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Debating/Problematizing the Stereotypes in Fairy Tales

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Abstract: Fairy tale is the first form of literature that we are acquainted with. They provide us with the basic framework of understanding the world; and furnish the initial binaries through which children conceptualize the society. The episodic nature of these tales helps them to incorporate abundant stereotypes. They re-endorse the historically devalued idea of female sexuality and other forms of sexuality, different from the heteronormative ones, as inferior and deviant. For women, these tales embed within themselves the warnings that danger will befall upon them once they deviate from path and show non-female traits; thereby, making them conscious of the Freudian lack. Similarly, males are directed on how to become the 'ideal' man; superimposing the ideologies of masculinity. These polarised stereotypes operate as power generators. In Foucauldian 'biopolitics,' power as an abstract idea needs agents to be enforced. Thus, male and female bodies become different agents of power circulation. Simultaneously, these bodies act as neo-textual sites of understanding the power-politics. This paper seeks to question, critique and 'problematize' such biased stereotypes. It tries to understand how it imposes limitations and constricts human behaviour by propagating such ideologies. Lastly, Fairy Tales play pivotal roles in educating the children; how these texts talk to children, what message they impart and their impact on child psychology, therefore become important questions that need to be studied. Furthermore, such gendered education develops improper Lacanian mirror images which children tend to carry forward throughout their life.

Keywords: Fairy tale, Heteronormativity, Masculinity, Ideology, Children

Fairy Tales are the first form of literature that we are acquainted with. They provide us with the basic framework of understanding the real world; and furnish the initial binaries through which children conceptualize the differences between good and bad, right and wrong. Hence, they have a lifelong lasting impression in our minds. Zipes aptly discusses in his *The Trials and the Tribulations*, that "we all pass through fairy tales, which inscribe indelible marks on our imagination and affect our behaviour and role-playing" (Zipes, xi). They not only develop our moral values but also determine our way of perceiving of the world around us.

O' Sullivan defines fairy tales as something" that usually involve magic, tell of transformations and wondrous changes in fortune of a disadvantaged protagonist, usually culminating in a happy end"(O' Sullivan, 94). Apart from this beautifully articulated definition some other popular views on this genre also exist. According to 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"(Haase, 322). The term 'Fairy Tale' was first coined by Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy in 1697, when her first collection of tales¹ was published. d' Aulnoy's fairy tales are a celebration of certain dominant features of the fairies like beauty, eternal youth, true love and generosity.

Undoubtedly, the histories of the written tales are much younger than the original ages of these tales. They must have travelled a few centuries; before being penned down in their present version. This conversion from their oral to written form affected the entire concept significantly. This transmutation is exemplary of Hayden White's argument on history being rendered through written narratives, which entails an intricate process of exertion of certain dominant ideologies and perpetual relegation of others. Initially, these oral stories were developed and circulated with a motif of community bonding and were meant for performances. In Germany, two brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected the stories from women who were predominantly spinners. They told the tales to "keep themselves and their company awake as they spun" (Rowe, 64). Perrault and his contemporaries in France institutionalized the oral tales by writing them down and publishing them which they mostly collected from peasant women. The performative

tradition of fairy tales faded away as a result of this. The printed copies were expensive and very few could afford them. The aristocratic and bourgeois class stopped passing them down orally. Nevertheless, they continued to survive among all the classes in different forms. However they, from being tales explaining natural occurrences, shifted to become stories of morals and happy endings which all wished to listen or read.

In the non-European world, these kinds of stories also existed which contained the features of the contemporary Fairy narratives, like the Indian *Panchatantra* (6th cent. AD) and the *Katha Sarit Sagara* (Ocean of Streams of Story), *the Book of Sindibad* in Persia as well as *the Arabian Nights* (ca. 10th century). However, in this paper I will focus only on the European Fairy Tales.

Fairy Tales serves a pedagogical purpose, therefore the questions like how these texts talk to children become important. What/how they say about emotional and moral values and how children relate and react to them determine children's developmental challenges and emotional experiences. Even Albert Einstein seems aware of the magnitude of its impact in forming the psyche of children when he says: "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales" (qtd. Vries, 1).

