

## ‘What? You Don’t Want the Baby Anymore? Well, I’m Not Sure if I Do Either’: A Kind of Decolonial Love in Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Not a Fairy Tale*

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### ABSTRACT

What do fairy tale representations that trouble normative configurations of identities offer feminist imaginings of love *about and for people of colour*? How does the re-writing of conventional fairy tales, framed within decolonial epistemologies that open up space for marginalised knowledges, allow us to think differently about selfhood and our relations to others? This article considers these questions through paying attention to what love looks like in Shaida Kazie Ali’s reworked fairy tales in *Not a Fairy Tale*, published in 2010, where the characters are of colour, are Muslim, the women transgressive, and some men questioning of patriarchal masculinities. This article argues that Kazie Ali’s tales take seriously a feminist re-thinking of gender, and is unique in destabilising myths about women and men of colour. This article asks: What does it look like when normative gender binaries written into Islam are unsettled? What does love look like when the desire to possess is absent? In other words, what could a decolonial form of love look like?

**Keywords:** Shaida Kazie Ali, *Not a Fairy Tale*, decolonial love, feminist re-writing

### INTRODUCTION

Although love can be defined and enacted in multiple ways, in this article, I define love as care of the self and an/other where social ideas of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on, do not determine how one is able to love. Under conditions where humans are thriving, they are able to care for themselves and others optimally, but love takes on a different appearance when it is mediated by the harsh realities of dehumanisation, trauma, and of racial, gender and class oppression. In the Fanonian (1967, 1986) sense, black racism and its consequences of violence between racially subjugated people, means that the expression of care between human subjects may take on a different cloak: it is difficult under conditions of deprivation for love to be the force that might act to destabilise such subjugation. In similar ways, the heteronormative gender system works to constrain our abilities to care for one another in ways that are fully human; in other words, care that is not based on what Maria Lugones (2010) would call the coloniality of gender. Lugones explains the coloniality of gender as constituted in oppressive ‘categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic’ central to ‘modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality’ (Lugones, 2010: 742). Her critique moves from the ways in which colonised people have been subjected to adopting and internalising the male/female dichotomy as ‘a normative construction of the social – a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society’ (2010: 748). She asks feminists to avoid a ‘colonising reading’ that draws hierarchical and essentialist dichotomies onto colonised societies, erasing how gender as a binary system has been created by the coloniser. A decolonial feminist analysis, then, entails ‘the possibility of overcoming’ the coloniality of gender; the ‘analysis of racialised, capitalist, gender oppression’ (2010: 747) through an openness to the ways in which coloniality has been, and continues to be, resisted by those who inhabit a ‘fractured locus’ (754) on the borderlands, as subalterns. This resistance is about affirming ‘life over profit, communalism over individualism... beings in relation, rather than dichotomously split over and over in hierarchically and violently ordered fragments’ (Lugones, 2010: 754).

Nuraan Davids, similarly, makes an important case for ‘a decoloniality of love, as a form of rupturing subjugated forms of knowledge, and hence, forms of being’ (2019: 112). Carolyn Ureña posits that decolonial love ‘promotes loving as an active, intersubjective process, and in so doing articulates an anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist affect and attitude that can guide the actions that work to dismantle oppressive regimes’ (2017: 86). This kind of love

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works against coloniality, which, Cornelia Gräbner argues, constitutes 'the desire to possess' (2014: 66). This article looks at the ways in which Shaida Kazie Ali's re-written fairy tales present forms of decolonial love.

## WHAT ALREADY IS

Fairy tales matter – they are important learning resources in the life of a child. As early as 1976, Bruno Bettelheim's book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, articulated the importance of fairy tales in the life of a child. Anthony Arthur, in an article discussing the book two years later, summarised Bettelheim's position as follows:

[F]airy tales provide a world for children that reflects their impressions of what life should be like; they provide necessary assurance that the world has meaning and purpose, and that children can succeed despite their own limitations and in spite of imposed hardship. (Arthur, 1978: 456)

