

Gender Stereotypes in Classic ‘Fairy Tales’: A Feminist Reading

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Abstract -The field of literature encompasses several genres, each of which has experienced its own emergence over time. Yet, there is one genre that has been highly esteemed and consistent throughout history, from ancient times to the most contemporary ones, whether it be in written or spoken form. It originated during an era when oral storytelling was still the prevailing narrative form. This genre constitutes fairy tales, replete with enchantment within a realm inhabited by fantastical beings. Fairy tales are universally beloved. Undoubtedly, individuals from all backgrounds have, at least once in their lifetimes, encountered or been exposed to a fairy tale. Folk and fairy tales are among the most ancient types of storytelling that have originated in our world. These literary forms have evolved over centuries and have undergone changes and adaptations from oral narratives to written compositions, theatrical performances, and even cinematic productions. The fairy tale genre is characterised by its simplicity and unambiguous nature, normally centred on a plight of a young woman and a tenacious man who embarks on a mission to rescue her. Fairy tales serve as a source of inspiration for numerous contemporary writers who have rewritten, adapted, and reimagined the traditional stories into fresh narratives. The propensity of fairy tales to undergo revision may be attributed to the inherent staticity and stereotypical nature of their characters. The motivation for this research paper stemmed from the fairy tales that the researchers were exposed to during their childhood, as well as the contrasting feminist viewpoint presented in the modern retellings of those same fairy tales that the researchers read as adults. The objective of this study is to analyse the retrogressive characteristics of certain traditional fairy tales that have been passed down through generations. This will be done by investigating the repeated motifs of the Damsel in Distress and Knight in Shining Armour, which serve to uphold gender roles and other traditional social standards that contradict the principles of feminism.

Keywords: Fairytales, Retellings, Regressive, Contemporary, Feminist, Stereotypes of Women, Classic Fairy Tales, Narratives, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, fairy tales have consistently been the initial form of literature that children encounter. Children engage in auditory perception of their parents' narration or reading of stories, or they passively consume fairy tales on television. Given the regular exposure of children to these stories, it is not unexpected that they are also influenced by them, particularly in terms of how the stories portray individuals who are often depicted in a stereotypical manner. Hence, it is imperative to be cognisant of such depictions not isolated to fairy tales. Regarding the characteristic portrayals themselves, women are commonly shown in a derogatory or generally unfavourable manner. They are shown as vulnerable princesses who rely on a courageous prince for their rescue, or as malevolent sorceresses who seek to assassinate someone or obstruct anyone's schemes. Princesses possess intrinsic beauty and are often adorned with exquisite attire. "However, they are also characterised by their naivety and inability to make independent decisions or take action without the assistance of animals or other extraordinary entities." In contrast, the archetypal male figures in fairy tales are valiant princes who possess the ability to rescue anyone, often the vulnerable princesses, with little hindrance, and furthermore, they receive the princess as a form of compensation.

Gender stereotypes, which are prevalent in children's literature, frequently depict women and men in a manner that may lead children to perceive these sexist characteristics as normal, typical, and even acceptable. Undoubtedly, this perspective is inappropriate as it reinforces the biases against both women and men and simultaneously contributes to the formation of children's erroneous and prejudiced notions about the appropriate behavioural patterns of females and males.

II. FAIRY TALES AND GENDER ROLES

For centuries, folklore and fairy tales have been recounted and disseminated. With *Breaking the Magic Spell*, Jack Zipes provides a thorough overview of the development of the fairy and folk tale genre. Initially, these stories mostly fulfill an educational function, but they also served as a means to 'unify the members of a community and facilitate a connection in their comprehension of societal issues' (6). The purpose of fairy tales was to impart knowledge to both children and adults, while also cautioning them about the potential repercussions that would ensue if they were to transgress social norms. The collection and modification of everyday folklore and fairy tales have spanned centuries. Undoubtedly, the most renowned fairy tales are those compiled by the Brothers Grimm. Aggregated during the early 19th century, these narratives have gained widespread recognition throughout the Western hemisphere. Frequently labelled as 'authentic' (Zipes 18), their renditions of these stories are undoubtedly not the sole versions. Regarding my study of Carter's contemporary fairy tales in connection to their original source, the matter of determining the authentic version arises. An inherent challenge in analysing classical fairy tales as a primary source is their lack of ownership or authorship by a single individual. The present study is grounded in Charles Perrault's rendition of 'Little Red Riding Hood' as a foundational intertext for Carter's adaptation. The rationale behind my selection of Perrault's version over the Brothers Grimm's comes from Carter's prior contributions. An anthology of English translations of Charles Perrault's traditional French fairy tales was published by Angela Carter in 1977. Hence, Carter was concurrently engaged in the translation of these works while simultaneously developing *The Bloody Chamber*, which likely served as the primary source of her inspiration. Given that there are specific details, such as the conclusion, that vary between the Perrault and Grimm versions, I shall refer to the earlier one.