It is through Fairy Tales, children first learn the difference between good and evil and the fate associated with one's chosen demeanour. They also meet the basic stereotypes which are harmful to the development of children's general perception and simplified understanding of the world around. In a world, where people are fighting to establish universal equality and mutual acceptance of diversity, these fairy tales set a standard of sexist codes for children which they start looking up to. They affirm the racial notions of beauty and patriarchal notion of femininity and goodness. Apart from this, fairy tales also exclude the existence of disabled bodies or turn them into sub-human beings thereby negating their rightful existence, as persons with the disabled body are mostly referred to as evil or slaves. Therefore through all these projections, children instead of facing the real world receive a biased world view, which they carry forward. According to the Lacanian view, children in their early Mirror Stage² (by the age of 2-3) are not able to distinguish between themselves and other sex; therefore the stereotypes formed at such an early age tend to remain with them throughout their life.

Fairy Tales hinge upon polarised gender roles. Cranny-Francis and others in their work *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*(2003) define the term ‘stereotype’ as “a radically reductive way of representing whole communities of people by identifying them with a few key characteristics. Individuals from the group who [do not] fit that stereotype are then said to be atypical” (Cranny et al,141). In the contemporary world, male and female are viewed as equals by the majority of the population, hence it is crucial that the stories also reflect the variety, this world possesses and identifies the various paths, offered to them in real life. Thus, it is important for both men and women to be portrayed in heterogeneous roles instead of re-ascertaining their traditional roles. As Zipes claims in *Don ’t Bet on the Prince*:

Children are conditioned to assume and accept arbitrary sex roles. These socially conditioned roles prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial . . . as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal situations . . . They prepare males to become competitive, authoritarian, and power-hungry as well as rational, abstract, and principled (Zipes, 3).

Various researches studying the gender stereotypes manifested in fairy tales; show the biased view where male characters set the standard of masculinity and female characters instead of being lively figures are merely stereotyped; based on their deeds. Weitzman and others argued that “male characters are depicted in active roles of adventurers and leaders whereas female characters are portrayed in passive roles of companions and helpers”³ (qtd. Renzetti and Curran 117). Furthermore, Odean found out in her study from 1997, “female characters play an inferior role and only a small part of the characters is described as brave, physically fit or independent”⁴ (qtd. Renzetti and Curran 118).

Women figures appear abundantly in fairy narratives. However, they convey the existence of only two kinds of women: the good and the bad. Both these terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are inadequate to explain the features of these respective categories, hence they need a detailed analysis. Good women are those which save the day and are rewarded with a prince, property and the idea of a permanent happy life thereafter. The bad ones are punished, i.e., killed and eliminated. It is crucial to

learn the features attributed to both these categories and what children learn from them.

One of the principal features of good women is passivity. It is arguably the most honoured characteristic in a woman's life. Beauty is a highly esteemed virtue in Fairy

Tales and is associated with intelligence, ability, kindness, worthiness and morality. The heroines are always naive and beautiful. Although the beautiful ones are often rewarded but beauty at times also becomes the source of danger. For example In *All Further* princess is described as "so beautiful that her equal could not be found anywhere on earth" (G&G 1992, 258). A crisis emerges, when her father falls in love with her and expresses his desire to marry his own daughter. So he had to run away from the castle. Fairy tales reinforce the normative roles that society has set for women. They embody the patriarchal way of silencing and oppressing women by making them the passive recipients. A major section of this genre argues that women should abide by the roles, assigned to them; the roles of wives and mother i.e., submissive and self-sacrificing characters. Beauty is used as a metaphor and not just as a physical feature. That's why it is associated with goodness and the evil women characters are usually ugly. It goes to the extent that if the evil character is beautiful it because of some magic or spell she is using to attract and captivate the king, evident in *Snow White*, where the villainous stepmother acquires beauty through her magical skills and is not originally beautiful. Thus the concept of 'beauty', which recurs again and again in the fairy tales could be viewed as a patriarchal tool to objectify and regulate the female body in such a manner that they remain perennially subservient and subject to male domination. This is also resonated in Louie's article *Not so happily ever after? The truth about gender representations in fairy tales*, where he argues that the view of beauty is essentially patriarchal and oppressive in nature which undermines the value of women and objectifies them. This, he states, further gives rise to the misconception among girls that being beautiful is more important than being intelligent.

