

Fairy Tales Offering a Harmonious Platform for the Human and the Nature: An Ecocritical Analysis

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Abstract

Ecocritical analysis offers a platform where the dysfunctional relationship of the human and the nature can find a middle ground. Fairy tales offer an arena to delve into the intricacies of the existence and help one dig out the possibilities to converge the two worlds. The fact of having speaking animals, trees, and birds not only excites the spirit of adventure but evokes empathy for the other. This paper provides an ecocritical analysis of fairy tales as the medium through which a moral lesson can be instilled along with providing practical solutions to the problem of everyday environmental scenario. Decoding the narrative of the fairy tales makes them stand out and show that they have more serious concerns to address regarding nature rather than just being mere child stories. The aim is to give agency to the unspoken so that the human world starts to look at the wild world from a different perspective and not just an object.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Fairy Tales, Human, Nature, Narration

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Introduction

The ability to communicate makes human consider him/herself as superior to the natural kingdom. But in fairy tales, we are provided with a different perspective where the protagonist is seen as communicating with the animal world and most of times, the wild world serves as an ally to the journey of the hero/heroine of the fairy tale. Sometimes, the character dons the garb of the wild in form of leaves or fur. Now the question arises how human can be so insensitive to the nature in the present scenario when the past legends sing of non-human companions of the heroes that served great purpose in their quest? Almost every fairy tale shows a sympathetic attitude towards the animal world. Interestingly, we are told of the marriage of the human and the non-human personas such as in “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Frog King,” “The Little Mermaid,” and “Shrek.”

Grimms’ tale of “Queen Bee” shows that the younger brother only got success in rescuing the little princess because he was kind to the ants, bees, and the ducks throughout the journey in the forest. In the tale of Baba Yaga, the little girl only manages to escape the witch’s hut when she is generous towards the cat and other animals and shares her meat with them. Marie Louise Von Franz highlights this aspect of morality centred on nature in European folk tales and says that the victory of the protagonist is dependent on a “helpful animal or bird” and the central character of the tale will be finished if he/she does not heed the advice of the animal that crosses the path (145). So, wisdom finds a non-human territory in folk tales and the agency to use mind is shown as not just resting with the human kingdom. Although this viewpoint of severing from reality may seem out-dated or irrelevant to the present scenario, but it is also a way out from the mechanical aspects of life and find an alternative solution to this topsy-turvy situation in which we have become insensitive to our environment.

Entering the Imaginary

The element of magic and enchantment finds a huge space in the fairy tales. The imaginary is the driving force of the protagonist’s success. Alice following the white rabbit into the deep burrows leads her to a magical world waiting for her. So, there is a shift from the mechanical Western world into a surrealistic realm that acts as an antithesis to the prevailing dominant order that is insidiously dangerous to both the human world and the wild world. So, the older narrative gives an enchanting and imaginary aspect to the nature as the flora and fauna is not just viewed as the site to be ravished by human forces. The nature is equally participating in the quest of the central character for the truth. The villain is shown as the one harassing the natural forces. So, it is safe to say that ecologists are finding a remedy to the existing ecological crisis in fairy tale narratives. Nanson, an ecologist storyteller, states that “traditional societies perceive the landscape as permeated and animated by a coextensive mythscape of songs, stories, spirits” (140). So, storytelling forms a wedge that unites the human world to the realm of Mother Earth.

Fairy tales show the natural world as animated. The trees and animals have a consciousness and knowledge of their own. The talking elves, fairies, foxes, horses, rabbits, and goblins

exist only because of the fact that the non-human is given the power to have a voice that is as valuable as that of the human species. There is an awareness of the existence of the other that holds value in the cycle of life and not even the protagonist can achieve success without acknowledging that, irrespective of the powers or lineage he/she possesses. Jacques Derrida points out the flaw of not addressing the value of the other in Western philosophy in *The Anima that Therefore I Am* by saying that the animal “has its point of view” (5). Thus, the wild world cannot be side-lined as mere matter that does not deserve any kind of morality. It is well aware of the human’s existence and possesses the power to influence the life of the species. There arises a need to re-evaluate the viewpoint that considers the natural world as a mere materialistic entity and we find the alternative answers in the fairy tale narratives.

