



**FRAMING FEMININITY IN FAIRY TALES : THE FEMALE STEREOTYPES IN
*CINDERELLA AND THE SLEEPING BEAUTY IN THE WOOD***



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ABSTRACT

Fairy tales, being a form of folk literature, continues to change and evolve according to the interpreters who gave them a written form. After years of being recognized as a source of entertainment, storytelling is now being viewed as a powerful tool for change and the overall development of an individual's personality, as well as an effective method to address social issues. As the characters depicted in children's fiction act as powerful cultural agents,

fairy tales like *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* play a major role in the socialization process of the children who read them. However, a positive movement has been noted in the genre of fairy tales in the form of "feminist" versions of fairy tales. Perrault's classical fairy tales have thus been rewritten by feminists in recent times. Unfortunately, a close reading of many fairytales reveals that they set an

oversimplified and un-questioned gender role stereotypes. As far as female stereotypes are concerned, the aim here is to explore how female characters in these fairy tales are represented as typical beautiful, submissive, enduring women

whose happiness rests upon the men in their life. The fairy tales thus become a mere tool that men use or exploit to uphold and perpetuate the patriarchal conventions of society.

KEYWORDS

Children's fiction, fairy tales, female stereotypes, femininity, Perrault, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty

RESEARCH PAPER

Fairy tales, being a form of folk literature, continues to change and evolve according to the interpreters who gave them a written form. Beginning with Perrault and the Brothers Grimm who replaced the traditional male villain with a female version who was not just villainous, but also ugly, old and jealous to their depiction of stereotypical female and male characters perpetuating patriarchal concepts, male interpreters continue to exploit these tales to maintain patriarchy. Disney's animated version of these fairy tales are often still deemed as classics and only add to the perpetuation of gender hierarchy. But the extent to which these interpretations of the traditional tales influence society, especially young minds is still vague and almost impossible to measure. But, as Swati Daftuar states in an article entitled "A Twist in the Tale",

After years of being recognized as a source of entertainment, storytelling is now being viewed as a powerful tool for change and the overall development of an individual's personality, as well as an effective method to address social issues (1).

However, the facts that these distorted versions of fairy tales have introduced stereotypical gender notions harmful for both male and female remains undisputed. And as the mythologist and author Devdutt Patanaik observes in Daftuar's "A Twist in the Tale", "There is a lot that a story can do. It can affect individuals or masses" and "Today story telling is also used as propaganda to shape people's political views, . . . it tells us who are our heroes should be and who our villains are; they essentially shape the mind of the person who is listening (1).

Fortunately, a positive movement has been noted in the genre of fairy tales in the form of "feminist" versions of fairy tales like Napoli's *Beast and Spinners*, Osborne's *Kate and the Beanstalk* and Barbara G. Walker's entire collection of such fairy tales titled *Feminist Fairy Tales*. But as Sturm and Kuykendal point out in "We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales", role reversals have their own demerits and empowerment of

protagonists should be made without any gender bias. The appropriation of feminist theory to fairy tales could probably be justified to an extent, as both women's literature and children's literature tend to be devalued and therefore marginalized. As the characters depicted in children's fiction act as powerful cultural agents, fairy tales like *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* play a major role in the socialization process of the children who read them.

Perrault's classical fairy tales have been rewritten by feminists in recent times. An entire collection of feminized fairy tales where gender roles are reversed have been published under the title "Fearless Girls, Wise Women and Beloved Sisters: Heroines in Folktales from Around the World" by Kathleen Ragan . Other examples of feminist fairy tales include "Feminist Fairy tales" by Barbara G. Walker, "Not One Damsel in Distress: World Folktales for Strong Girls" by Jane Yolen, "Tatterhood and Other Tales" by Ethel Johnston Phelps etc.