Zipes argues that the fairy tales gathered in the nineteenth century were frequently directed towards the lower social strata as prescriptive guidelines for living (8). Nevertheless, the stories did not consistently tackle or revolve around ethical assertions targeted towards the working class. Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's rendition of *Beauty and the Beast*

exemplifies the inclusion of stories that were more closely associated with the upper echelons of society. The plot centres on an affluent merchant who has suffered enormous financial losses, and the subsequent hardships he faces. The narrative effectively imparts moral lessons on the ideals of life, with the notable distinction being that the characters are of aristocratic descent (10).

Typically, characters in traditional fairy and folk tales exhibit a high degree of stereotyping. Indeed, the female characters frequently exhibit traits of weakness, naivety, and helplessness. Moreover, the narratives often depend on a male protagonist saving the female central character, so transforming her into an object that requires rescue (Zipes 181). Furthermore, Karen E. Rowe characterises the 'female virtues' in fairy tales as 'enduring patience, selflessness, and reliance' (217). The fairy tale genre is replete with stereotypes, which authors can effectively use to underscore the inherent imbalance within the patriarchal structure. These structures are frequently firmly established in culture and society to such an extent that they appear almost inherent. In her book 'The Sadeian Woman,' Angela Carter explores the relationship between patriarchal systems and myths, asserting that myths perpetuate false universalist beliefs (5). In this work, the author not only examines myths from a literary perspective, but also emphasises the notion that gender roles are constructed as metaphorical myths. Moreover, in 'Notes from the Front Line,' she asserts that she holds the belief that all myths are creations of the human intellect and solely mirror elements of tangible human engagement. "I am engaged in the task of demythologising" (38).

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF CONVEYING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

Fairytales have always been an integral part of society. The popularization of the classic fairytales came with the era of Disney and this company has dominated the fairytale scene since the late 20th century with their adaptations of fairytales, the earliest being in 1937- *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. However, this massive production house had its own limitations too, as pointed out by academic U. H. Sharif in her thesis paper, *From Fairy Tales to Disney Movies: Gender Roles and Stereotypes Then and Now*, she notes that, 'Disney's animated films used to present stereotypical

characters having a specific set of gender roles and behaviors. It exemplified what men and women should do, how they are supposed to look, and how they should act.' (pg. 37).

An example of the above would be the movie *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) in which, the portrayal of the Beast shows him to be quite literally a beast who only needs a woman's touch to turn him into a civilized entity. The Beast's initial treatment of Beauty can only be dubbed as chauvinistic. It is only recently that Disney has been portraying fairytales from a contemporary point of view and this can be seen in a new generation of princesses with agency who aren't defined by their physical appearances and who actively fight against their oppressors for independence such as *Tangled* (a retelling of *Rapunzel*, 2011) and *Brave* (2012).

This change has also slowly made its appearance in the literature of India; there is a movement from the traditional figures of mythology into more feminist characters. A prominent example of this would be Amish's, *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila*, published in 2017 that challenges the tradition of the meek mythological figure of Sita, Amish's Sita, breaks all the stereotypes assigned to her, in the books she is a woman of valor who is shown to be 'fielding armies single-handedly, is a champion archer, an efficient queen, and an able administrator...whose physical appearance is not prioritized on her portrayal.' (Zehra Rosheena; 'Book Review: Amish's 'Sita' Can Wield A Spear Better Than You'; *The Quint Web Magazine*; 2017).

IV. DEPICTION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ENGLISH FAIRY TALES

Preceding the examination of gender stereotypes in fairy tales, it is imperative to address the key concepts of gender identity, gender roles, gender stereotypes, and sexism. It is imperative to focus on the explanations and interpretations of these terms as they are vital for comprehending the matter of gender stereotypes and conventional depictions of the primary characters in fairy tales and associated impact on children. Gender is one of the most crucial fundamental concepts. The explanation of this phrase can be occasionally deceptive as there exist two main interpretations of the term. Firstly, sex refers to the determination of whether an individual is male or

female based on their genitalia. As Cranny-Francis et al. elaborate, sex can be defined as 'a theoretical framework that categorises human beings into two biologically determined groups - male or female'. This term is used to refer to fundamental physiological differences between males and females, specifically including variations in genitalia and reproductive tendencies.