As a child of colour, of mixed ancestry and identifying as black growing up in South Africa, I was inundated with European fairy tales read to me by my parents. I loved them, even though none of the characters looked like me, with social realities quite foreign to my own. Still, the narratives were exciting, beautiful and interesting, and I came to know these tales by heart, even though, by the time I had a child of my own, I found it difficult to tell these stories without shifting aspects of the narrative, and the descriptions of the characters. In 'Whose Truth? A Conversation with Maria Tatar' (2012), Tatar, well known for her feminist critiques of fairy tales, similarly narrates how she often relayed variants of the popular Grimm fairy tales to make the tales more relevant, or more empowering, for her own children (Neile, 2012). Nay Soursourinho, in a podcast titled 'Decolonising fairy tales and object-oriented pedagogy' (2020), discusses the work necessary in rupturing the erasure of colonised cultures through conventional fairy tales. Soursourinho talks about 'reconstellating [their] worlds', when she reads to, or plays with, her daughter (2020: no page), through identifying where the objects referred to in the fairy tale come from – the tea, the material of a dress, the spices. Similar to Soursourinho, I would essentially decolonise the story, either through reading the stories as they appear in the text and then constantly intervening with my own questions, re-interpretations, and additions, or I would change the characters altogether so that my child could relate, so that he could engage these stories from the perspective as a child of colour growing up in South Africa.

Angela Carter's work, particularly her retelling of popular European fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), has been central to my own feminist thinking about the possibilities of fairy tales to narrate gender otherwise. Ethel Johnston Phelps' *Tatterhood and Other Tales* (1978), and Virginia Hamilton's *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales* (1995), offer *new* stories that are not retellings, but ones that imagine black and/or female characters differently – these stories begin from the premise that female humans and people of colour can define their own storylines and the directions these take.

In the broader African context, it is folktales and folklore that are unique: there are almost no feminist rewritings that unsettle and speak back to canonical and exclusionary European and American, and at times, racist and sexist fairy tales. While folktales and folklore create new tales, specific to space and place on the African continent, writing back to the centre is equally necessary in unsettling norms around what constitutes human subjects and their respective embodiment. Adri Marias' *Ever Other: Unsettling Subjects in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales* (2017) is the only work I have been able to find that refers briefly to Shaida Kazie Ali's rewritings. Marais' focus is slightly different from my own, even though she is also interested in how the writer speaks back to Eurocentric notions of gender.

In her article, 'Rediscovery of the magical: On fairy tales, feminism, and the new South Africa' (2000), Emily Zinn talks about how, during the apartheid era in South Africa, there was no place for fantasy and fairy tales in literary studies. Over the last twenty years, however, 'editors and critics of fairy tales have demonstrated the immense diversity of non-canonical tales and variations on canonical ones, while contemporary feminist writers have turned the genre of the fairy tale to a wide variety of new uses' (2000: 251). Zinn quotes Marina Warner in her articulation of fairy tales' ability to 'upend ossified hierarchies and offer visions of transformation [that] could be enormously valuable' in the South African context (2000: 251). In her analysis of Marita van der Vyver's novel, *Entertaining Angels*, Zinn discusses how 'moralistic, alternative fairy tales represent a challengingly wide range of perspectives and ideas, able to offer more transgressive and multifaceted stories' (2000: 251). Zinn's discussion of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of the popular Grimm tale, *Little Snow White*, reveals how Snow White, as

childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that has no story is in opposition to the Queen, who is 'adult and demonic, [and] plainly wants a life of 'significant action', by definition an 'unfeminine' life of stories and storytelling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself,

she wants to kill the Snow White in herself, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house. (in Zinn, 2000: 251)

Zinn's research in the South African context reveals the significance of feminist readings that recast sexist representations of traditional fairy tales: they offer us alternatives in presenting women and men in ways that undermine damaging gender constructions which restrict the possibilities for a healthier human existence for both women and men. When race, class and religion comprise such an analysis in the South African context, the re-writing is one which interrupts colonial thinking; a decolonial opportunity. *Not a Fairy Tale*, told from a South African perspective, is therefore significant: Kazie Ali's recasting of women and men of colour (and Muslim in religious belief and practice) reflects a different imagination; one that presents a fracturing of colonial ways of loving and caring. As Davids explains, this re-imagining of love can be understood 'as a form of rupturing not only of the matrices of colonial power, but also rupturing human ways that insist upon binary ways of thinking and being' (2019: 117). If literature theorises, as Rita Felski argues in *Uses of Literature* (2008), then Kazie Ali's satirical writing of people of colour, gender, and its mediations with religion, positions *Not a Fairy Tale* as a productive decolonial imaginary of feminist theorisation.

