discourses and presenting them as the norm, Meyer allows for different types of ‘happy endings’ for the leading ladies in the Lunar Chronicles which is not up to their male leads. Thus, she celebrates the fluid aspects of nature and refuses to entirely parrot patriarchal sex and gender roles “to challenge both our gender expectations and moral expectations, pushing readers toward a larger spectrum of possibilities” (Didicher, 2020: 49). In the light of the contemporary wave of retellings of a fairy tale or mythical nature, Meyer's “expansion of gender roles is mainly

¹ De Vos, B. (2020, August 27). *The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young adults - Soroptimist International*, Blog by Berthe De Vos, SI United Nations (UN) Representative in Geneva, retrieved from <https://www.soroptimistinternational.org/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-young-adults/> (In English)

adding traditional stereotypes back into the spectrum of possibilities, not adding characters with genders and sexual orientations beyond the cisgendered and heterosexual binaries” (Insenga, 2018: 64). The kinds of which are now expected in the genre of young adult fiction and fictional retellings of current times.

Conclusion

Young adult literature's adaptation of fairy tales to tackle current challenges enables the stories keep their relevance. Postmodern and feminist literary theories emphasise this. This study comes to the conclusion that young adult popular fiction might indeed engage with diverse audiences while addressing adult issues. Such feminist fairy tale retellings are the bridge that stems from the familiar to the novel while crossing the tumultuous cataract of real-world catastrophes and the imbalance that the posthuman condition can cause. They address concerns of the youth of the century, suggest viable and optimistic solutions, while keeping them entertained.

This exploration of Marissa Mayer's novels ushers the understanding that postmodern retellings of fairy tales can address much more than its predecessors. Being more than a cautionary tale or a narrative of a magical fantastical quest and living happily ever after with a handsome prince who solved all the princess' problems, they manifest their latent potential. In employing a futuristic or posthuman revisioning and a feminist lens, *The Lunar Chronicles* show that the solution to unfair authoritarian regimes and systems is to form or forge friendships. To unite and let diverse traits, capabilities, backgrounds and conditions bring people together and make them stronger. *The Lunar Chronicles* gain significance from the fact that it has largely predicted the state of the human condition and the inadequate response to a fatal airborne pandemic.

The Fairy Tales Retellings under study posit that the youth of the world regardless of gender, culture, creed, race and physical conditions put their foot down and declare

that they will have no part in the politics of hatred and wars of destruction waged in the interests of autocratic and authoritarian regimes in a scheme for unchecked power and access to resources. The novels also propose that the youth accept their diversity as a catalyst to help achieve a world where the growth of science, technology and medicine ensures equality, equity and a heightened quality of life free of disease and conditions that plague the value of human life.

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