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The Portrayal of Women in the Fairy Tales

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Abstract: The article explores the wondrous fairy tales that have emanated from a wide variety of tiny tales having undergone numerous transformations by political and social forces over time. The prominence of feminine beauty ideal and the ways in which beauty is presented in these tales have been beautifully dealt with and also the link between beauty and goodness and between ugliness and evil are reflected through the various tales.

Keywords: *Oral Folklore, feminine beauty, innocent, beautiful, stepmothers.*

Fairy tales are also referred to as wonder or magic tales having originated from a wide variety of tiny tales, perhaps thousands of years ago. They were related to beliefs, rites, values and experiences of pagan people. However, with the passage of time, the fairy tales have undergone great changes and have become diffused in their nature and spirit. A beautiful definition of the term has been given by the critic Donald Haase "For some, the term denotes a specific narrative form easily identified characteristics but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of other forms may be grouped". (1:322)

Fairy tales are important pieces of children's literature that have had a lasting impact on our society. It was for the first time that the term fairy tale was coined by Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy in 1697, when she published her first collection of tales. d'Aulnoy's fairy tales celebrate the beauty, generosity, eternal youth and true love of the fairies. In a way her stories marked the 'modernist' recreation of oral folklore. 'The Green Serpent', 'The Ram', 'Cupid and Psyche' are some of the major stories of

d'Aulnoy. It is observed that though d'Aulnoy's fairy tales take place in some unknown realm and indefinite time, they encompassed the contemporary social and political condition in her own time. In 1750, the term 'fairy tale' was brought into English usage and thereafter the fairy tales have grown immensely in significance and has become more widespread and complex. In recent times, the Disney Corporation has commercialized fairy tales through its film series of "Fairies". In the area of fairy tales experiments are also being carried out in literature, opera, theater, film, TV and the internet.

Women figure prominently in the narrative of fairy tales. If we recall Grimm's fairy tales, we think of figures such as Snow White, Rapunzel, Red Riding Hood, Cinderella as well as countless evil stepmothers and witches. If on the one hand, the women in the fairy tales are evil like the witches or stepmothers who usually die in the end; on the other they are innocent, beautiful and virtuous. The good maiden rides off with a prince, who saves her from misery and she marries him to become the princess in his castle with the joyous consensus of the King and the Queen. In fairy

tales, we meet with a variety of female characters. There are examples, girls in fairy tales who are brave and witty, such as Gretel, who exhibits common sense and kills the evil witches. The Grimm's "Marienkind" portrays a disobedient young girl who stubbornly denies that she has peered through a forbidden door. She does not speak the truth, even when punished with the loss of her three children; it is only when she faces a horrible death at the stake that she admits her fault and her life is spared.

Although many female characters in fairy tales are passive figures, such as Snow White, there are others who challenge the passivity by their transformative power of speech. In 'Rapunzel', 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Scheherazade', the female protagonists are not passive or silent. They are women who begin as objects of desire, but who strive to find their voice and through means of speech transform their social ambitions. The best example of such a fairy tale character who transforms her life by storytelling is the protagonist of the 'The Robber Bridegroom'. The fairy tale begins with the Miller's decision to have his daughter marry a man who appears to be someone of wealth and status but turns out to be the head of an evil band of robbers who butchers young women. From the beginning of her acquaintance with the man, the bride to be senses that the man is not to be trusted and puts off his invitation to visit his house in the forest, but eventually she can no longer be able to put him off. When she arrives at his house in the forest, she manages to hide and witnesses her fiancé and his gangs of cutthroats poison a young girl and chop her to pieces. One of the ring-fingers of the woman with the wedding ring still on it falls within the reach of the Miller's daughter and she takes it along. After the robbers have finished their butchering and fallen into drunken stupor, the Miller's daughter makes her escape with the ring-finger as evidence to present to her father. It is at this point of the story that we witness the power and appeal of storytelling by women in the patriarchal society. Instead of making a direct charge against the robber bridegroom, the Miller's daughter presents her testimony in the guise of a recounted dream at