## ABOUT THE NOVEL

*Not a Fairy Tale* is a novel essentially split into two parts, comprising re-written fairy tales as well as Indian-South African food recipes. The two parts reflect the tales of two Muslim sisters, Zuhra and Salena, growing up in a racially divisive apartheid South Africa. The first part constitutes Zuhra's tale, and it is she who is the narrator of her story. The second part of the novel is Selena's story, narrated in the third person. Who narrates is important in this novel: Zuhra, wilful and defiant, is spared patriarchal and possessive love through parental neglect due to their internalised racism. They are ashamed of being read as black and regard white people as intellectually superior. Zuhra is dark-skinned and curly-haired, and as she narrates, had 'grown up knowing [she] was therefore ugly' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 66). In her parents' view, Zuhra could not, therefore, be easily married off to a man in line with traditional Muslim practice. It is precisely her 'undesirability' in the racist and heteronormative gender market, however, which allows Zuhra the freedom to pursue her own life path. Selena, however, is not spared an arranged Muslim marriage: she is fair-skinned and regarded as conventionally beautiful – able to pass for white during the apartheid years in South Africa – and essentially bullied by her parents into performing both whiteness and demure Muslim femininity. Selena finds herself in a very unhappy, brutal marriage to a man who attempts to control her, mostly successfully. She cannot tell her own story; her story is told *for* her, her life path determined for her. The fairy tale reworkings that accompany each sister's tale are presented in nuanced ways in the novel and are specific to each sister's story. In this article, I focus particularly on the fairy tales accompanying Zuhra's story, as this is where we see the most acute examples of feminist decolonial imagination. The themes which constitute the analysis below are: other kinds of mothers; irreverent women; women who desire outside of heteronormativity; alternative constructions of masculinity, and finally, women choosing to love differently.

## OTHER KINDS OF MOTHERS

Some of Kazie Ali's tales reveal the dark and gloomy underside of motherhood, the often-unspeakable experiences of mothers which they are expected to silence, particularly within social contexts. There is no shortage of research on what is classically termed as postpartum depression, although the term *matrescence*, coined in the 1970s by anthropologist, Dana Raphael (2011), is a lot more nuanced and less pathologically informed, taking into account the specific and unique psychological and development shifts women undergo through conception, pregnancy, and birthing, all similar to the adolescent experience. In Kazie Ali's narratives, this feminist perspective of mothering and motherhood is expressed in a refreshingly honest and humorous way. In what follows in this section, I engage the stories 'Dreams of Sleep', 'Fatherhood', and 'Different Tastes' in order to reflect on alternative enactments of motherhood.

In 'Dreams of Sleep', Zuhra has just given birth to baby Nazma. At the start of the chapter, Zuhra laments:

I fantasise about sleep the way men are supposed to think about sex all the time. I crave a night of uninterrupted sleep the way I craved chocolate before my period when I was a teenager. I long for my body to be mine, not to wake up ten times a night to feel little demanding hands clawing at my breasts for sustenance. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 83)

This lack of uninterrupted sleep has an understandable psychological effect on Zuhra's brain; in fact, it is why sleep deprivation has been used as a method of psychological torture in certain forms of interrogation (Cakal, 2019). Zuhra continues:

Sometimes I dance with her, sometimes I coo lullabies. Sometimes I fantasise about placing a soft feathery pillow over her dewy skin, her eyes like open flowers, and just holding it there until she sleeps for a hundred years. (2010: 83)

This almost-taboo discourse about mothering is continued in the rewritten fairy tale which follows 'Dreams of Sleep'. Titled paradoxically as 'Fatherhood', the tale is a reworking of the classic *Rumpelstiltskin*:

She promised me her firstborn; I'd come to collect. I was happy, I was delighted, I was thrilled. I would have a child of my own to love and nurture, and protect. Some little being who would look up to me even if he outgrew me. I pictured us in front of the fire, him asleep in his crib, me smoking my little pipe, both of us content. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 85)

This masculine fantasy is very quickly dissolved, in Mother's response to Father (or Rumpelstiltskin):

'Ah, it's you. At last you've come for the child. Took your time, didn't you?' She glanced irritably at her wristwatch. 'Yes, it's a girl. You said firstborn. You didn't specify gender ... Now, I've drawn up a schedule for each day of the week. Let's begin with Monday. That's your bowling night? Don't be ridiculous. No, there'll be none of that. You've got a child now: you need to be responsible. There'll be no more movie nights, no book club, no AA meetings, no full moon spell nights. Listen, you wanted the child, now you've got to live with your decision. You made me promise. A verbal contract. What? You don't want the baby anymore? Well, I'm not sure if I do either.' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 87)

