

Exploring Female Captivity, Repression and Abuse in Fairy Tales

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Abstract

The paper attempts to analyse various findings from the fairy tales – ‘Cinderella’, ‘Sleeping Beauty’, ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’ from the feminist perspective. Fairy tales often express a strong cultural and social influence of misogyny and patriarchal anarchy that prevails within the crux of the society since times immemorial. A feminist approach towards the understanding of Fairy tales is gaining attention because it highlights the gender power politics of social roles and social norms adhering to ‘the second sex’¹ of the society. This paper interprets the debate about why a powerful woman is portrayed as an evil queen and why the timid and suppressed princess becomes the idealistic female figure or the ‘angel in the house’. The paper also refers to a minimal extent to the books ‘Fairy Tales and Feminism’ by Donald Haase² and ‘The Portrayal of Woman in Fairy Tales’³ by Silima Nanda. Utilising and analysing the findings from these sources the paper deals with an insight into the understanding of fairy tales versus the implications of these fairy tales upon the recipient’s mental framework.

Keywords: Equality, Feminism, Misogyny, Oppression, Abuse.

Going by the dictionary definition of the term feminism, it states the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of equality of the sexes. However, in the broader sense of the term, Feminism is about equality, about creating a world where we can all receive the same treatment, regardless of which gender the person belongs to. We cannot say that we believe in equality but we aren’t feminists – the two are one in the same. This is a general idea which is needed as much for men as we do for women. In the 1970’s, feminists focused critical attention on literature; fairy tales extensively that had enchanted readers for centuries. Literature is a reflection of society and fairy tales are the initial section of literature that the children are exposed to. Imbibing the dominant misogyny in its ideas, the children, irrespective of their sex, as learners get a complicated image of the society. By exposing the role of fairy tales in the culture and politics that lies in the gender struggle, feminism has transformed fairy tale studies and sparked debates that would change the way learners or recipients think about fairy tales and terms such as ‘happily ever after’. In actuality, these fairy tales exposed a glaring reality of the role of women in the society. What needs to be

¹ ‘The Second Sex’ by Simone de Beauvoir.

² ‘Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches.’ by Donald Haase.

³ ‘The Portrayal of Women in Fairy Tales’ by Silima Nanda.

brought under focus is the significance of these readings upon the learners' mind and its effect on learning. What is stored in the learners' mind is the normalcy of the subservient position of women in the society, stereotyping of women as evil witches or stepmothers or the valiant hero or men freeing the 'damsel in distress', thereby proving their superiority over women.

Fairy tales are often considered to be citing certain ideas which, the paper aims to interpret from the feminist point of view such as the 'idea of women being 'fair and beautiful' in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs ; 'portrayal of women as evil' as pictured in almost every fairy tale. For example the evil stepmother and step sisters in Cinderella, the evil fairy Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty. The idea of 'damsel in distress' is also varied to interpretations from a feminist point of view. The central idea which surrounds every fairy tale is the tale of the submissive princess passively relegated to the domestic section of household, waiting earnestly for their Knights in shining armour, whose superiority is superimposed by the portrayal of valiantly defeating dragons and animals. What they fail to portray overall is that women should be characterised by the strength of their abilities and if given a chance, they can themselves seize control of their destinies, rather than being the passive 'victim' as the fairy tales showcase. The feminist perspective has been essentially stated on fairy tales by many ideas portraying in many researches. As stated by Donald Hease in Fairy Tales and Feminism, feminism and feminists exposed the role of fairy tales. The book identifies the cultural struggle over gender and feminism and fairy tale studies. The essays challenge the conventional wisdom about the fairy tales' heroines and offer new insights into the tales produced by female writers. This paper explores the ideas that elucidates in the intersection of fairy tales and feminism. The Portrayal of Women in Fairy Tales by Dr. Silima Nanda explores the wondrous fairy tales that have emanated from a wide variety of tiny tales having undergone numerous transformations by political and social forces. The paper aims to construct an idea from these sources and establish how the function of an educator can be implemented in the study of the fairy tales. (Haase)

Cinderella, far from being an innocent fairy tale about a girl achieving her dreams is actually a misogynistic story that represents women as greedy and cruel, or pretty and passive and suggests that the only way for a woman to get ahead in the world is to let her be abused and wait for help from a glorified hero. Cinderella is oppressed by her father and stepmother. She is forced to perform the traditional female tasks relegated to domestic works like cooking and cleaning. The story allows for no solidarity among women as well. While the stepmother is presented as a monstrous figure, the step sisters use their evil tactics to impress the men in their lives. Getting a new dress and looking pretty is the only way she is able to be happy, to be noticed and to gain social eminence. In other words, keeping her ugly kept her away from power. Beauty is seen as the only way a woman can become powerful. The only way of the damsel in distress to get out of the step-mother's shackles is marriage to the prince. However, the prince does not even recognise her at first- her distinguishing mark becomes her shoe size. He announces that he will marry the woman who fits the shoe. Marriage, here, is shown to be the holy grail for a woman, the motif of her happiness. Thus reinforcing the superficial idea of love towards women and being 'happily ever after'. Cinderella's final validation of herself is received at the ball, only when her prince recognises her and falls in love with her as she is the most beautiful women thereby reinforcing the idea of 'The Fair is Beautiful'.