Voices of the Wild

Fairy tales do not consider human kingdom as the sole species that will redeem this Earth. It shows human race as the torch bearer lot that will only make through the hardships if each tiny organic entity’s voice is paid attention irrespective of the size or shape. So, the focus is more on communication rather than language per se. Cinderella properly understands the three mice while no one else can know what they utter. In the words of David Abram:

To our indigenous ancestors, and to the many aboriginal peoples that still hold fast to their oral traditions, language is less a human possession than it is a property of the animate earth itself. (170-171)

Thus, oral tradition involves all elements of the planet, and the subsequent transformation of the voice into printed and digital formats, which only human being has the ability to do, has somehow resulted into disregarding the voices of the wild. Hence, the language and its limits should be re-evaluated to rediscover the mind and soul in the matter that is considered non-human. Language is that part of the evolution which differentiates *Homo sapiens* from even its ancestors. This also may be the reason why our ancestors were more sensitive toward the wild world as their way of communication was same as that of the animal world. Mark Pagel, an evolutionary biologist, argues in his TED video titled “How Language Transformed Humanity” that language is the very reason “why our species has prospered around the world while the rest of the animals sit behind bars in zoos, languishing.” So, the fact that animals cannot express themselves like the humans can has resulted into developing a chasm between the human and the animal world. The language of the ancient tribes was all encapsulating. But now, the human has severed from the wholeness of the world. The language is no longer all encapsulating.

Children’s literature provides a hope to see the other in a new light, a dimension where one can “retain the possibility of being different, other or wild” (Payne 301). So, there is a gap in the way we treat nature in the stories and the way we treat it in reality. This gives birth to a dialogue where environment has the centre seat. More than any other time, fairy tales hold relevance for present generation where children are so obsessed with internet that they have no time to consider the enchantment of the wild, and on top of that, oral tradition has disappeared long ago. This might be the reason why 21st century is lacking in sensitivity towards fellow humans, because earlier, oral tradition considered even non-humans as living beings with a voice and soul!

Fairy Tales and Pedagogy

Fairy tales teach that communicating with the wild is not a choice but a necessity. This instills a sense of paying heed to the voice of the other, which can further find new dimensions in form of being considerate of other gender, race, class, or religion. It enriches the perspectives and opens the windows of the mind to new horizons. The wild is as active and alive as us and only yearns to be acknowledged. One classic example of anthropomorphism exalting non-human beings can be found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* where horses referred to as Houyhnhnms are shown as being more intelligent and disciplined as compared to human race. The animal world is shown as having a functionality of higher level than we generally attribute to it. So, the relation is one of understanding rather than mere listening to the words. Although the animal language may be different just like Houyhnhnms, but their world may offer a possibility of mutual support to the human world.

Each single person perceives a tale from a different perspective that is moulded by personal, social, political, ethical, religious, and multiple other factors. In the words of Jack Zipes, fairy tales are a way to “test the limits, test the words of language and test the rules.” In fact, ecocritical analysis of fairy tales must be made a part of the school curriculum so that the young minds can develop sentience towards the world around them and not see a tree or a fish as just objects made to serve the needs of human race, but as beings having feelings and consciousness.

Conclusion

This paper is written with the purpose to instill a sense of enchantment into the mind of the reader regarding the wild world. Almost all the disciplines provide an anthropocentric analysis of the world, which has resulted into side-lining the other. Fairy tales provide a domain where the wild voices find an agency of their own and the creatures are given equal importance as the protagonists in making the story a happily ever after tale. So, there must be a celebration of the relationship between human and nature, rather than considering them as two different territories that are mutually exclusive to each other. Fairy tales and myths provide a place to decode the power structure and provide a prestigious position to every kind of beings from tribal people and dwarfs to ravens, horses, crockery, mice, frog, and what not. Thus, making the other as not an object for human race, but a subject with a voice and role in the working nexus of this world. They find appreciation and acknowledgment in the tale. As human race is struggling to cope with the on-going environmental crisis, fairy tales provide a space to connect and empathize with the other at the same time.

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