In 'Fatherhood', Kazie Ali humorously presents us with a dispelling of the fantasy of parenting, revealing that one, women are not necessarily pre-destined for mothering; two, fathering is a choice that men can, at times, make *even when they have children*, and three, given the choice in a society not bent on defining motherhood in specific and sometimes unrealistic ways, women, too, would make different choices about how to mother their children if they choose to have them. The reference to gender by Mother – 'Yes, it's a girl. You said firstborn. You didn't specify gender' (2010: 87) – reveals the patriarchal inclination of Rumpelstiltskin's preference for male babies, which Mother simply dismisses as insignificant and moves on to more important matters around the child's needs and Rumpelstiltskin's responsibilities as a parent. In orthodox Islamic culture, as in other patriarchal systems, male babies are preferred. In this story, Mother (Zuhra) is willing and eager to *give* her child to Rumpelstiltskin, which distorts the age-old construction of mothers in the original Rumpelstiltskin story, while simultaneously upending particular expectations of Muslim mothers as maternalistic and nurturing. Here is a moment of rupturing of gender binary thinking that Davids (2019) insinuates in her engagement with decoloniality: Mother (Zuhra) unsettles gender normative expectations written into religion that ground ideas of both motherhood and fatherhood, offering us alternative representations of mothers, in particular, in this story.

While some of Kazie Ali's stories are critical of the stereotype of mothers and stepmothers as evil and dangerous, others are not. In the story 'Different Tastes', there is both a critique of the stereotype of the evil stepmother as well as an unapologetic taking on of a villainous role as the witch in the popular *Hansel and Gretel* tale. After Hansel and Gretel kill the witch who would have killed Hansel by placing him in the oven to cook and eventually eat, the two children settle into life with their father. Gretel wonders:

At home there was much rejoicing, and we three settled into a comfortable life, no one mentioning our stepmother. It's strange, now that I think about it after all these years: we never asked father how she died. Simply celebrated her absence. Had he killed her in a fit of guilt over dumping us in the forest? Did she run away with a man who could feed her? Did she die of hunger? What's even odder is that we never blamed him for our abandonment. It was always her fault; she was the villain in our story. (2010: 102)

Here, through Gretel's voice, Kazie Ali comments on the ironic ways in which the stepmother is erased by her father; her disappearance not even questioned. Instead, she is, through omission, and unproblematically, relegated to the role of wrongdoer in the tale. Interestingly, it is Gretel who, after her father dies and her brother marries, moves into the ill-fated gingerbread house and becomes the witch. Gretel becomes the new malefactor whose childhood and adolescence we, as readers, are familiar with: in other words, the reworked story offers readers insight into Gretel's history and *how she becomes the witch*. Gretel's tone is unapologetic and expectant:

We wait, the always-warm oven and me. To hear some stray, small person's juicy-pink lips, someone's lickable white milk teeth nibbling at my chocolate windows. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 103)

Phyllis Chesler's chapter entitled 'The mother-daughter relationship in fairy tale, myth, and Greek tragedy', reveals how fairy tales historically function as 'a secret history of embattled female relationships – a history that we repress only at our own peril' (2009: 167). According to Chesler, some fairy tale themes still resonate today, in real-life relationships between mothers or mothers-in-law, and daughters or stepdaughters. Ideas of being 'replaced' by younger, fertile women, either through marriage (in the past) or in the workplace (currently), do exist, and Chesler offers evidenced accounts of these kinds of stories in her chapter. In fact, she argues that,

harsh fairy-tale-like female rivalries still exist in countries where husband-based extended families, child marriage, child-prostitution, arranged marriages, polygamy, concubinage, and intractable poverty once existed or still do. (Chesler, 2009: 176)

'Mad' mothers, Chesler argues, sometimes do serious psychological harm to their biological daughters, and there are examples of this in Greek mythology (Queen Clytemnestra and her daughter, Elektra, is one example). Clytemnestra, eventually murdered by her daughter for murdering her father, Agamemnon, competed with Elektra to remain the only sexually desirable woman: 'Clytemnestra refuses to yield to her daughter's inevitable sexual ascent' (Chesler, 2009: 200).

There are also cases of complicated, passionate, 'difficult' feminist women whose mothers were described as abusive or psychotic: Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, Signe Hammer and Linda Gray Sexton are examples. Sylvia Plath's tumultuous relationship with her own mother, some argue, resulted in her suicide, a reflection of her competition with her mother. Through suicide, Chesler argues, Plath 'beat' her mother through absencing 'herself entirely from the lives of her two children' (2009: 191). In addition, Plath's relationship to her husband, Ted Hughes, also tumultuous, has been argued by some to have been unfairly represented: Plath, according to Chesler, was also 'cold, secretive, asocial' and 'intensely jealous' (2009: 190).