a feast to which the robber has been invited. 'The Robber Bridegroom' exemplifies both the ways in which patriarchal societies attempt to subjugate and silence woman and the way in which women have turned to storytelling to overcome the subjugation. By telling a dream like story on the wedding day, she lets the guests realize the truth and gets the robber arrested. In *Rapunzel*, the girl in the beginning of the tale is less a character than a head of hair, but by the end of the tale, after she has lost her hair and finds her voice, through which she finds the way to freedom. The two examples show how female use voice as weapons to fight challenges. Women's speech inside and outside of the fairy tales indicate women's predicament of being oppressed by the dominant power and their urge to speak out. In her reflection upon the tale, Porter focuses on the process of how the Prince is attracted to *Rapunzel*. She indicates that it is Rapunzel's voice that brings the prince to her and it is the beauty of her soul that makes him excited and eager to ascend the tower. It was *Rapunzel*, who used to kill her solitude by letting her sweet voice resound in the forest, even after the witch separated the couple and would not let them see each other. When the Prince hears the voice that he thought sounded familiar, he went straight towards it, and when he reached her, Rapunzel recognized him. Porter connects the process of finding the beautiful future with the female character's inner voice and thus she finds that voice has strength to make things better.

Ambitious women in the fairy tales are always portrayed as evil from within, ugly and scheming, wielding over other women and men. As for example, the stepmother in Snow White, the evil stepmother in Cinderella, and the stepmother of Hansel and Gretel who left the children in the forest. The stepmothers in fairy tales bear negative and repulsive traits, such as vanity, jealousy and pride. Combined with these traits are their knowledge of magic and sorcery. One can imagine the witch locking herself away in some remote, dark room of the castle, casting spells and mixing lethal positions. Despite her knowledge of the supernatural, her beauty is a fading one.

Fairy tales embody the ways that societies attempted to silence and oppress women making them passive. Much of the fairy tale literature reinforces the idea that women should be wives and mothers, submissive and self-sacrificing. Good women in stories are to be silent passive, without ambition, beautiful and eager to marry. In Snow White, the dwarfs make sure that Snow White can cook, wash and clean the house. They also make the condition that the girl should not go out of the house or entertain everyone. Snow White is so innocent that she is deprived of developing an independent self. She is unable to defeat the stepmother's evil plans. Thus she is the perfect image of innocence, virtuous beauty and youth. Out of fear for her life, she flees from her evil stepmother but the hunter she encounters in the forest spares her and lets her flee into the forest. Her life is again saved this time by seven dwarfs. The dwarfs, also, men are clear about the conditions under which Snow White is allowed to stay with them. She fulfills all the duties like a good housewife and has only one flaw. Her naiveté and curiosity compel her to open the door and let the evil witch in, despite the fact that wise dwarfs have warned her to be careful. Besides Snow White there are many other examples like Cinderella who strictly fulfills the female duties around the house, even though she is abused by her stepmother and sisters. She does not choose to stand against them; instead she endures her situation until a princess rescues her. Cinderella possesses all the admirable qualities to be wooed by the princes; works for the house and bears everything with silence.

Embedded in these tales are warnings to little girls of what will befall upon them should they choose to exhibit non-female traits. As for instance, in *Rapunzel*, the girl sings, attracts the prince and all troubles befall her. Red Riding Hood is the best example of an innocent young girl becoming the victim of a wolf once she leaves her familiar home. She is confident, fearless and travels in the forest alone to reach her grandmother's place. She has absolutely no idea of 'evil' associated with the wolf and her learning experience is a painful one.

