

A Thought On Cinderella: The Construction Of Female Gender Through Fairy Tales

Ashalekshmi V

Assistant Professor in English
University Institute of Technology, Bharanikavu
Affiliated to the University of Kerala

Abstract

Every kid's life starts by hearing stories, especially fairy tales and beast fables. They carry some hidden motives and messages consciously or unconsciously as they pass from one generation to the other. All fairy tales tell the stories of weak female protagonists who have been tormented by evil stepmothers and witches. At the closure of every tale the distressed female protagonist is saved by a prince and they happily live ever after.

This paper brings out a general study on the most popular fairy tales like Cinderella, Snow white, Sleeping Beauty and Beauty and the Beast written by Grimm brothers. This paper focuses on the '**constructedness of femininity**' in fairytales through the images of weak and submissive female protagonists. It is an analysis of whether gender stereotypes are constructed through fairytales. The female protagonist is portrayed as weak and she don't resist the abuses on her. The image of a good woman as well as a bad woman is created through these tales. This study focuses on the ideas of **Hegemony, Patriarchy, Hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity.**

Keywords: Fairy tales, Constructedness of femininity, Patriarchy, Hegemony

Fairy tales are cultural artefacts that they encompass the human experience. Fairy tale's main form of dissemination has evolved from era to era, as the preferred method of storytelling has changed. Many psychoanalysts in the twentieth century perceived fairy tale as a teaching tool and in some instances, as case studies because of their focus on problems that seemed to reflect the experiences they underwent themselves. One of the most famous of these was Dr. Bruno Bettelheim. Bettelheim in his 'The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales' writes that Fairy tales are psychologically important because they help children navigate through their psychological development. Bettelheim closely followed the teachings of Freud and used this philosophy to develop theories on the meaning and uses of fairy tales. Fairy tales were psychological tools that were used to help transition people from one stage of development to the other. (125)

The debate over whether fairy tales help or hurt women has contained for decades with arguments on both sides. Critics argue that fairy tales are an essentially female genre and view fairy tale as a vehicle for more radical thoughts to be expressed. Most of the fairy tales served to legitimize the dominant gender system by highlighting the importance of the feminine beauty ideal. Through the majority of the story the heroine's beauty rather than her actions derives the plot. The male lead may not enter the picture, other than the victimized heroine dreaming of her saviour, until the last portion of the story. The female heroine is often weeping or locked in a state of ageless sleep. The unequal emphasis of the female versus male appearances reinforces the stereotype of the women's characters.

In the 1970s, a debate between two feminist authors highlighted the confusion many people have over the roles of women in fairy tales. Alison Laurie wrote *Fairy Tale Liberation* (1970) and *Witches and Fairies: Fitzgerald to Updike* (1971) arguing that fairy tales showed active progressive females not dominated by traditional gender roles and should be considered feminist works. Marcia. R. Lieberman argues against this claim in her article 'Some Day My Prince Will Come-Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale' (1972). In this article, Lieberman claims that, the best-known tales display women stripped of their agency, waiting for men to save them. She claimed that fairy tales are tools for the indoctrination of women to passive existence, subjected to dominance of men. (12)

This paper points out the stereotyping or the construction of the female gender in the most celebrated fairy tale Cinderella. The tale that glorifies passivity, dependency, and self sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity. The story of Cinderella participated in an unconscious stereotyping of 'female figure' in the minds of the readers. It shows that heroines are always innocent, passive, inactive, obedient and waiting for her man to save her. The evil stepmothers are always jealous, cruel, unkind, and exploit the heroine to a large extent.

Undoubtedly 'Cinderella' can be considered as one of the most famous as well as favourite fairy tale throughout the world. There have been a number of versions as well as the names of Cinderella's story; even though, the main theme always remains the same. After Cinderella's mother's death, her father marries another woman with two daughters. Her stepmother and stepsisters treat Cinderella as a maid who has to work very hard. One day, there is a ball in the town and everybody is to partake in that event except Cinderella. Nevertheless, she manages to attend the ball by means of some supernatural power where she meets the prince and at the same time loses, her slipper, which is important for unfolding the story. The prince tries to find the girl in the town whom the slipper belongs to, after some time he finally changes and as a result Cinderella becomes his wife.