Think about the evil stepmothers in *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* or *Hansel and Gretel*. We are never offered any context to why they are considered evil and unloving of their stepchildren; instead, they are overwhelmingly presented as searching for ways to rid themselves of these children, apparently in order to have a more wholesome relationship with their father, uninterrupted by the responsibilities of parenting. The Disney film, *Maleficent* (2014), is one narrative that shifts the original *Sleeping Beauty* tale by Giambattista Basile, taking seriously the misogynist violence perpetrated against Maleficent by the man she loves (the king), resulting in a stepmother character who is understandably cautious of love and of other human beings, including children. Interesting, too, is that Maleficent and Princess Aurora (the king's daughter) fall in love – Maleficent *learns to love* the girl in a relationship that resembles one between a mother and daughter. Perhaps the film wishes to reflect that it is the violence of patriarchy that interrupts the potential for love and care between these two female characters, although this is not made clear. Nonetheless, the narrative is successful in marginalising the centrality of powerful men in the film: it is the love connection between Maleficent and Aurora that is set up as central in unsettling the conventionality of the *Sleeping Beauty* story.

Motherhood, as a state of being *in service to*, has a long recorded written history. In 1995, Adrienne Rich wrote about women's struggle to draw together parenting as a woman, with what she called 'the subversive function of the imagination' (Rich, 1995: 174). Historically, conventional mothering has meant taking care of others (husbands or other kinds of male partners, and children) without centralising the self. Andrea O'Reilly's work (2004) adds yet another layer to the experience of mothering, centralising race and class and raising questions about what it means to be a black mother with black children in our world: the anxiety of keeping children of colour safe in structurally racist societies are added realities for mothers of colour. Although this has changed to different extents over the last few decades – much of it due to feminist activism and struggle – mothering and fathering are generally not held to the same standard. Normative gendered discourse constitutes the belief that mothers must feel a natural urge to parent – to be in service to multiple others. Guilt for not wanting to measure up to these unreachable standards for women as mothers, has been discussed by writers across the globe, including, but not limited to, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels' *Mommy Myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined all women* (2005) and Rosemary Agonito's *The Last Taboo: Saying No to Motherhood* (2014), as well as Lou-Marié Kruger in her recent book, *Motherhood and Melancholia* (2020). Kruger's work focuses particularly on how class and race in the South African context impact on women's circumstances and abilities to make choices around motherhood. In the re-written fairy tales above, Kazie Ali represents some of these discourses, offering us a disturbance of – a break – in gender normative thinking about motherhood. We are presented with reworked tales that imagine what a mother's love looks like when she is exhausted due to sleep deprivation in 'Dreams of Sleep'; how the distance between fathers and children allow the former to make different parenting choices which essentially free them of parental responsibility in 'Fatherhood', and how we need to think critically about the evil stepmother trope in fairy tales in 'Different Tastes'. It is noteworthy that the reworked tales discussed above accompany Zuhra's story in Kazie Ali's novel: her own experiences into new motherhood are tied to the religious and cultural worlds – mediated by race and gender – she inhabits. It is Zuhra's acceptance of her own mother's struggle to love her

(discussed later), which is inadvertently based on her traumas related to South African racial histories, that allows for a decolonial reading of Kazie Ali's re-written fairy tales.

## ACCEPTABLY IRREVERENT WOMEN: RAPUNZEL AND SLEEPING BEAUTY

The stories 'The Ties That Bind' and 'After the Awakening' are another two of Kazie Ali's feminist reworkings which re-imagine the respective protagonists, Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty, as subversive women. In 'The Ties That Bind', Rapunzel questions the 'spiteful bitch-witch' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 59) whose magical spell led to the 'ludicrously long hair', spun-gold in colour, that hadn't been washed in years:

'How do the Grimms describe it? "Spun-gold". Spun-gold my arse', laments Rapunzel. 'She gave me this length, this colour, but she never thought of the maintenance! And now she's so old, she's forgotten her own spells. Bitch. Witch'. (2010: 59)

Rapunzel is quite unforgiving of the witch, although her aggressive language does not appear to be that of a victim held captive. Instead, this re-writing of the story satirically casts the witch as unapologetically evil and spiteful and does not offer reasons for what would be regarded conventionally as these 'unfeminine' characteristics. This revising ties into Zuhra's own complicated relationship with her mother, Hafsa, who in many ways – along with her father before he passed away – did not parent her with the kind of love that is critical of racial subjugation, inequalities, and power in the South African context. Instead, it is precisely Zuhra and Selena's parents' internalised racism – and self-hatred, consequently – which they unintentionally and carelessly pass on to their children, although this is less successful with Zuhra, as I reveal in the section above on 'Other kinds of mothers'. In other words, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres writes, the parents could be described as examples of '*damné*', subjects 'who cannot give because what he or she has, has been taken from him or her' (2007: 258). Zuhra and Selena's parents mirror the figure of the *damné*, produced through coloniality, with little to no energy to be generous in the world: this lack of 'gift-giving' energy (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 258), in some ways, could limit parenting that allows children, and later adults, to encounter the world generously. However, both Zuhra and Selena, in different ways and at disparate moments in their journeys into and through adulthood, resist their parents' enactments of caregiving, generating new ways of being in the world that are premised on love for oneself and others.

