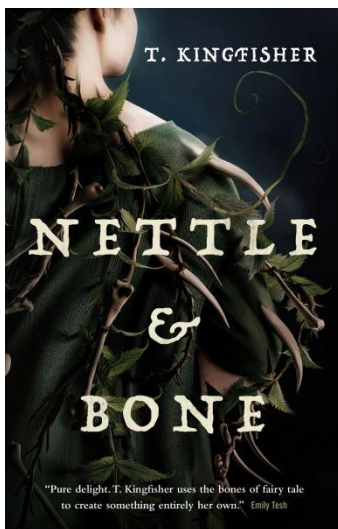


Subversion of Traditional Women Roles and Agency in T. Kingfisher's *Nettle & Bone*

T.P. Aishwarya*  



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*T.P. Aishwarya, MA English Literature, Department of English, Stella Maris College (Autonomous), Affiliated to the University of Madras, Chennai - 600086, Tamil Nadu, India.

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In the realm of modern fantasy literature, few novels have woven the intricate themes of women's agency and empowerment as deftly as T. Kingfisher's *Nettle & Bone*. This darkly whimsical tale, rich with subverted fairy tale motifs and shadowed paths through enchanted realms, provides a fertile ground for exploring the multifaceted expressions of female strength, resilience, and autonomy. At the heart of Kingfisher's narrative is Marra, the unassuming princess whose journey from the confines of her predetermined royal life to becoming the architect of her own destiny encapsulates the essence of women's agency. Through her quest to save her sister from an oppressive marriage, Marra, alongside a cadre of unlikely allies, challenges the traditional roles and expectations imposed upon women in fairy tales and, by extension, society at large.

This book review dissects the layers of women's agency presented in *Nettle & Bone*, examining each female characters, from the grave-witch to the fairy godmother, contributes to a broader narrative of empowerment against a backdrop of darkness and constraint. It explores how Kingfisher's characters defy, negotiate with, and ultimately transcend the boundaries set before them, using their wit, will, and determination to reshape their world. In doing so, Kingfisher crafts a tale that is both a critique and a celebration, a narrative where the thorns of struggle give rise to the foundations of strength, resilience, and autonomy. Along the way, Marra and her companions face numerous challenges, from dealing with their capricious and dangerous nature to unraveling the secrets of the demon chicken and the true nature of the fairy godmother. In the face of darkness, Marra finds her light, not as a princess waiting for rescue, but as a warrior battling for justice.

Marra's agency in *Nettle & Bone* is a central and transformative element of the novel, driving the plot forward and shaping the narrative in profound ways. Initially portrayed as the overlooked and underestimated youngest princess of a small kingdom, Marra defies societal expectations and embarks on a daring quest to rescue her sister from an abusive marriage. Her journey is marked by a remarkable display of agency as she navigates through a perilous world filled with magical creatures, treacherous alliances, and daunting challenges. Despite lacking traditional heroic attributes, Marra's strength lies in her resilience, resourcefulness, and unwavering determination to do what is right. Throughout the novel, Marra continually asserts her agency by making bold decisions and taking decisive actions. She forges alliances with unlikely companions, such as a bone knife, a demon-possessed chicken, and a grave witch, leveraging their unique abilities to aid her quest. Rather than conforming to the passive role expected of a princess, Marra actively seeks solutions to the problems she faces, refusing to be sidelined or silenced. Her agency is further demonstrated through her willingness to confront injustice and challenge oppressive systems.

Despite the risks involved, Marra refuses to accept the status quo and instead works tirelessly to bring about change. Her determination to save her sister serves as a driving force behind her actions, but her quest extends beyond personal motivations to encompass a broader desire for justice and autonomy. As Marra's

journey unfolds, she undergoes significant growth, emerging as a fully realized protagonist who embodies courage, compassion, and resilience. Her agency extends beyond individual acts of defiance, encompassing a broader journey of self-discovery and empowerment. By the novel's conclusion, Marra's agency has not only reshaped her own destiny but has also left an indelible mark on the world around her, inspiring others to challenge expectations and forge their own paths.

Marra's decision to leave the safety of her convent life and embark on a perilous quest to save her sister is the first significant act of agency. This choice marks her transition from passive observer to active participant in her story, driven by love and a sense of justice. Her realization that she cannot accomplish her goals alone leaves her to actively seek out allies, including a witch, a demon-possessed chicken, and a dust-wife or grave witch. Her ability to form this unconventional team highlights her leadership and willingness to embrace unconventional solutions that embody her own agency. The creation of the bone knife, with the assistance of the dust-wife, is a pivotal moment where Marra uses magical means to assert her will and gain protection. This act is symbolic of her taking control over her destiny and harming herself against the challenges ahead. Each of these instances not only exemplifies Marra's exercise of agency, but also highlights the novel's wider themes of empowerment, resilience, and the pursuit of autonomy amidst overwhelming challenges.

Marra's journey is a vivid portrayal of how determination, coupled with the courage to make difficult choices, can redefine one's destiny. Following Marra, the fairy godmother character embodies a complex form of women's agency that both aligns with and diverges from traditional expectations. Unlike the archetypal fairy godmother who benevolently facilitates the heroine's journey with magic and guidance, this character operates within a nuanced framework of power, autonomy, and the constraints imposed by her role. She exercises her agency by subverting and manipulating the rules that bind her, exposing the limitations that even powerful women encounter in patriarchal structures. Her interactions with Marra and the tasks she sets before the protagonist are not merely tests of worthiness but are imbued with lessons on the harsh realities of the world and the necessity of cunning and resilience. Through these actions, the fairy godmother exercises her agency within the limited scope allowed to her, steering Marra towards a path of self-reliance and empowerment. This guidance, though cryptic and challenging, underscores a form of mentorship that is pivotal in Marra's development and quest. The fairy godmother's story arc, marked by moments where she bends the expectations of her role to impart wisdom and aid, underscores a thematic exploration of the limitations and possibilities of women's agency within a framework that often seeks to constrain their power and influence.

