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The Making of Masculinity: Readings on the Male Stereotypes in *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally categorized under the genre of folk tales, Fairy tales have over the years been shifted from folktales to its own unique genre with the development of literary fairy tales. It is still a matter of controversy whether fairy tales can be included under the genre of children's literature considering its immense popularity among children. The morals or ethic values conveyed by the fairy tales have led them to be recommended as bedtime stories and found a place for them at school libraries as well. But the question is whether these tales really convey morals or is there something else implicated within them which shape notions of gender in vulnerable, young minds. The

pattern of enchantment and disenchantment of these tales seem so conventional and common that we do not question the implications. So it is worth analyzing how the gender stereotypical concepts are weaved into such tales that implicitly set standards of behaviour and attributes for young boys who obviously admire and yearn to be like the Royal figures.

KEYWORDS

gender, stereotypes, masculinity, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty

RESEARCH PAPER

Traditionally categorized under the genre of folk tales, Fairy tales have over the years been shifted from folktales to its own unique genre with the development of literary fairy tales. It is still a matter of controversy whether fairy tales can be included under the genre of children's literature considering its immense popularity among children. The morals or ethic values conveyed by the fairy tales have led them to be recommended as bedtime stories and found a place for them at school libraries as well. But the question is whether these tales really convey morals or is there something else implicated within them which shape notions of gender in vulnerable, young minds. The pattern of enchantment and disenchantment of these tales seem so conventional and common that we do not question the implications. So it is worth analyzing how the gender stereotypical concepts are weaved into such taleslike Perrault's *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*.

Femininity has long been understood by theorists largely as a social construction. But on the other hand, masculinity has undergone less scrutiny and is therefore often unquestioned, and considered as something common or usual, and a continued focus on the female gender as primary subject for the study of gender in children's literature is an unhealthy practice which would lead to perpetuating the idea that girls are constructed while boys are just naturally boys. Hence we find most scholars in the field of masculinity studies echoing Simone de Beauvoir in varying degrees by claiming that men "are made, not born". Feminism itself never excludes studies and analysis of hegemonic masculinity which damages boys and men as much as it damages girls and women. "The current fixation on boys is also clearly a reaction to recent progress

feminists have made and our hopes or uncertainties about the future direction of accepted gender roles..." (Wannamaker 5).

In fact, feminists gain from studies on hegemonic masculinity as it persuades more men and boys to accept versions of masculinity that are not based on the oppression of women or showcasing of the so-called masculine traits. Therefore, it isn't feminism that suffocates and pressurizes men, but patriarchy which puts too much pressure on boys and men to be unemotional, tough or in other words, non-feminine. This pressure is often met by male gender by conforming at the stake of their emotional well-being. This study takes into account liberal feminists who consider the welfare and education of boys as equally important as girls. But there are other non -liberal feminists who are less concerned about boys' welfare as "Attempts to raise the issue of boys' difficulties are often received skeptically by many feminists who have worked so hard to expose the bias against girls". (Wannamaker 5)

One of the major aims of masculinity studies is to create a general awareness that masculinity is to an extent created by the society and hence alterable. However, to say that gender is entirely constructed by society and culture is just as deterministic as claiming that gender, is entirely shaped by biology. And if masculinity was a natural result of biology, "…boys would not need to police gendered behaviors of themselves and their peers on the playground, and boys and men would not need to continuously prove that they are not feminine." (Wannamaker 128)

While female characters in fairy tales like Perrault's *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* are judged by their physical appearance, male characters are judged based on their actions. However, understanding and foregrounding the way masculinity functions in popular children's literature are vital to discourage portrayal of stereotypical gender roles as "The books we claim will most benefit our boys are those books that reinforce whichever version of masculinity we most value" (Wannamaker 4)And this would gradually lead to the birth of 'handicapped' men in the society. For such boys, expressing emotions or being seen as sensitive is really complicated and undesirable as Wannamaker mentions in "Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture", "Dominant constructions of masculinity that require boys to be stoic and unemotional damage boys' emotional health" (2).

Male gender stereotypes are obviously coded as just the opposite of the female stereotypes. Male stereotypes therefore include independence, aggression, insensitive,

confidence and sexual assertion as opposed to female stereotypes. Stereotypical depiction of male characters in fairy tales like Perrault's *Cinderella, The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* and the Grimm Brothers *Snow White* as brave, adventurous, domineering, confident young men who are in constant search for "beautiful" women constrain boys and do not allow them the broad range of emotions that they deserve or even ways of expressing them freely.