For example, it is precisely that Zuhra was left on her own – ignored, in some ways – which allowed her the freedom to choose a life path that gives her more joy. In fact, in a chapter titled 'Family Lice' in Kazie Ali's novel, Zuhra's mother cuts her hair in order to rid her scalp of lice, which was spreading at Zuhra's school. Hafsa refuses to take Zuhra to the hair salon, claiming that her daughter's hair is too '*keroes*',<sup>1</sup> another racially denigrating term that Hafsa uses to disparage her daughter for not being fairer-skinned and straighter-haired. Similar to the re-written Rapunzel in 'The Ties that Bind' above, Zuhra, however, relishes in the freedom of a naked neck after her hair cut, musing: 'I hear the crunch as the scissor snip snips through my hair, munching, swallowing long threads of me, leaving my neck naked and cold and light. Free' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 33). Selena, on the other hand, for large chunks of her childhood, suffers abuse at the hands of her mother and father in multiple ways, and then later, her husband, because of her parents' desire to possess her – to choose a path for their daughter that would grant the family respectability in a racially and economically divisive and cruel apartheid South Africa.

The critique in Kazie Ali's story, 'After the Awakening', also suggests female irreverence with the object of unsettling gender norms, including arranged Muslim marriages. Reworked from the classic *Sleeping Beauty* tale, the girl states that it was 'simple coincidence' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 136) that the prince – smug and who thinks he is special – arrived at the same time as she awoke, when the spell splintered. She spends her time sleeping in order to avoid him, including 'when he practices his lovemaking act on [her]' (2010: 136). The prince, who is Muslim and married to Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, dismisses her dislike of him 'with a wave of his manicured nails' (2010: 137). She drugs him, and he falls to the floor 'in a poignant display of femininity before he collapses in a swoon' (2010: 136). The tale ends with the narrator stating, 'The idiot. He never understood that he was a mere boy, while I am a woman who's lived for a hundred and sixty years' (2010: 137). The critique, here, is of arranged marriages in Islam, which in Zuhra and Selena's family, are considered a normative means to secure 'good' husbands for daughters. Kazie Ali ruptures what is presented as traditional patriarchal practice, in the form of arranged marriages to three women who are also sisters, through re-characterising the prince as 'idiotic' and inexperienced: it is the princess who presents wisdom and experience in the tale; it is she who decides how she wants to live, unsettling gender binaries that make arranged heterosexual marriages a possibility in the first instance.

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<sup>1</sup> The term is a racially offensive one meant to ridicule hair that is curly or bushy and not straight. It is usually tied, in the South African context, to the hair of people of colour.

## DESIRING GIRLS AND WOMEN IN *CINDERELLA* AND *FROG PRINCE*

Throughout Kazi Ali's stories, we are presented with girls and women who desire that which they have been denied. In this section, I focus specifically on the re-imagined protagonists in two well-known stories: *Cinderella* and *Frog Prince*. 'Cinderella's Wish' casts a young girl child in atypical terms, mirroring Zuhra's own sense of self. When Cinderella grows tired of cleaning for her stepmother and wishes for a 'different life' (2010: 31), her cat transforms into a spiritual being resembling a jinn<sup>2</sup>, rather than a fairy godmother, as is the case in the original fairy tale. The jinn says:

I'm here to grant you a new life. You'll have new clothes, jewels, and of course a prince for a husband, and you'll bear him many fine sons. Let's begin. First, you'll need – What's wrong? Why the sad face? (2010: 32)

In response, Cinderella states that she does not want to marry at all, and particularly not to a man she's never met. Instead, her wish is to learn about the world through study. Surprised at this rather strange and unusual wish, the jinn magically creates a 'gigantic library filled with books' (32), leaving Cinderella overjoyed.