Her character demonstrates that agency can be wielded in various forms, sometimes subtle and indirect, challenging traditional narratives about power and assistance in fairy tales. In the novel, the grave witch is a symbol of wisdom, resilience, and the acceptance of life's darker aspects. She emerges as a compelling

embodiment of women's agency, navigating the margins of society with a quiet strength and wisdom that defies conventional expectations. Through her interactions with Marra and her pivotal role in aiding the protagonist on her quest, the grave witch showcases a form of agency rooted in self-assurance, autonomy, and resilience. Throughout the novel, the grave witch demonstrates her ability to wield power and influence in subtle yet profound ways. Her knowledge of the arcane and her command over the forces of life and death serve as a testament to her agency, challenging the notion that power is solely the domain of those in positions of authority. Moreover, her willingness to offer guidance and support to Marra, despite the risks involved, highlights a sense of solidarity and sisterhood among women, further emphasizing the importance of community in the exercise of agency. The grave witch's refusal to conform to societal expectations and her comfort in embracing her true nature exemplify a form of agency that transcends traditional boundaries and definitions. Her character serves as a reminder of the resilience and resourcefulness inherent in women, even in the face of adversity.

Finally, Marra's sister, despite initially seeming to occupy a more traditional and passive role as a victim of an abusive marriage, gradually reveals a nuanced portrayal of women's agency within her constrained circumstances. Her situation serves as a critical catalyst for Marra's quest, yet it is through her own subtle acts of resistance and resilience that she contributes to the narrative of female empowerment. Her initial acquiescence to her fate, often mistaken for passivity, belies the quiet strength and the survival tactics she employs to navigate her oppressive circumstances. This portrayal challenges the reader to reconsider the forms and expressions of agency, especially in situations where direct action might not be possible or safe. Her endurance and the ways she manages to communicate her plight to Marra, indirectly inspiring her sister to undertake a perilous quest, reflect a form of agency that is deeply intertwined with resilience and the will to survive.

Through this character, *Nettle & Bone* explores the complexities of agency within oppressive relationships, highlighting that agency can also be found in endurance and the courage to hope for change. Her story underscores the fact that agency and resistance take many forms, not all of which conform to overt expressions of defiance but are nonetheless powerful in their own right. In *Nettle & Bone* by T. Kingfisher, the exploration and embodiment of women's roles and agency emerges as a powerful narrative force, challenging traditional fairy tale archetypes and offering a refreshing perspective on female empowerment and resilience. Through the journeys of Marra, her sister, the grave witch, and the fairy godmother, the novel weaves a complex tapestry of female experiences, each character demonstrating unique forms of agency within their societal and personal constraints. This multifaceted portrayal not only enriches the story but also serves as a commentary on the broader theme of women navigating and resisting patriarchal structures.

Marra's transformation from a seemingly powerless princess into a decisive, action-taking heroine underscores the novel's central theme of self-determination. Her quest to save her sister from an abusive marriage becomes a conduit for her own self-discovery and assertion of autonomy. Marra's journey is marked by the strategic formation of alliances, the overcoming of formidable obstacles, and, ultimately, the reclamation of her narrative from those who seek to control it.

Through Marra, *Nettle & Bone* celebrates the agency of women taking control of their destinies, advocating for the idea that strength and bravery come in many forms. The grave witch and the fairy godmother further expand on the theme of agency, each representing different aspects of power and autonomy. The grave witch, with her quiet strength and mastery over the liminal spaces between life and death, exemplifies the agency found in embracing one's identity and capabilities, even when they lie outside societal norms. On the other hand, the fairy godmother presents a more nuanced exploration of agency, highlighting the constraints and sacrifices inherent in roles that, on the surface, seem to wield considerable power. Together, these characters illuminate the complexities of female agency, revealing it to be a multifaceted and deeply personal phenomenon. Marra's sister, though initially appearing as a victim, embodies a subtle yet profound form of resistance. Her endurance and indirect actions to signal for help reflect the reality that agency can manifest in various forms, not all of which conform to overt acts of defiance. Her story serves as a poignant reminder of the strength inherent in survival and the hope for change, further complicating the narrative of victimhood and resilience.

Nettle & Bone offers a compelling examination of women's roles and agency, framed within a narrative that deftly subverts fairy tale conventions. The novel's portrayal of its female characters highlights the diversity of women's experiences and the myriad ways they navigate, resist, and challenge the structures that seek to define and confine them. Through its nuanced characterizations and rich thematic exploration, *Nettle & Bone* asserts that women's agency is both a personal journey and a collective struggle, one that encompasses strength, cunning, resilience, and, above all, the unyielding pursuit of autonomy. In doing so, T. Kingfisher crafts a narrative that not only entertains but also inspires, urging readers to reconsider the power dynamics at play in their own stories and the world around them. Through these characters and their journeys, *Nettle & Bone* delves into the complexities of women's agency, showcasing a spectrum of strengths and vulnerabilities. T. Kingfisher crafts a narrative that celebrates the power of women coming into their own, challenging societal expectations, and forging new paths. The novel presents a nuanced examination of what it means to be a woman with agency, highlighting the diverse ways women navigate and resist the limitations imposed upon them.

Reference

Kingfisher, T. *Nettle and Bone*. Tor Books, 2022.