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# The Tale Behind the Fairy Tales – A Study on The Disparity in Gender Representations

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“Fairy Tale signifies belief in the supernatural, not the suspension of belief. We all believe in the extra-ordinary of Once Upon a Time. We need to believe. We breathe through our tales”. - Vincenzo di Kastiaux (as cited in "The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture.")

The familiar and traditional fairy tale often seems a storehouse of values and behavior that are culturally acceptable. “In this sense, it forms an imaginary world which reflects the same process of defining differences and distinguishing categories by which we construct and apprehend the world around us. These fairy-tale distinctions may extend from good and evil to rich and poor, to earthly and sublime, to male and female. They form motifs and patterns which surface and resurface, weaving their way in and out of tales, traveling from fireside stories to the gossip of women at the loom, to the songs of workers in the field, to the notebook of the collector. This process of delineating differences becomes as familiar as the process of storytelling itself, and its to pos as recognizable. The tale, moreover, often falls within the guidelines of established social morals and mores. It becomes, if not a pedagogical tool to instill cultural values, and often a means of enforcing the status quo, then certainly the narrative voicing of a society's most pervasive patterns of belief, behavior, and conviction” (Brockleback, 2000). Fairy tales give a way to transcend the inevitable expectations and enables one to

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circumvent the conventional knowledge of the society. They marvellously challenge habitual patterns of thoughts and seek to redefine notions of reality.

When it comes to children, they are thoroughly socialized and conditioned by films, television and stories they hear or read (Lieberman, 1972). Fairy tales have been the most fascinating part of a child's growing up years and children have consumed far more than just the outline of the stories. They learn values, behavioural and associational patterns and consequences of actions. These stories also reveal a picture of roles, behaviour, and psychology and fate according to sex and all this they gather from the princes, princesses, wood cutters, witches, and fairies of their favourite tales. The ending is also very important as the children are always curious to know how things fare in the end (ibid).

Now if we examine these tales we could observe a similar trend in all where the treatment of women have followed a certain pattern which could be an influence to create sexual role concept in the young developing minds and also suggesting shortcomings on a person's endeavours depending on the sex.

The question that arises is that whether these traits have been designated as feminine have roots in biology or in the process of forced acculturation? (Lieberman, 1972). To consider the potential that gender has a cultural character it is required to inspect the primary mechanisms of acculturation. Women all around the world have definitely formed their psycho-sexual self concepts, ideas on what they could achieve and what they could not, and what kind of behaviour is applauded and what kind is frowned upon, from their favourite fairy tales. These stories have always been a treasure chest of imaginations, aspirations and fantasies (ibid).

There are certain patterns that are visible in mostly all tales especially the prominence given to the concept of beauty which also forms the

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primary device in many of the stories. When there is mention of several female characters, it is always the prettiest one who gets chosen for the reward. They might be punished or mistreated at first but ultimately it is always a happy ending.

Children were fed with the idea that beauty was perpetually the girl's most and probably the only valuable asset. Apart from being beautiful the girl also was docile, humble, timid and serene. Hot headedness and ill temperament were signs of ugliness. Most popular examples occur in "Cinderella", Beauty and the Beast", "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" where the singular beautiful daughter noted for gentleness, docious manners, and mellow temperament gets the prize. Heroines in Grimm tales or Disney movies are always pretty, doe eyed, obedient, pleasing temperament, passive and quiet with no defects. These stories encourage intense competition underlined with jealousy and divisiveness among girls and teach that there can be only one winner because there is only one prize (Lieberman, 1972).

A child learns to identify with the concept of beauty from a very tender age which may instil in them ideas that ugly girls are vicious, crafty and conniving and if the child identifies with the plain girls then she may learn to be envious and insecure of pretty girls, beauty being fate endowed; something that cannot be procured (Lieberman, 1972). This imbibed fear is a major source of perturbation, trepidation, deficiency and inferiority among women. Girls may be inclined to believe that there is a connection between a charming face and an attractive character and unpleasant face and an appalling character. The heroines are always chosen for their beauty and their existence is passive; waiting to be selected for the reward which is always in the form of a handsome prince rescuing them from their cruel lives. Marriage forever seems to be the focal point of all stories and the courtship the most significant and exciting part of a girl's life. When fairy tales are concluded with marriage and the vague

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statement that “they lived happily ever after”, children develop a yearning to be courted, since marriage is the end of the story (ibid).