One popular image that fairy tale has created is that of 'damsel-in-distress' – "a maiden in distress leaning from a tower window and searching the horizon for a rescuer". (Bottigheimer,101). The heroines can't free themselves from their present plight and they essentially need

to wait for the prince (rescuer) to come and alter their situation. Thus escape for heroines in fairy tales becomes synonymous with the rescue. The heroine cannot save herself from the undesirable harmful situation; it must be the hero who should come as a saviour. So the heroines are portrayed as weak, dependent and submissive. Here, Cherland⁵ (2006) points out that the messages portrayed here hinders the self-esteem of girls and delimits their perception of their own abilities in life. It is further reinforced that only by the virtue of beauty, patience and long sufferance, one can triumph in life. Bravery, ambition and self-defence are alien concepts to these heroines. Kasner⁶ further argues; how these stereotypes build up illusory expectations and false hopes among children. He argues that these narratives aren't meant to empower girls but to drag them down, enmeshing them under the weight of morality and virtuosity.

These tales embed within themselves the warnings that danger will befall upon them once they deviate from the designated path and show non-female traits. For example, Rapunzel sings and attracts the prince and the troubles follow. Similarly, Red Riding Hood is fearless and confidently travels in the wood, unaware of the presence of evils in the outside world and falls in the traps of the gullible wolfs.

The other category of women, exhibited in these tales is the evil women. Older women and lazy girls are generally portrayed as ugly ones. Since the heroine epitomizes the beauty, the evil counterpart must be bestowed with the opposite physical features. This creates a clear association between beauty-good and ugly-evil. The characteristics such as ambition, bravery and determination are associated with evil and are considered as threats to ideal feminine qualities. Ugly women are also a potential source of suspicion. They take advantage of the naive heroine and often torture her, which also establishes a link between beauty and jealousy among female members at various intervals.

In *SnowWhite*, the stepmother takes the murderous action just to acquire beauty and retain her position as the most beautiful. In Grimm's first edition, the step-mother goes to the extent of eating Snow White's heart to preserve her beauty. Similarly, the mutilation of the stepsister's feet in *Cinderella* brings out the notion of the extent women can go to ruin and defame one another. The evil women, since they differ from the normative behaviour, are often stripped off their human quality, which is

why the step-mother of *Snow White* is a power-hungry witch/magician and the queen in *Sleeping Beauty* is an ogress.

According to Kasner (2004), in fairy tales, men are typically adventurous, rescuers, fighters and symbolize ingenuity and perseverance. The heroes of this genre of Children literature are two dimensional in nature: they are rich, handsome, powerful and vigorous but are devoid of personality and stability. They are royal, rich and ideal in every possible way. Here one needs to question this concept of being 'ideal' and ponder on the deeds and characteristics that make them ideal. However, the princes or heroes lack human emotions and needs and are almost non-existent until the end of the story, where they emerge as the saviour. They are unstable and lack personality as they fall for the popular trope of 'love at first sight'⁷ and are capable of seeing the inner beauty of the heroine at once. They are shattered at the death/loss of their lady love. Though their actions are often construed as controversial, they are never wrong or stained since they exemplify the ideal masculine figure. He is always right and wins the land, heroine and people at the end, moving towards the anticipated happy ending, '...and they lived happily ever after'⁸. Regardless of the plot and the incidents happening, he is the unequivocal hero, one who brings the final triumph. Often he doesn't play any role in bringing forth the successful conclusion and depends mostly on the minor characters like fairies, talking animals, plants and mythical figures, who help him. Louie (2012) points out that males in fairy tales are encouraged to be strong, adventurous and self-sufficient saviours, whereas girls are taught to stay passive, sweet, innocent and self-sacrificing.

The royalty; associated with the Prince in the fairy tales was symbolic of the monarchy, dominating the European nations. With the gradual fall of the monarchy after the French revolution and subsequent events, the kings/princes continued to live through the Fairy Tales. The fairy narratives didn't change with the advent of democracy and preserved the literary counterparts of the monarchic system. The fictional counterparts continued to be powerful but not intellectually impressive.

The father figure is generally absent or left unmentioned in these narratives. The girls are often orphans living with step-relations; even if the father is present the old man is kept out of the narrative without any significant role to play. In Grimm's *Aschenputtel* (*Cinderella*) there are

sporadic references to her father throughout the story. In Disney's *Cinderella*, the father is a kind and devoted character, who provides his beloved daughter with every luxury and comfort and dies shortly afterwards. Similar things happen in *Snow White* and *Rapunzel*. In the former, the mother dies during childbirth and the father ceases his presence after the arrival of a stepmother. In the case of *Rapunzel*, her parents give her to the witch Dame Gothel (Grimm's version) to escape her wrath and are no more heard of. In Disney's version, Gothel kidnaps princess Rapunzel as an infant and 'helpless' King Fredrick does nothing.