In almost all popular fairy tales, women are portrayed as subjugated, sexualized and discriminated by the male gender. These traditional folk tales are very often read and thereby influence young, child readers. The cultural norms picturized in these tales obviously play a part in the socialization process of the children who read them. Fairytales therefore act as powerful cultural agents and unfortunately these tales depict the oversimplified, unquestioned gender role stereotypes. A similar pattern of male dominance and female subservience is portrayed and thereby emphasized throughout such tales. Stereotypes may be either positive or negative, but they rarely communicate accurate information. As far as female stereotypes are concerned, the aim here is to explore how female characters in these fairy tales are represented as typical beautiful, submissive, enduring women whose happiness rests upon the men in their life. Marriage is quite conveniently made not simply an ideal, but the only aim toward which women should aspire for a happy and successful life. Beauty is represented as the most important or the only necessary quality in any woman, simultaneously disregarding the significance of intellect. Women in fairy tales are thus defined as beautiful objects that are powerless to alter any event in their lives. Female characters in fairy tales also tend to be categorized into two, namely, the victim and the victimizer. These stereotypical depictions naturally affect the readers and thereby the society in which we live, hence the so-called feminine traits and modes of behaviours are set by literature of these kinds. As feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler agree, females are "constructed" or "girded", and the stereotypical depiction of female characters in fairy tales help in this process of construction. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 273)

Gender stereotypes affect both sexes, be it male or female stereotypes. Hence, through literature both genders are put under pressure to conform to the so-called gender specific traits which naturally lead to the growth of a fractured society with stereotypical notions. Cinderella, for instance, is trapped in a world where men are on the top of hierarchy. She remains a dependent character throughout Perrault's tale, beginning from her relation with her stepmother upon whom she is dependent for her very existence. Secondly she depends on the Prince, her husband, to whom she looks upon as a saviour. And thirdly, she depends on her own good looks to rescue her from her pitiable condition and get her married off. Unfortunately, we find that Cinderella needs "cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels" and a pair of glass slippers which are "the prettiest in the whole world", to get her out of her situation. The very name 'Cinderella' was earned by Cinderella not through any particular virtue or personal value, but by sleeping in the dust and cinders. In fact, readers fall in love with Cinderella only out of sympathy for a beautiful lady whose life is marred by dust and rags. All Cinderella does in the story is performing menial tasks her stepmother and stepsisters deem unfit for their status, such as cooking, cleaning, mending, and helping her stepsisters groom and dress. Being portrayed as an extremely submissive character, Cinderella performs these tasks without even a slight hint of rebellion or disobedience which is natural on her part. The possibility of Cinderella pulling herself out of her deprived condition through education, wit or any worthy quality seems to have been ruled out by Perrault. Instead Perrault instills the concept of men rescuing women or "damsels" from distress with beauty of the woman playing a major role in instigating this process of rescuing because: "In modern tales as in ancient legends man is the privileged hero" (Beauvoir 292)

Magic is an inevitable part of fairy tales, but it is often used in place of intellect and ideas by the female characters in order to face obstacles and difficulties in one's lives. For instance, Cinderella lives "happily ever after" as there is a good fairy in the guise of the godmother who helps Cinderella achieves her dream of going to the ball by altering Cinderella's appearance. With a wave of her magic wand, the fairy godmother turns Cinderella's ragged and ugly clothes into a beautiful shimmering gown coupled with glass slippers on her feet, and equip her with a horse and a carriage. In the fairytale, it is the godmother's supernatural powers that enable Cinderella to fulfill her dream and not any effort on Cinderella's part.

Upon hearing of Cinderella's current dilemma, the fairy godmother instructs her to "promise to be a good girl and I will arrange for you to go (Perrault, "Old" 79). Proving her sweet and submissive disposition, Cinderella follows her fairy godmother's subsequent commands and is thus rewarded with marriage to a Prince. Hence, magic in these fairy tales only re-emphasize a feeling of helplessness in young girls. It creates in them a need for "a stroke of a wand" to attain a happy life:

Magic involves the idea of a passive force, because she is doomed to passivity and yet wants power, the adolescent girl must believe in magic: in that of her body, which will bring men under her yoke, in that of fate in general, which will crown her desires without her having to do anything. (Beauvoir 339)

Analyzing how Cinderella fell into such a pitiable and deprived condition in the tale re-emphasizes the fact that women's status is entirely built by the men in their lives. After all it was with the death of Cinderella's father that she becomes a slave in her own house. Does a male character's death have to be picturized with such dramatic effect upon the female characters in the story? Again, Cinderella is raised to a respectable and admirable status only when the Prince falls for her and marries her. And hence we find Perrault's Cinderella playing a passive role, allowing everything to happen to her rather than taking charge of her life and situation in a practical manner. It would be easier to understand the shallowness of her character by peeling off each of those superficial layers like beauty, magic and marriage that dress her up. Even though Perrault does not describe Cinderella's life after marriage, the readers naturally assume that she would continue to fulfill duties assigned to her by her husband or the society, be it housework or rearing up of her children she would continue to live submissively and obediently, ignoring her individuality. Although she escapes from the clutches of her stepmother, she is once again under the clasp of just another human being who appears in the form of a husband.