Sleeping Beauty, while exploring this classic or rather the hegemonic versions of the story, it is almost as if the protagonist has no will and she is portrayed as blatantly passive as someone

who is just waiting for fate and life to happen to her. Or in other words of Joyce Carol- 'To be female is to be without volition or identity'. (Tatar, 1987)

A kiss of love or abuse? This enunciates an important question. The prince rescues Aurora from her deep slumber with the true love's kiss. However there is a lack of moral compass in the appropriateness of intimacy towards a woman who cannot give consent. It is here, the educators play an important role. The educator will help point out the ethical issues and take a stand about the right and wrong and other questions of ethics.

In Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, varied observations lead to an understanding of women. In order to obtain protection and shelter, the dwarfs and Snow White herself decides to perform her traditional household work. The name 'Snow White' itself is a name which forces the idea of a woman being 'fair and beautiful'. The eternal beauty of Snow White lies in the irony of her name. This superimposes the idea that lack of beauty in women is without fairness. Extreme focus has been given on the beauty of women as her only weapon to gain social power or recognition. When the queen repeatedly asks the question – 'Who is the fairest of all?' to the mirror, 'Fairest' here means the most beautiful. The tale takes a hard left towards sexism when Snow White is apparently so dim that the queen manages to dress up as different personality and trick her own death. The tale makes it clear that female brain cannot process anything complex than cleaning and knitting. The final glorification of the male hero occurs when he sweeps into the plot suddenly and saves the day by saving the heroine. Thus, again, the story showcases that the beauty without brains is save by her knight in shining armour.

In the story of Cinderella, Cinderella is image of the ideal angelic female which the stepmother and the stepsisters are a contrast to. They, on the other hand, are stereotyped as the monster images as suggested by the critics Gilbert and Gubar. (Gilbert., 1979)⁴ Starting with the physical appearance, Cinderella is beautiful and the others are dark and unattractive. Her nurturing actions mirror what kind of a mother, wife and caretaker she would make in future. The step mother on the other hand is scheming, outspoken, dominant and essentially evil who forces Cinderella into servitude. The triumph of Cinderella over the wicked stepmother and sisters displays to learners that her female qualities are the ones to be repeated and grained into the unconscious. This gives a wrong sense of reality to the learners, especially women who start identifying with that innocent holy character. They, thereby evolve within them an ideology of accepting subordination as their natural role. It is here that the world needs to question these ideologies of gender stereotyping.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs chronicle all the false ideas of perfection and the 'silly' idea of love at first sight with a girl in the glass coffin. This tale puts forward a wrong message upon the girls i.e. in order to succeed they need to fit into the narrow view of what was beautiful as well as being self-sacrificing, the epitome of patience and lack of expression of opinions. Essentially they were taught to recognise their domestic work in a man's productive world. The step-mother being dominant and scheming, the step sisters pushing and surpassing limits to gain social advancements and the vicious plot by the queen to kill Snow White; every idea puts forward a picture of 'No solidarity among women'.

It has been argued by Sally Blythe, a child development expert, that the fairy tales are crucial to a child's development. However it becomes important to nurture their moral behaviour and show proper portrayal of ideologies. By understanding how gender works in fairy tales, we are able to see how deep-rooted patriarchal ideology is within every fraction of the society. We should move away from the conventional understanding of the fairy tales. Fairy tales are a way in literature to uphold the patriarchal conventions of society. These 'harmless' stories presented to the children at a young age, establish the normality of the male domination of men in the world. It is here that that the feminist analysis attempt at breaking the ideology gradually sustaining in the minds of the learners. Social conventions are instilled in children through fairy tale characters that they can relate to in order to embed proper gender behaviours in their psyche. These starts developing at an early age and it is thus important to construct an understanding of gender stereotyping and feminism in their knowledge. In doing so, the world should advocate their rights as human beings. Girls learning their place in the society by identifying with Cinderella or Aurora, starts even before their formal education actually begin. This is so because they will be less likely to question tradition if it has been presented to them so early on. It is important to focus on the insignificance of adhering to such traditional roles as determined in the tales. If not so, then fairy tales become a powerful weapon which strengthens and celebrates the patriarchal mindset in the world to times' eternity. Fairy tales rather, should become a source of investigation of the real sufferings of women in society and acknowledge the cause of the sufferings.

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