Similarly, Kazie Ali's 'Promises Promises', as a re-imagined *Frog Prince* story, presents the female narrator as pressurised by her father to marry Mr. Froggy, whom she describes as a revolting 'slimy green creature' whose tadpoles she did not 'want swimming in [her] clean body every night' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 54). This story, meant to mirror that of Selena's in the novel, where she imagines taking revenge on her deceitful husband (the marriage arranged by her parents), is one of retribution and revenge, an important destabilisation of gender binaries. The protagonist arranges the murder of Mr. Froggy through leaving out her cat's (Fluffy) golden food pellets, seemingly poisonous for frogs. After successfully getting rid of her potential frog husband, the narrator claims in relief:

Next week Fluffy and I are off on a world tour. I've always dreamt of travelling – perhaps I'll even look up Mother, now that I'm of legal age and Daddy can't keep us apart any longer (Kazie Ali, 2010: 55).

It is clear, from both 'Cinderella's Wish' and 'Promises Promises', that there is an unsettling of dominant ideas of gender; the narrators do not wish to be married in heteronormative unions, enforced by their fathers. Within the context of *Not a Fairy Tale*, the critique is aimed at Islamic arranged marriages. Using satire, Kazie Ali reveals in 'Cinderella's Wish' how what would ordinarily be regarded as a wish-come-true in restrictive gender discourse, and in the conventional fairy tale, is not a wish for the protagonist at all: she desires to pursue more interesting endeavours, her adventures including education and travel. This re-writing by Kazie Ali places Muslim women of colour as drivers of their own destinies, not curtailed by religious value systems that marginalise and erase their interests. Of course, in the context of *Not a Fairy Tale*, this is not the situation for all women – Selena's journey is one which is incredibly brutal and relentless: her forced submission to her parents and then her husband had, for a long time into adulthood, left her unable to imagine life outside of domestication and service to others. The death of her son had left her traumatised. Her tale is therefore a lot more troubled and complicated, her process of defining her own life, a lot harder. For a long time, she is stuck within a system that leaves her violated and subjugated, not at all different from the life of her mother.

## WOLFIE UNLEASHED, OR PREDATORY MASCULINITY RE-VISITED IN *LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD*

The popular phrase, 'men are dogs', is rooted in ideas of masculinities as dog- or wolf-like: men are believed to be inherently sexually rapacious, animalistic and predatory, and uncontrollable around women they desire. These gender myths infiltrate 'real life' as well as fairy tales. Think, for example, of Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* – the girl in her red cape carries a basket of foodstuff through the woods on her travels to her grandmother. She is unknowingly followed by the big bad wolf, who desires to eat both the innocent grandmother and the little girl. The classical tale ends with the wolf disguised as the little girl in order to gain access to the grandmother, and the latter's horrible death through consumption by the wolf. There have, of course, been multiple renditions of this tale over time – the one I refer to above is the most well-known. There have also been many feminist critiques

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<sup>2</sup> In her book, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (2009), Amira el-Zein discusses the complexity of the jinn as 'intermediary beings within Islam', who 'could at anytime shift toward goodness or toward evil' (2009: xi). Contrary to Western conceptualisations, jinn in Islam are 'not demons opposed to angels. They are a third category of beings different from both angels and demons' (el-Zein, 2009: xi).

of this tale in terms of the ways in which heteronormative gender and sexual roles have been naturalised, with Angela Carter's 'The Werewolf' (1995) rendition being one such early example.

Kazie Ali's re-writing of the tale, entitled 'Yours Faithfully', also works to unsettle normative gender and sexual roles, but ties these to religion, love, desire and masculinity in disruptive ways. Wolfie writes:

Dear Ms Hood

You don't know me, but I've been watching you for years, since you were a little girl... Yes, I have loved you from afar all these years, from the shadows of the woods. I first saw you one day when you were a little girl, taking a basket of goodies to your sick grandmother. My mouth watered at the sight of you. It was all I could do not to gobble you up right there and then, but I thought, Why not follow you and have your granny, too?

But by the time you got to your grandmother's house, something in my consciousness had shifted. I knew I loved you, but that I did not have to consume you and your relations. I started therapy. I stopped chasing the three little pigs (that was part of my self-destructive youth). I became vegetarian. I noticed you always had your hair covered, and I wondered if you were Muslim. I spent years studying Islam in the hope that this would impress you. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 95)

In this rendition, Wolfie is Muslim, and is thoughtful, incisive and sensitive, spending time learning how to control his 'animalistic' impulses (as all human beings need to do in order to live amongst others in the world). Wolfie, rather than using brute force and control, attempts to woo Ms Hood (as she is called in Kazie Ali's narrative) through romantic letter writing. Connecting 'Yours Faithfully' to 'The Ties That Bind', Kazie Ali introduces us to politically leftist and gender-progressive male subjects who cannot in simple terms be labelled as Muslim patriarchs. In 'The Ties That Bind', the prince, while saving Rapunzel from the bitch-witch, says:

'Your hair just gets in our way, let's chop it off.'