The feminist fairy tale debates in the 1970s led to the conclusion that fairy tales did have an impact on the lives and dreams of women as well as profoundly induced romance and fantasy in their daily lives.

As Jack Zipes puts in, “These classical fairy tales reinforced the patriarchal symbolic order - one based on ossified concepts of gender behavior”. Feminist theorists as well as cultural critics have given much stress on the contorted and falsified portrayal of women presented by these tales. They have been deeply saddened by the inimical gender expectations they promote and have been quite contributory in bringing to attention the cultural ramifications of these tales which performs the task of infusing roles and behavior patterns. As Brocklebank quotes Marcia K. Lieberman, “According to the standards of gender behavior delineated within canonical tales such as "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Snow White," passivity, victimization, feminine charm, and physical beauty are the necessary precursors to marriage and fortune”. For, as Ruth B. Bottigheimer remarks, the discursive pattern of such tales “produce functionally silent heroines”.

In the 1970s when there was a raging feminist fairy tale debate going on, everyone confirmed that these tales did have an impact on women’s lives, hopes and aspirations, extending amorous ideas and influencing their fantasies and sub conscious minds. “Even Alison Lurie, who sparked the debates with her 1970 article "Fairy Tale Liberation," assumed a fairly direct relationship between women's lives and the tales they read or were fed” (Harries,2000). Feminist literary critics complained that in the most celebrated fairy tales like "Cinderella" and "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty," the heroines were portrayed as passive, unresisting, unassertive waiting for their prince to arrive and save them. “As the earliest feminist critics of fairy tales all agreed, women in the best-known tales were either beautiful,

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slumbering young girls or powerful, usually wicked and grotesque older women. Though there might be a muted tradition of tales in which women were admirable, active, clever, and self-assertive participants, the dominant tradition prescribed harmful roles for women that little girls could not help but imitate. Rather than design a life for themselves, the women "in thrall" to fairy-tale patterns wait for male rescue, or at least for something to happen. They half-consciously submit to being male property, handed from father to suitor or husband without complaint or volition" (Harries, 2000).

Early feminist critics were mainly perturbed with the female representation and its effects of these representations on gender identity and behaviour of children. Throughout the 1970s, these ideas were found in writings by American feminists who did the job of identifying such delusional socio-cultural myths and deceptive mechanisms that favoured oppression upon women. "In 1974, for example, Andrea Dworkin's *Woman Hating* echoed Lieberman's thesis by asserting that fairy tales shape our cultural values and understanding of gender roles by invariably depicting women as wicked, beautiful, and passive, while portraying men, in absolute contrast, as good, active, and heroic. Similarly, Susan Brownmiller, in the course of her 1975 book, *Against Our Will : Men, Women and Rape*, offered the tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" as a parable of rape and argued that fairy tales - particularly classic tales like "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Snow White" - train women to be rape victims. And in 1978, Mary Daly began the first chapter of *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* by pointing to the fairy tale as a carrier of the toxic patriarchal myths that are used to deceive women" (Hasse, 2000).

By the end of the 70s, these issues regarding the relationship of fairy tales to societal values and construction of gender identity gave way to more complex approaches. In the year 1979, Karen E. Rowe, an American literary critic asserted the importance of women forming

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attitudes towards themselves, men, marriage and society. She remarked that even adult women were affected by the romantic paradigms of these tales and extracted the utopian ideals from the fables to fit into their “real” lives.

There were also feminist-oriented Grimm scholars who identified how the Grimms had constructed tales as to reflect the socio-cultural values of the prevailing times. Jack David Zipes, an American professor, in his essay "Who's Afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and Politi [ci] zation through Fairy Tales", compared different versions of Grimm's tales to expose how the Grimm brothers had revised stories to advocate patriarchal bourgeois values as part of the socialization process. This analysis was imbibed into Zipes's *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 1983. He probed that the fairy tale discourse was actually planned to act as a socialization agent for children especially to promote gender specific identity and behaviour.