According to the World Health Organisation, gender, in its second sense, encompasses the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and characteristics that a particular society deems suitable for individuals based on their gender ('What Do We Mean by 'Sex' and 'Gender'?'). According to Cranny-Francis et al., gender classifies individuals into two distinct groups: male and female. Simultaneously, this comment refers to the distinctions between males and females that are not inherent biologically, but rather acquired through upbringing within the framework of a certain society or culture. Regarding the differences, as we can ascertain by further perusal of the brochure, we refer to 'distinct social and psychological distinctions... that evolve over time and vary across different cultures'. Moreover, gender encompasses predominantly social and socially patterned cultural disparities, expectations, biases, and specific characteristics of the statuses of men and women.

Snow-White and the Seven Dwarf:

The central protagonist of this fairy tale is Snow White. Being a princess, she is expected to adhere to the instructions given to her in order to be a conforming young woman. "This encompasses culinary and domestic tasks." As she matured, her physical attractiveness surpassed that of her stepmother, which greatly caused her annoyance. Snow-White was explicitly directed by the stepmother to be killed by the huntsman. Snow-White was rescued by the band of seven dwarfs who requested her to prepare meals for them. The householders cautioned her against allowing anyone to enter the premises. In defiance of the directive, Snow-White one day swung open the door and allowed the woman who was knocking at it to enter. She lacked knowledge that the woman was a queen with a desire for her demise. Although Snow-White was poisoned by the queen, the seven dwarfs successfully revived her. This fairy tale imparts the lesson to women to fully comply with the directives given by the males, as non-compliance may

result in repercussions. Thus, it is evident that women lack independent thinking and are expected to comply and heed the counsel of men.

Cinderella:

Cinderella, in this classical narrative, resides with her stepmother and stepsisters following the demise of her father. She is subjected to mistreatment by both her stepmother and her daughters. The portrayal of Cinderella as weak and passive stems from her failure to confront the stepmother and her daughters, despite the fact that she is the rightful owner of the house. Consequently, her family members perceive her as being of lesser status compared to them. Cinderella eagerly anticipates being saved by a prince who promptly weds her, so ensuring her eternal happiness. A fairy tale depicts women as individuals incapable of self-defence. Therefore, they anticipate the arrival of a male figure to save them. Furthermore, the female characters in this fairy tale are linked to domestic chores. Cinderella diligently tackles all the domestic chores and remains unconcerned with the external world. Moreover, beauty assumes a significant position in this fairy tale. Marriage to a handsome prince is contingent upon one's physical attractiveness.

Language serves as a potent instrument in depicting the world. The objective of critical discourse analysis is to investigate the stereotypes, human interactions, and identities that are evident in a given text. Moreover, it delves into the gender disparities that are expressed through language and dialogue. Utilising Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, the analysis reveals that genders are depicted in stereotypical manners. Males are portrayed as possessing authority and a violent disposition, resorting to killing their wives to mitigate their anger. Conversely, females are shown as submissive and meek, subjected to beatings for questioning and being killed for disloyalty, but demonstrating resilience and cleverness in their struggle for survival. The portrayal of gender in this manner can establish a fixed and inflexible perception of male and female within the cognitive framework of children.

CONCLUSION

Given the aforementioned factors, a fairy tale is an indispensable instrument in the education of children

because of its myriad benefits. Nevertheless, it is not a tool devoid of its limitations; several authors highlight certain hazards arising from the message conveyed by the fairy tale. The majority of retellings in contemporary literature are specifically targeted towards the young adult audience. An adult group is fully assimilated into society and possesses knowledge of assigned gender roles. Nevertheless, it is the younger children who are the primary consumers of fairytales and continue to engage with and learn from the conventional and traditional stories. "The need for this change lies in its ability to guarantee the empowerment of younger generations, liberating them from the limitations imposed by gender roles and sexist ideas." Hence, it is imperative to promptly transform classical fairytales and guarantee an equitable recognition of characters for their multifaceted attributes and abilities, rather than the shallow ones attributed to them based on their gender. This list comprises a limited number of recommendations that can effectively challenge the detrimental gender stereotypes often depicted in fairy tales. Nevertheless, in order to ensure the implementation of these preventive measures and achieve the intended outcome, it is imperative to first increase awareness of the discussed issues among those who have the most influence on moulding the attitudes of the youngest beneficiaries of imaginative narratives. These individuals encompass significant adults in the child's life, such as teachers, parents, and guardians, who introduce children to the realm of fairy tales and elucidate the surrounding reality to the child. Assume that these individuals lack sensitivity towards matters of gender equality. Under such circumstances, they will fail to perceive any validity in implementing these preventative measures to counteract the detrimental consequences of gender stereotypes. Thus, it is crucial to carry out all activities targeted at increasing awareness of the issue.

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