Children's literature thus indirectly establish strict rules about how the male as well as female sex should behave, rules which both genders genuinely fear breaking. The male protagonists in such popular fairy tales and juvenile literature also tend to be chosen from the upper class, mostly fair, charming Royal members: "Gay boys, poor boys, and minority boys are often invisible in popular texts or, worse, are presented as the Other against which a protagonist's subjectivity is defined" (Wannamaker 8).And as Wannamaker points out, "This doesn't mean, however, that white, middle class, heterosexual boys are the only ones reading, viewing, and consuming these texts or being affected by them" (9). The Prince of a fairy tale is always right and always wins by the end of the tale. Even when some of their actions may be assigned as controversial, they are never portrayed as the wrongdoers. And these flawless male heroes have neither virtues nor vices, making them one dimensional, literally emotionless character. When compared to female characters, at least female stereotypes have either virtues of some kind or major flaws and they are never devoid of emotion.

In Perrault's *Cinderella,* the Prince falls in love with beautiful Cinderella at first sight. He spends the entire night dancing away with her ignoring all the other maidens at the ball. The next night also "the King's son was always by her, and never ceased his compliments and kind speeches to her" (3). Cinderella however runs off as the clock strikes twelve. Here, we find the Prince simply waiting for the woman he apparently loves and when Cinderella runs off from the ball at midnight, he doesn't run behind her or try to find her himself with the help of the glass slipper. Instead he orders others to take the glass slipper and find her. This is probably a natural course of events as he is a Prince after all and always has servants to do his menial jobs, but it is still odd that the Prince does literally nothing by himself.

The Prince never sees Cinderella in her rags and he does not choose her as his bride to rescue her from her deprived condition, rather because he is charmed and dumb-struck by her beauty. And yet this one- dimensional character is presented as the prize at the

end of a difficult race. The male protagonist in Cinderella is thus depicted as the savior as in other fairy tales like Grimm Brother's *Snow White* and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* despite the fact that most of the worthy efforts were made by the female protagonists through their virtues. Is the male protagonist then an apt or worthy role model for young boys?

Perrault has also made it a point to describe Cinderella's beauty by describing her as a "charming, pretty girl" who "danced gracefully" and "showed a thousand civilities" to her step sisters thus instilling into young boys' minds that feminine beauty is confined to such superficial qualities. This issue is practically even worse and more evident in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* as the princess in this tale is picturized as "an angel, so fair was she to behold" whose "cheeks were delicately flushed, her lips like coral". This sort of description of physical beauty generates two possible issues. One, there is an indirect encouragement of general preoccupation with physical appearances which also includes an emphasis on materialism and neglect of individual personality traits. Secondly, is Perrault implying that only fair women who have rosy-red lips are beautiful? This seems to be the impression made upon any reader and thus boys develop their idea on feminine beauty from such tales at a very young age. Unfortunately the idea that they develop on feminine beauty from these fairy tales is of 'fair' women and this impression automatically makes 'dark' women be categorized as ugly.

Perrault seems to have given all men liberty to gaze at women including the old King, "The king himself, old as he was, could not help watching her, and telling the queen softly that it was a long time since he had seen so beautiful and lovely a creature." (*Cinderella,* 2). It's not just liberty to gaze at women, but the tale also instills into boys mind that beauty is the most important quality in any woman and beauty is what is to be admired and respected the most, "The King's son led her to the most honourable seat, and afterwards took her out to dance with him. She danced so very gracefully that they all more and more admired her. " (*Cinderella,* 4)

The Prince in Disney's animated movie of *Cinderella* (1950) is just like the Princes in the various versions of Cinderella- unemotional, yet handsome and rich which makes him the most eligible bachelor in the Kingdom. His role is shorter than any other character in the movie just as in Perrault's version of the story. And still he is clearly the main Hero of the story who apparently brings about the happy ending to beautiful Cinderella's life.

The passive, submissive and pathetic depictions of female characters also affect boys as they are not provided with strong female role models through them. It is equally important for them to read tales with female protagonists rather than male heroes who lead female protagonists into a happy life through marriage, and practically nothing else. Tales with female protagonists would probably encourage boys to accept women in leading roles in their life, while otherwise they may find it unusual and unacceptable.