Feminist writers like Andrea Dworkin, Kay Stone and Ruth Bottigheimer have all proposed that the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, The Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen have ascribed gender specific roles to girls and boys where femininity is marked by passiveness and masculinity as being active. So at the time when Grimms' tales were firmly rooted in German culture, 'Kaffeterkreis', an exclusive female literary salon, was established in Berlin as a response to exclusive male literary lobby and its members started working on breaking open the traditional framework lined in the tales. It was perceived that in the tales the females were “passive, silent, industrious, and rewarded with riches and a man to support them, while male models were destined to seek out adventure and take as their reward passive, silent, industrious females. Kaffeter fairy tales reversed these roles and presented heroines who found happiness in being educated and single rather than married and brain dead” (Teverson, 1999).

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In the tale “Beauty and the Beast, the heroine is beautiful, morally sound, benevolent, and rehearsed to sacrifice self when mentioned about the deal made by her father with the Beast. She even loves and pardons her cruel sister displaying her martyr qualities. The message that a woman always must be inclined to adjust herself even if that means reconciling herself to a beast to better her father’s financial standing is entrenched in all the versions.

Apart from Beauty, whose vulnerability and her submission to the Prince who comes to her rescue is the key feature to feminist scholars, female passivity can also be seen in the tales of Sleeping Beauty who lies asleep waiting for her Prince to wake her up. Karen Rowe, an American literary critic, explains vividly on the social effects of passivity of females in fairy tales, noting, "These tales which glorify 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" (Lash, 2008).

These fascinating fairy tales originated from a variety of tiny tales thousands of years ago that were freely flowing in the world existing in unique ways under divergent environmental conditions. “The form and contents of the fairy tale were not exactly what they are today, for as a simple, imaginative oral tale that contained magical and miraculous elements and was related to the belief systems, values, rites, and experiences of pagan peoples, the fairy tale, also known as the wonder or magic tale, underwent numerous transformations before the invention of print led to the production of fixed texts and conventions of telling and reading” (Lash, 2008). Though print did not really help the fairy tales to settle and they continued to refashion and alter throughout the world by word of mouth. It was now shaped by both print and orality and many other technological innovations such as photography, painting, radio, film, Internet, etc.

“The fairy story affords the folklorist a very fruitful field for inquiry,

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containing as it does a series of cultural layers. There is first the most primitive period, traces of which we find in the primitive customs and beliefs alluded to in the tale: such things as marriage customs, kingly state, the practice of cannibalism, helpful and talking animals, magical transformations, monsters, protracted sleep, separable soul, animism, the renewal of life, sorcery and taboo—a long list” (James, 1945).

We notice that right at the time of puberty Rapunzel is locked up in a tower, Snow White is sent out to be murdered, and Sleeping Beauty is in deep slumber, which unveils the fact that their freedom is severely chained down when in fact the young heroes of the tales are exhibiting full independence and increased power. Restrictions on girls at puberty contrasting with the freedom their brothers enjoy, is the reason why women have such a sympathetic reaction to the passivity of the heroines in the fairy tales. “In the specific tales mentioned, this restriction reflects anxiety about competition with other women that increased sexuality offers. It might also be seen as a protection for the heroine herself, who must remain pure for the one man who will eventually claim her. The restriction of women at puberty can also be interpreted as a reaction of men to the threat of female sexuality” (Stone, 1975).

The content of mass media is said to exert influence on their audience. To achieve their objectives they reflect the culture they are a part of as well as reflect its reality and needs. Thus, men are always projected as more powerful and vigorous than women, more intelligent, more logical and less emotional. Ideally the man should be more aggressive and less flexible while the woman should be submissive and who can easily adjust. “Men know their own minds and are less under the influence of emotions, less suggestible” (Saenger, 1995).