Hence, Cinderella is and never will be free. The Princess in Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* also undergoes a similar never ending captivation. While she is being freed from her hundred years of sleep, this so-called "liberation" process however lands her into the walls of a patriarchal prison where she is expected to fulfill her duties as housewife and mother.

Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters are portrayed as evil characters thus bringing about the idea that women can be categorized into two, beautiful, good and subservient on one hand and ugly, evil and independent on the other hand. The evil characters in these tales seem to echo Simone de Beauvoir words that "Woman is doomed to immorality" (458). Both boys

and girls are probably equally affected by such a categorization of the female sex. Perhaps this categorization is even more evidently portrayed in Disney's animated version of Perrault's Cinderella where the stepsisters are not just jealous, evil and snobby but also ugly in appearance when compared to Cinderella. The question is why did these evil female characters also have to be portrayed as ugly? Is Perrault perhaps implying that physically unattractive women are always evil in character? This seems to be the implied message hidden in most of the fairytales, be it Perrault's, the Grimm Brothers or even Anderson's.

Similarly in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, the Prince's mother is depicted as an ugly, evil Ogress who is set upon eating her own daughter-in-law and grandchildren: "It was whispered at the court that she had ogreish instincts, and that when little children were near her she had the greatest difficulty in the world to keep herself from pouncing on them" (Perrault, "Old" 16). Perrault unabashedly weaves into his tale the fact that the Princess' father married her only for her wealth. But this cunning and evil nature on the part of the King is overlooked and it is the Ogresses evilness that is focused upon throughout the rest of the story and probably this is what Beauvoir is pointing to when she states: "While Prometheus magnificently steals fire from the sun, Pandora opens her box of evils from the sun" (Beauvoir 292).

Opposed to the ogreish, evil step mother, the Princess is pictured as a young maiden whose radiant beauty had "an almost unearthly luster" and who sleeps throughout the beginning of the tale thus living up to the title of the fairy tale. She finally wakes up when she is rescued by a Prince who cuts through the thick brambles that have grown around the palace in which she lay asleep. The Princess manages to wake up when approached by a handsome Prince. She even falls in love with him and they managed to live happily ever after without even speaking to each other before tying the knot. There is absolutely no mention of the Princess' wit or intellect or any other worthy quality, all she has is "radiant beauty" of "unearthly luster" and she still manages to be the most admired character in the tale that young girls would obviously look up to as a role model. She obviously does nothing immoral or wrong; all she does is waking up to the Prince and bear him children. The beautiful Princess is just pure good opposed to pure evil represented by the evil, Ogreish Queen.

And her beauty was not exactly something she was born with, it was a gift offered by the fairies. It is to be noted that the very first gift given to the baby Princess was beauty, and not intellect or any worthy moral value. The emphasis on such a superficial quality as beauty is evident here, being the very first gift to the Princess. In fact, almost all the gifts offered by the

fairies are superficial in quality and are the typical qualities a patriarchal society would expect a woman to possess:

Presently the fairies began to bestow their gifts upon the princess. The youngest ordained that she should be the most beautiful person in the world; the next, that she should have the temper of an angel; the third, that she should do everything with wonderful grace; the fourth, that she should dance to perfection; the fifth, that she should sing like a nightingale; and the sixth, that she should play every kind of music with the utmost skill. (Perrault, "Old" 2)

Surprisingly, all the gifts endowed by the fairies to the baby Princess are qualities men need in a woman, be it beauty, tolerance, charm and talents like dancing and singing. None of these qualities are of any worth for a successful life for any human being, be it male or female. Yet these are the qualities Perrault seems to have chosen, deliberately perhaps, to reinforce patriarchy. Thus, according to traditional fairy tales, women are supposed to be beautiful, obedient, dependent, passive and vulnerable as well to be accepted in society. These so-called feminine traits are picturized as ideal virtues a woman should have from a male perspective: "Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits." (Beauvoir 294)