I say, 'bitch-witch says men find long hair sexy.'

He says, 'Maybe, but not me, and not this long.'

I ask him if he thinks I'm beautiful.

'Yeah, you're gorgeous, but I didn't fall in love with you because of your face. I couldn't see your face where you stood, way up in the clouds, your features obscured by your blonde tresses. It was your voice, it was your maudlin song; you vocalised my sorrows, my despair at being a prince in this dark land of hard-working heroines, wicked wolves, abusive parents, gold-grabbing kings and murderous tots'. (2010: 59)

This prince obviously desires Rapunzel because of her talent, not her looks, and his general politics are what influences his views on gender and sexuality. When Rapunzel says, 'Listen, I know it's traditional for the heroine to marry her rescuer, but I can't marry you. You're the first man I've seen. I need to do some sexual experimenting first' (2010: 60), the prince logically responds, 'Okay, I'll wait. And if you don't choose me, at least we'll make music together' (2010: 60). This unsettling of the popular fairy tale offers a feminist reworking that turns on its head ideas of desperate maidens waiting to be saved by handsome, brave princes. Instead, Kazie Ali presents us with a young woman who prefers short hair because it is practical for her, desires to be free to explore sexually, and a man who finds talent more attractive than looks in a woman and is not threatened by her need to be sexually explorative with other men. It is an important rewriting, proposing an alternative view on romance, attraction and love, and shifting damaging heteronormative values that perpetuate outdated gender and Islamic norms that restrict, rather than invite, freedom.

## **WOMEN CHOOSING TO LOVE DIFFERENTLY, OR I DON'T HAVE TO ASK HIM TO DO THE COOKING**

Similar to the discourse that 'men are dogs', is the feminist discourse (see Sanger, 2019) that situates men as a problem, and in heteronormative relationships, women are always in struggle with them: the relationships are always unequal. Further, women do not *choose* men; men choose them, and women then spend the rest of their lives – unwillingly and reluctantly – begging men to take care of themselves and do household chores. This is obviously an unhealthy and damaging perpetuation of gender roles in heteronormative relationships; it assumes a

binary relationship where women are always good and virtuous, and men are always bad and self-centred. It does little for eradicating damaging ideas of gender and presents love as unequal: onerous on both women and men. In a few of the stories in *Not a Fairy Tale*, Kazie Ali upsets such understandings of gender and love, reminding readers that any kind of dogmatic, inflexible conceptualisations of identity, including religious ones, are unrealistic. Restorying the tropes that naturalise deterministic notions of gender allows us to take heed of the multiple ways in which women and men can exist in the world and could possibly love each other. This is a re-imagining of conservative ideas of heterosexuality. Kazie Ali's 'A Mother's Love' is one such feminist tale about a woman choosing whom to love. Reminiscent of the Grimm story *Changeling*, the story revolves around a mother's search for her ethereal, rosebud-like daughter, conceived from the mother's magic spell. The child had been snatched multiple times, by different animals – including a toad, a mole, and a mouse – for the purpose of arranged marriages with various male creatures (arranged marriages are clearly a motif in the novel!). After many failed attempts at finding her daughter, she appears at her mother's door relating her adventures and announcing that she'd found her prince 'of the Blossoms. My choice; my own kind. I met him in a flower, and we've spent a lot of time getting to know each other... I am small, but no longer locked' (2010: 151). Again, Kazie Ali critiques dogmatic Islamic convention and the normative gender system where women should consider themselves as privileged to be desired by an always handsome and dashing prince: they are fortunate to be considered for marriage and procreation. In 'A Mother's Love', it is the girl who chooses how and whom to love, similar to 'The Ties That Bind' where Rapunzel does not automatically have to marry the man who rescued her. Muslim women of colour, Kazie Ali seems to be posing, have choices.

## SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We need more writing that unsettles that which is taken for granted knowledge about how humans are supposed to engage themselves and others in the world. This knowledge is often based on the worlds of privileged, white subjects and communities. Disturbing colonial thinking is one way in which we can begin presenting the world in fairer, more just ways: there are many stories that have been hidden and untold – there is an archive to build. It is a large project in which engagement with reworked European fairy tales are only a small part. Paying attention to what has been left out or erased is a significant part of decolonial work. Shaida Kazie Ali's storying, not well-known either in South Africa or globally, offers feminist theorisation that imagines a decolonial kind of love. Her work upsets ways of being that are inflexible and unmoving. She presents gender binaries, gender relations and gender roles for people of colour, who are also Muslim, differently, and by extension, ruptures colonial thinking. Consequently, decolonial forms of love – and of being – become possible.

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