Starting from oral to literary, tales were always written to silence the voice of females and this was further cemented when these were

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made into films. Brocklebank (2000) cites Jack Zipes ("Breaking the Disney Spell" 27) and explains that "the second significant movement in the institutionalization of the fairy-tale genre was the shift to film, for visual images now imposed themselves on the text, creating their own separate textual meaning". Walt Disney Productions has had its supremacy over fairy tale films and has been quite influential in promoting gendered images. Animated feature films like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty are most sharply criticized by scholars in children's literature as they star all passive heroines and female villains and these films have further promoted the already sexist stereotype of womanhood within the verbal texts and strengthened its position as a purveyor of social pedagogy and ideology.

Walt Disney kept the fairy tale genre alive as well as became quite influential in keeping the gendered images intact. In 1937, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs released and his representation of the victimized yet contented princess keeping domestic order in a tiny house and crooning "someday my prince will come" became exceedingly popular topping the charts of all times. This cinematic representation of femininity not only restricted to children but Snow White became a model which real women identified with.

Cinderella, Disney's first full length feature film, released in 1950 and this too echoed the success of Snow White. The movie again had a charming heroine and a scheming and villainous stepmother, again reflecting and influencing gender roles of the time. "Disney's stepsisters could never have cut a fine figure anywhere. They are purposely grotesque to heighten the drama. They are lazy, nasty creatures whose main purpose in life seems to be to argue among themselves. While they are not as frightening as the wicked queen in Snow White, they are equally repulsive" (May, 1981). The makers wanted Cinderella to be a universal model so that any woman could relate to and identify with her.

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1989 saw the release of *The Little Mermaid* and the makers proudly displayed their updated their traditional gender portrayal by creating a feisty and spunky heroine, Ariel. Film critic Roger Ebert lauded Disney for their depiction of "a fully realized female character that thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously, instead of hanging around passively while the fates decide her destiny".

After *The Little Mermaid*, Walt Disney Pictures released *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991. Linda Woolverton, the scriptwriter for *Beauty and the Beast*, offers the following explanation for her conception of Belle: "You have to consider what kids are like now in terms of sophistication, you have to make sure that your themes are strong, that people can relate to the characters, that the story isn't sexist. Belle is a strong, smart, courageous woman. She sacrifices herself for her father. There are great themes of passionate love in the story, almost operatic themes. She's a Disney heroine who reads books. It excites me. We've never seen that before" (Brocklebank, 2000).

Though Ariel and Belle deviated from the gender stereotypes by following their unconventional desires, yet in the end they do confirm to the culmination of marriage. In fact, Ariel's upward mobility costs her voice and identity and Belle sacrifices her hopes of adventure to a restrained domestic life. In this context of children's culture medium, thus, we see that these characters enjoy a prominent place in the "constituents of contemporary children's subjectivities, encouraging and spreading strict standards of femininity and masculinity", (Odinino, 2016).

Fairytales has revealed a vantage point from which one could understand the world of women, understand the world of men as well as understand the interrelationship between the two worlds. These tales have been maneuvered through social, political and educational lanes and we often feel the need to abstract a moral from them, be it repressive or emancipatory. It also depends on the minds of the readers who show their responsiveness or unresponsiveness to the

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contents of the book. This is explained by the theory of Cultural Lag which helps in reflecting change in the patterns of the mindset of the society of that particular time. Change in children's books is unhurried and displays established values and attitudes of the general mass.

A deep understanding is required to comprehend the complex cultural patterns, coding and personal insights imbibed in the structure and language of these tales. Today there may be greater acceptance of girls in active roles and stories can easily incorporate female characters as more bold, adventurous and dynamic. Female characters have definitely undergone cultural changes but still subtle differences in gender are visible even today, in the culture of consumption.

There exists a controversy about what is biologically conditioned and what is learned. Questions like is passivity biologically imbibed in women; or is it affected by culture; do they reflect female characteristics or do they serve as training manuals for young girls; do the 'rewards' reflect societal values or are they inherent in nature. There is a chance that the traditional features of femininity found in these stories are actually stamped in the minds of the children and are reinforced by the stories themselves.

So what we can do is we balance the beloved old fashioned classical tales that clearly defines our childhood with stories that even things up a bit and reflects the current position of women in the world.

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