As Anderson refers to Aarne- Thomson's division of the folktales and fairy tale, the structure seem in the stories based on Cinderella's topic can be divided into mainly five sections. The first section is the persecuted heroine. The heroine is abused by her stepmother and stepsisters. She is dressed in rough clothing. Second section consist of the magic help. She is helped by her dead mother or by a tree on the mother's grave or by supernatural being or by birds etc. The third section is the meeting of the heroine with the prince. She dances in beautiful clothes several times with the prince. Fourth section is the proof of identity. She is discovered through the slipper test. The last section is the marriage with the prince. (24-25)

The main female character Cinderella is presented as poor, defenceless girl who is abused, humiliated and finally forced to become a servant in her own house. She must obey her stepmother's and stepsisters' commands and take care of the household. She has to do all the drudgery of the house and must sleep but on the hearth among the cinders. She got the name Cinderella because she always looked dusty and ugly as if she had slept in cinders. In short she is literally a maid who is exploited by her stepfamily without any signs of Cinderella's resistance to them, which is a typical feature of submissiveness connected to the main female protagonists in fairy tales.

There is a stereotyping takes place that a girl cannot merit a happy life without being a servant, captured or working very hard, she has to deserve it. Based on the facts stated above, Cinderella has to experience something very bad to be rewarded. More than all she has to be inactive, avoid talking back, at the same time she simply has to wait passively for her rescuer who will certainly come and she will live happily live after as almost every fairy tale guarantees.

Cinderella, at the same time is characterised as an "ever gentle and kind" young lady which is also another typical example of the stereotypes connected to the heroines. She is not only submissive and obedient, but also very good and although her life is very difficult, she does not seem to complain anyone. She helps the animals or other people instead and flies from the reality into her dreams about a happy life, usually with the prince which can mean that the only possibility of being rescued from an inequitable life full of sadness and hopelessness is the prince.

Observing the positive traits of Cinderella, it cannot be doubted that these good characteristics were chosen intentionally. Such typical portrayal of central female

protagonists in fairy tales can be also connected with the reader himself as we usually tend to grow fond of the characters in terms of gender, women who are depicted with good qualities and behaviour and help others. Readers also have an inclination to empathize with poor girls who are treated unfairly or who are abused, such as the heroine of this fairy tale, Cinderella. A good behaviour to a girl is to be good and kind in any case. She can let others hurt her feelings and treat her in a bad and inferior role.

Even though Cinderella is depicted as a very hard working girl, she does not seem to be able to finish the work or tasks without the help of birds such as in Grimm's version. She relies on the pigeons for the help. Furthermore she does not even try to do a task on her own, she calls doves and birds instead: "O gentle doves, and all the birds that be, The lentils that in ashes lie Come and pick up for me! The good must be put in the dish, the bad you may eat if you wish."(Grimm)

Cinderella is dependent on the supernatural things which will make her happier. This is also connected to her characteristics that she seems to be feckless as she is unable to handle with the problems herself. She always needs some assistance or advice which is also strengthens the image of women as helpless and even unwilling to face the problems. Concerning the physical appearance of Cinderella, she is always described as a very beautiful and good looking girl, especially in association with the gorgeous dress she wears at the ball. The most interesting fact is that there is no emphasis on Cinderella's intelligence anywhere which can be understood that attractiveness or the physical beauty is the most important attribute that a woman can possess, and is often an indicator of chances of future happiness. Alice Neikirk in her essay "Happily Ever After or What Fairy Tales Teach Girls About Being Women" points out that "there is a strong correlation between the number of times a book was reproduced and the number of times the appearance of the female lead was stated"(38). The impression here the reader gets is that everything a young lady needs to be finally rescued and live a happy life with her prince. It is her beauty and appearance is relevant and it is not important to be clever as the prince does not care about her intelligence at all.