Anyhow, it can be clear from a close analysis that the female stereotypical characters like Cinderella and the Sleeping Beauty are domestic in nature and show an obvious desire for marriage. They are also portrayed along with the other male endowed qualities like submissiveness and dependency. Thus fairy tales glorify beauty, submissiveness and passive dependency as a female protagonist's essential qualities and thereby suggests that a woman's acceptance of her domestic roles is significant for the survival of a society. The heroine gains social status and financial security not through her hard work or intellect but rather through marriage which is instigated by her physical charm and beauty:

Thus the supreme necessity for woman is to charm a masculine heart; intrepid and adventurous though they may be, it is the recompense to which all heroines aspire; and most often no quality is asked of them other than their beauty. (Beauvoir 294)

Portrayals of feminine power, independence and non-feminine traits are often depicted in derogatory contexts where such exhibitions of female force are usually punished. Instances of such punishment or banishment from society born by such strong female characters in fairy tales are plenty. In *Cinderella*, we find that the step sisters lose their chance of marrying the Prince although they were dressed and made up in high fashion and in the end they have to depend on Cinderella's forgiveness to lead a happy life. Similarly, in *The Sleeping Beauty in*

the Wood, the wicked fairy is not called to the banquet and the Ogress Queen meets with her death and is not even mourned by her own son. Young readers thus automatically dissociate themselves from such characters of feminine power, defiance or self-expression and they instead tend to relate and identify themselves with the beautiful and passively dependent female protagonists whose submission to male power ensures her success and happiness. While young readers automatically dissociate themselves from these portrayals of feminine power, defiance or self-expression, they readily identify with the beautiful, submissive and passive female characters whose submission to the male community insures her triumphant happiness:

It is understandable that the care of her physical appearance should become for the young girl a real obsession; be they princess or shepherdesses, they must always be pretty in order to obtain love and happiness; homeliness is cruelly associated with wickedness, and one is in doubt, when misfortunes shower on the ugly, whether their crimes or their ill-favored looks are being punished. (Beauvoir, 294)

Characters like Cinderella and Snow White are shown suffering cruel treatment at the hands of their step mothers, thereby implying that the absence of a natural mother will leave girls vulnerable. But on the other hand, the Princess in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* has a living natural mother who is unable to protect her from the wicked fairy's spell and hence doomed to sleep for a hundred years. Hence, a decent or stern and capable mother-figure is lacking in all these tales and movies. There are either the beautiful, submissive, domestic Princesses or the evil, jealous, calculating step-mothers and step-sisters.

Even the morals provided by Perrault at the end of each of these fairy tales serve to reinforce male dominance and a continuance of patriarchy. In *Cinderella*, graciousness is portrayed as the most important trait a woman must possess, and at the same time Perrault leaves women powerless to shape their life by emphasizing the inevitable need for a Godmother or Godfather in one's life. He also adds that "Beauty's to the sex a treasure". He chooses an entirely superficial quality like "beauty" as a rare treasure in woman instead of intellect, wit, honesty or any other moral quality. And "T'ingage and captivate a heart,/ Than a fine head dress'd up with art", which obviously implies that a "fine head dress'd up with art" is also important. Thus, Perrault fails to leave his obsession with feminine beauty even in the "moral" he provides his fairy tale with. Ultimately, through this final "moral" that Perrault conveys, he urges women to uphold traditional gender roles as Cinderella's obedience to her stepmother and kindness to her stepsisters signifies her as a morally righteous woman. It is

this moral uprightness that earns her the admiration and love of the Prince along with a life that ends “happily ever after”.

Perrault thus hands over the fates of his heroines to the male protagonists thereby spreading shared beliefs about gender roles which build children’s notions on gender identity. Women and children in his tales are not often found straying away from the bounds of home and gardens, thereby presenting physical entrapment as a natural course of life. And unlike the adventurous male characters who get to ride off to the woods and brandish their swords, female characters are often depicted as waiting at home for ‘Prince Charming to save the day’. The very function of the hero seems to be to deliver the female protagonist from her oppressors.

In short, through his fairy tales, what Perrault tries to weave is an illusionary world where men hold the reins, and as Karen E. Rows puts it, "...as long as modern women continue to tailor their aspirations and capabilities to conform to romantic paradigms, they will live with deceptions, disillusionments, and/or ambivalences" (Zipes 222). The fairy tales thus become a mere tool that men use or exploit to uphold and perpetuate the patriarchal conventions of society. The stereotypical portrayal of female gender with male-endowed qualities; be it a deliberate portrayal or not; would definitely prove harmful to socialization processes of young children who read these tales.

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