This suggests that a girl cannot rely on her father for protection, help, comfort and strength, but only on the prince who will come and rescue her. However, these Princes are not always ideal in their actions as in most of the cases, they don't do anything heroic at all. In *Sleeping Beauty* (Italian version), the hero is the most despicable character. He is a King who while out for hunting sees this beautiful sleeping maiden Talia, falls in love and "gathers the first fruit of love"⁹ and leaves. After months, he remembers Talia and comes to visit her, while in the meantime she has given birth to two children and has to awaken after breaking the curse. He is happy to see his true love and new family but hides them from his cruel wife. But the Queen finds out about Talia and sets out to kill the children and their mother. The King comes and rescues them by killing the evil queen and a happy ending follows. Throughout the tale, the King is portrayed as a perfect male figure, whom Talia loves as she wakes up. She is, strangely not angry with him for raping and impregnating her, when she was unconscious. On the other hand, his wife has no right to be angry at her infidel husband and ends up illustrated as an evil. The King remains the hero whom both Talia and the Queen desire.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, the flaws of the Prince are only there in his beast form, which obliterates as soon as he transforms into the proper, ideal Prince. Cinderella's Prince is just an idle man, in search of a beautiful bride who is helped by the fairy God-mother to search for the girl in glass slippers. Similar things follow in *Snow White* and *All Fur*, only to mention a few.

Men are always portrayed as a positive factor. Therefore, the presence of this unworthy yet ideal male characters creates an

environment of helplessness among girls who start thinking themselves as weak, afraid and incapable of fighting with conviction and defeating the evil. The women are seen as 'lack' who can only be perfect and whole in the presence of this princes. Even though the prince does nothing at all, they are the essential elements for a happy ending of life. This further generates the idea that women have no right to be happy alone or to bring happiness in their own lives and must be gifted by the princes. This also affects the homo-social relationships as girls are never shown as friends or helpers but are only portrayed as rivals.g., Cinderella's step-sisters. Hetero-social relations hardly exist in these kinds of literature as their main focus is the heterosexual union of the Prince and the heroine.

These traditional delineations of men and women with fixed gender roles, rigid gender stereotypes are frequent in children's literature which can encourage them to consider this sexist features as conventional and right. This viewpoint further corroborates the prejudices in both boys and girls and contributes to the formation and development of biased and incorrect notions about the behavioural patterns of the respective genders.

Some critics have offered a simple study of how the paradigms of beauty ensure the continuance of inequality. Since our concept of beauty is racially constructed it doesn't allow acceptance of all standards of beauty. It also creates gender inequality. In "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales," Lori-Baker Sperry and Liz Grauerholz argue, "as women gain greater social status and independence, reliance on normative controls become more important to maintain gender inequality at structural and interpersonal levels"(Sperry and Grauerholz, 715). For example, working women who wear make-up are seen as heterosexual, healthier, and more competent than those who do not. These ideas, they claim, are indoctrinated through fairy tales. Eg, the already mentioned incident of Cinderella's stepsisters who cut gets mutilated in order to fit into the shoe. Folklorist Kay Stone published an interview, in 1975, with a twenty-nine-year-old woman, who admitted:

"I remembered the feeling of being left out in fairy stories. Whatever the story was about, it wasn't about *me*. But this feeling didn't make me not interested in them—I knew there

was something I was supposed to do to fit in but I didn't. So I thought there was something wrong with *me*, not with the fairy stories.” (Stone, 49)

As proof of the importance of children's literature in society, scholars like Grauerholz claims that children's stories are a “major means by which children assimilate culture.” (Grauerholz, 715)

A Fairy tale, though considered as a significant genre of Children's Literature has an ever-pervading impact. It is responsible for the programming of young minds in the formative years, thereby shaping up the future society. In today's world, where women are caught between the evolving feminism and cultural status quo, it is essential to have a balance by which one can preserve the cultural components along with the accommodation of changing norms. The need to accommodate more and more varieties is crucial for the survival of fairy tales and the progression of society towards equality. The gap between romantic fantasies and contemporary realities might bring Fairy Tales on the verge of extinction. Undoubtedly, it has evolved more with the rise of cinema, yet it needs to change its attitude towards the gender and racial stereotypes to help the children grow up with a better and broader understanding and acceptance. Nevertheless, these tales are not stagnant and evolve slowly, giving place to characters like *Little Mermaid*, *Moana*, *Maleficent*, *Mulan* *Tinkerbell*, showing empowered and self-dependent women, hence distancing themselves from the traditional gender-based stereotypes and progressing towards a gender desensitized narratives.

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