It is also noticeable that there are very few mentions about the natural beauty of Cinderella, she always becomes very beautiful princess after dressing herself into a gorgeous dress with slippers. This gives the impression that no one concerns whether a girl herself is pretty, she needs to wear a stunning dress, slippers to attract the prince, who would not pay attention to her if she attended the ball in her common dirty clothes. It is surprisingly possible that the prince would not even recognize his future wife without the lost slipper that all women living in a kingdom were supposed to put on. It brings out the picture before the children and especially girls that they should be beautiful otherwise they will never be able to find their heroes who would provide them with all happiness. So all these picturizations definitely leads to a stereotyping of both genders especially the female.

As it was already mentioned above, Cinderella is portrayed as a very good and kind girl, therefore there must be the opposite of her humane, gentle and innocent characteristics, which represents her stepmother and stepsisters. These characters are "beautiful and fair in appearance, but at heart were black and ugly" (Grimm). Not only the appearance is the only contrast to Cinderella, but also a striking difference evident in

the characteristics and demeanour of stepmother and stepsisters. While Cinderella represents the good in general, the stepfamily represents the evil side. Cinderella's stepmother is described as wicked and greedy person who is not concerned with anyone other than herself and her two daughters. She is not interested in others' feelings. She would give beautiful dresses and good food to her daughters but none to her stepdaughter Cinderella.

It seems that within the course of time as well as the film versions the stepmother's cruelty and brutality grows, which can also deepen children's negative impression of women in general especially stepmothers. They find it very difficult to build a relationship with the stepmother as they occupied with the negative and evil qualities associated with the stepmothers in the fairy tales. The stepsisters are depicted as unintelligent and also portrayed as insidious and mean girls who have fondness especially in ridicule, mockery and bringing disgrace on Cinderella. They are also very jealous of Cinderella as they want to marry the prince. However there is no strong reason explained why they long for that so much, and can be interpreted that women are interested in money and wealth and are ready to do anything to gain money. Here the stepsisters are willing even to cut their toes and parts of feet. At the same time such intentional self-inflicted injuries can indicate the fact that the females are greedy and they always compete with each other in order to win wealth and money. Nothing could stop them, not even the family relationships. As Alice Neikirk, in her essay "Happily Ever After or What Fairy Tales Teach Girls About Being Women" writes that "the mutilation of the stepsister's feet also presents the notion that women will go to great lengths in order to undermine each other. This common theme sends a message to girls that they cannot trust one another, a message in approximately 17% of the tales". (39)

The most certain fact is that these female characters serve as the foil of Cinderella and therefore they are portrayed in a completely reverse way than the main character herself. There is a noticeable connection between the beauty and positive traits and between the unattractiveness and negative characteristics. This can be understood that ugly women are source of suspicion. If woman is not charming or attractive, she is automatically considered evil or she must be jealous of more attractive women. Therefore if a young girl wants to be perceived as good, she has to be beautiful at first. The stepmother and stepsisters get the punishment at the end of the tale. They are attacked by birds which peck out their eyes so that "they are condemned to go blind for the rest of their days because of their wickedness and falsehood" (Grimm). Even little children should aware of the consequences of their actions, if you behave good, you will be rewarded but if you behave badly, you will be punished instead. Concerning the gender stereotypes, this implies that a girl who is not obedient and who does not wait passively cannot expect a happy life but a punishment instead. As it has been already suggested in the analysis above, it seems that there can be only one good as well as beautiful female character in the story otherwise readers would not have to sympathize with her.

Conclusion

The tale of Cinderella glorifies passivity, dependency and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues. It also suggests that the very survival of culture and society depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity. The fairy tales present subtle stereotypes that send exact messages about what women meant to society at the time in terms of their roles and the ideas about gendered. The children especially girls who were reading this is crucial in understanding the overall social impact of these tales. In all, each princesses' tale offers a different view as to what a perfect woman should be engaging in, which ultimately would reflect how these texts were understood.

The fairy tales immensely influence in children's developing gender identity. Marica Liberman in her book "Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy tale" explains that:

"Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho- sexual self-concepts and their ideas of what they could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales."(34)

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