Apart from the fact that the male protagonist in the tale is overly obsessed with beauty and is also portrayed as the rescuer in the story although he literally does nothing except marrying the beautiful Cinderella, he possess no other positive quality or emotion. Male emotions are thus simplified to merely love and that too only for "fair" women whose "cheeks are delicately flushed" and have "lips like coral". The Prince in *Cinderella* is literally jobless and his only task seems to be to choose a fair and beautiful woman to marry, which he does accomplish a bit too easily. Similarly in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, the Prince is portrayed as weak and submissive before the "radiant beauty" of the Princess; "Trembling in his admiration he drew near and went on his knees beside her" (*Sleeping Beauty*, 4). And charmed by her beauty and the words she spoke, he was wonder struck, "The Prince scarcely knew how to express his delight and gratification. He declared that he loved her better than he loved himself. His words were faltering, but they pleased the more for that." (*Sleeping Beauty*, 5)

Again boys are given the impression that they can easily charm and possess any woman whom they take a fascination about. Rejection by women or fate is completely missing in these fairy tales, thus leading boys to grow into vain. Weak-willedmen would probably be shocked by such rejections in the real world. The Prince in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, however, is more active than the Prince in *Cinderella*. He merely hears about a tale of hidden castle with a princess sleeping inside and he immediately feels that he is all set for the adventure, for a Prince ought to be "young and gallant" in Perrault's words. He bravely cuts through great trees, bushes and brambles to reach the hidden castle. Upon entering, "...everything he saw might have frozen the most fearless person with horror. There reigned all over a most frightful silence; the image of death everywhere showed itself." (*Sleeping Beauty*, 4)

But the so-called "brave" Prince pushes on and finds a resplendent beauty, who awakes at his arrival. He immediately declares his undying love for her and marries the very same day in the "castle chapel" without knowing how the Princess behaves, what her

personal attributes are or even how she came into such a state of sleep for so many years. He is however portrayed as a brave, passionate and gallant young man who easily believes tales told by others and thus ends up finding the beauty of his dreams.

The Prince, however, does not embark upon the adventure to rescue the beautiful Princess from her pathetic sleep or to liberate her from the evil spell of the wicked fairy, but he was "impelled alike by the wish for love and glory". Perrault sets ineffective, hegemonic standards for Royalty through the representation of the Prince in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*: "A young and gallant Prince is always brave..." (*Sleeping Beauty,* 3) Thus, we find the tale implicitly setting standards of behaviour and attributes for young boys who obviously admire and yearn to be like Princes. The choosing of Royal members like the Princess, Prince, King, Queen etc is to be noted as Royalty, and is always looked upon with admiration, respect and naturally, imitated by young children. Then, what about those children who do not feel as brave as the Princes? Many boys may be much happy in doing household chores than going about like Don Quixote. But even these boys are tuned to believe that they have more of feminine traits than the so called masculine traits set by such fairy tales and other genres of literature as well.

Perrault successfully establishes male domination right from the beginning of *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*: "By the King's orders, a place was laid for her...", and "The King in an attempt to avert the unhappy doom pronounced by the old fairy, at once published an edict forbidding all persons, under pain of death, to use a spinning wheel or keep a spindle in the house" (*Sleeping Beauty* 2). In this case, the Queen is automatically pushed to the back seat and given only secondary importance as it is evident through the above quotes that it is the King who makes all the important decisions. The Queen is thus erased from most scenes of significance.

However, in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, the Prince hides his marriage with the Princess from his mother. Despite the morals embedded in such fairy tales, boys are probably encouraged to disregard and hide important information of their lives from their mothers. And he does this only because she is an Ogre, a decision built merely on a prejudice. But as soon as he gains power as King of the country, he decides to reveal his marriage in front of the citizens and his mother, only because of the change in his power:

But at the end of two years the King died, and the prince found himself on the throne. He then made public announcement of his marriage, and went in state to fetch his Royal consort from her castle. With her two children beside her, she made a triumphal entry into the capital of her husband's realm." (*Sleeping Beauty*, 5)

Motherhood is thus degraded in most of these fairy tales and simultaneously young boys are indirectly encouraged to disregard and neglect their own mothers. And despite his distrust in his ogress mother, he puts her in charge after bringing his wife and children, when he leaves on a journey. The Prince even attempts to murder his own mother. This is definitely not a moral value to be injected into a child. And when the Prince's mother finally commits suicide by throwing herself into the vat or tub prepared for the Prince's wife and children, "The Prince could not but be very sorry, for she was his mother; but he soon comforted himself with his beautiful wife, and his pretty children." (*Sleeping Beauty*, 6)

Is a "beautiful" wife and "pretty" children all that a person needs to comfort him and relieve him from the death of his own mother? The unnecessary importance laid on the attribute of beauty here, again injects wrong impressions into young boys, who by reading such fairy tales would probably grow into individuals who believe beauty is the only factor that determines their happiness in married life.

In Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), however, the Prince is not exactly as brave or capable as the one in Perrault's story. In the Disney version, the Prince is captured by the evil fairy, Maleficent, and is left helpless until the good fairies appear and rescue him. They also provide him with a sword and shield to get to his love and kiss her back to life. Although most of the so called brave, adventurous and heroic acts are done by the good fairies, the Prince is portrayed as the one saves the day. And in the end, all he did was 'kiss' the Princess back to life.

Despite the relatively poor and ineffective pictures portrayed by both the Princes in Perrault's and Disney versions of *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, they are highlighted as the heroes or rescuers who bring about the happy ending. Thus, through the portrayal of such male characters, fairy tales establish male domination or patriarchy in other words. And at the same time, boys and young men are equally affected negatively by the so called masculine traits presented and established through fairy tales like *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*. Though these

hegemonic males are portrayed as being brave, adventurous and royal, they also tend to possess very simple needs as well as emotions.

There are obviously many boys and men who do not conform to the hegemonic masculinity depicted in such tales. Hence these boys grow into men with a double consciousness, with who they really are on one hand, and who they ought to be according to the norms of the society on the other hand. These so called norms of the society are embodied and reflected through forms of art like literature, dance, music etc. Therefore being 'manly' is defined and filtered through the lens of this stereotypical depiction in art forms like fairy tales. And 'manly' attributes can be summed up as comprising of mainly three factors, namely, status, toughness and anti-feminism. Many boys who do not conform to these so-called masculine traits are at times ridiculed, bullied and insulted both in real life and in literature. The character Neville Longbottom in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter is an example for such victims of hegemonic notions of gender.

This leads us to the conclusion that hegemonic or stereotypical gender roles affect not just females, but also males in an almost equal manner. But unfortunately, masculinity and issues related with it are neglected or often not even recognized:

> Changing the ways our culture perceives dominant masculinity, and the hierarchal systems constructed in relation to it, must first begin with marking masculinity as a gender, making visible the ways it is both socially constructed and evolving, and creating spaces for child readers to see themselves as agents of change. (Wannamaker 148)

Thus, Prince Charming has been deconstructed. Boys should therefore be provided with texts that feature a wide variety of characters that represent different races, ethnicities, nationalities and most importantly, a number of ways of 'being male', even though this works as only a part of the solution, "They should be reading texts featuring males, who are nonviolent, sensitive, tolerant, and wise, not only those depicting males who are violent, stoic and individualistic" (Wannamaker 15).

William Brozo's book *To be a Boy, To be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy* works to compile a list of books boys should be reading because they feature positive male role models that help to counter the negative stereotypical images that boys come across in popular culture and literature. But there are few scholars like

Mc Gillis who considers fairytales as metaphors rather than as a guide to live in a society:

> I suggest that the tales may liberate the reader from existing social structures by transforming those social structures into metaphor. The fairy tale world is a metaphor of a possible reality, not an imitation of reality or a blueprint of reality. (Wannamaker 14)

However, there are novels like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* which opens up more possibilities for boys by portraying broader definitions of what it means to be masculine and also by giving readers characters and situations that test the constructed borders of gender. Thus in *Harry Potter* we find the hero, Harry leading a Cinderella-like life of deprivation and submissive helplessness initially. There are of course other stereotypical characters in Harry Potter, but at least the male protagonist is not one of those typical stereotypes.

But why are fairy tales like *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* still so popular? Probably because their reinforcement of hegemonic notions of gender makes readers feel comfortable as it instills the belief that they don't pose challenges to the existing state of affairs in the society. This might not be the sole reason, but maybe just a small part of the reasons for the undeterred popularity. Other more obvious reasons would be the magical elements and the "happily ever after" endings that attract young minds to such tales.

Completely re-modifying and re-signifying masculinity and femininity is an almost Utopian or rather difficult aim, mainly because gender construction is always crafted in a concealed manner and literature alone cannot undertake such a huge task. But it would be a relief to read and imagine about 'real' characters who are not too perfect, and thereby believable and likeable, contrasted to the perfect, manly Prince's and heroes.

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