In the fairy tales, passivity is the most valued and honored attribute a woman can possess in life. It is not the female who can save herself from harm or an undesirable situation; it is the male that must save her. *The Sleeping Beauty* sleeps for nearly hundred years only to be awakened to life by the restoring kiss of the Prince charming. Cinderella is saved from her miserable existence through the help of the prince. Likewise in *The Mermaid who could not swim* Melin the mermaid learns to swim to the depths of the sea only by the young Spedwin. Young women are often described as beautiful, pretty or fair than older women. Beauty is highly revered in fairy tales being associated with intelligence, ability, kindness, worthiness and morality and this can be well perceived from the Grimms fairy tales. In "The Pink Flower" a maiden is described as "so beautiful that no painter could ever have made her look more beautiful". (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 286). In "*The Goose Girl at the spring*" a young woman is said to be "so beautiful that the entire world considered her a miracle" (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 566).

Often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness and between ugliness and evil. This is best evidenced in '*Mother Holle*'. (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 96). Beautiful young maidens are virtuous and marry handsome, powerful and wealthy princes, while their ugly step-sisters perish due to their evil doings. The best example is the fairy tale of *Cinderella* where she is the epitome of all virtues, and these factors attract the prince to her. *Snow White* is described as fair with eyes of the color of the sea and hair as golden as the sun. The irresistible beauty of the maiden makes the prince overjoyous and happy and he proposes her to marry him and come with him to the father's kingdom. In *The Sleeping Beauty*, the King's beautiful daughter Rose is bestowed with beauty, sweet voice, kindness, health, grace and other womanly qualities that make the handsome prince dazed because he feels that he has never seen anyone so beautiful and he misses her. Goodness and Beauty are also associated with industriousness. They are always rewarded in the long run. The best example is Cinderella where she finally marries the handsome prince despite

the ordeals and hazards faced by her. The image of 'beauty' moves the story forward with moral overtones that can be conveyed to the readers. It has also been observed that several of the tales have been popular and have been reproduced like 'Cinderella' and 'Snow White' which represent feminine beauty.

Although beauty is often rewarded but at times it is also a source of danger. In 'All Fur' the princess described in the tale is "so beautiful that her equal could not be found anywhere on earth" (G&G 1992, 258). She was forced to run away from the castle because her father fell passionately in love with her and said to his councilors' that he is going to marry his daughter (G&G 1992, 260). There are at times links between beauty and jealousy among female characters. In the 'Snow White' the murderous action taken by the stepmother reminds readers of the symbolic lengths some women go to maintain or acquire beauty. In 'Cinderella' the jealousy between Cinderella and the step sisters is stretched to such an extent that the girl goes through hell.

Fairy tales have portrayed woman in her different aspects: admirable and abominable. The underlying messages in these stories convey the praise and adulation of 'Female' beauty not only externally but also internally. However critics like Jack Zipes and Barbara G. Walker have commented on the traditional sexist roles women have played in fairy tales. At a time when men and women are viewed as equals by much of the population, it is crucial that the stories children are exposed to reflect the variety of paths offered to them in real life. Thus, it is important for female to be portrayed in different roles than what were viewed as 'traditional'. These other roles may include business women, single, warrior, widows to reflect the options that females have in front of them today.

Thus, fairy tales are important pieces of children's literature that have had a lasting impact on our society. The classic tales have been retold through many generations and nowadays have been transformed into major film productions treasured by not only children but by people of all

ages. Fairy tales are beginning to recognize the change in societal values, being evolved and morphed to mirror the current society and their present day values. The roles of women are already changing in today's culture. Disney fairytales films namely *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* portray females in a more positive light. They possess more freedom to make choices and more changes in their lives as they pursue their highly articulated dreams. Thus Disney has recently developed tales such as *Mulan*, where there is a female heroine challenging the prejudices her country currently has. In her Chinese culture women are not permitted to join the army and fight alongside the men. Nevertheless, she does, and in the end is given many accolades for her accomplishments. Her grandfather praises her bravery and is even proud of her disobedience. Such a drastic change in the structure of fairy tales shows how culture can change for the better. Hence, society must make an effort to accept the change of societal values and reflect these changes in its modern works of art. In doing so the traditional presentation of the female gender as exhibited in Fairy tales may be interpreted from new angles.

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