

## **Fairy Tales as Carriers of Gendered Social Attitudes**

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### **Abstract**

Fairy tales are not as innocent a figment of imagination as they appear. There lies a whole plethora of patriarchal gendered attitudes beneath the world of fantasy which they represent. They act as a subtle tool for indoctrinating the young minds of the children, leaving a lifelong effect on their psyche, as young minds easily and deeply get imprinted with whatever they see, hear, or read. Ideologies or attitudes imbibed unconsciously have even a greater impact than ones taught openly. This paper attempts to draw the attention of its readers towards this disguised form of indoctrination as to how fairy tales serve as a medium to inculcate the patriarchal values among children, particularly among girls, and their influence on their behaviour as they grow into adulthood, their expectations as well as attitudes being shaped by them.

Keywords: Fairy tales, patriarchy, children, gender, attitude

Story telling is as old a tradition as the human race itself. Each society has had its own set of folk tales transmitted from generation to generation by way of oral tradition. These stories, besides serving as a source of entertainment, had a didactic role also to play. The stories meant for children particularly were used to teach them values and morals. Fairy tales, also a subset of folk tales, however appear simply as fantasies, depicting a world of fantasy with imaginary characters in imaginary settings. Behind the apparent fantasy world of these bedtime fairy tales, however, lie much more than just the fanciful thinking. With the advent of feminist studies, a process of dissecting fairy tales has been ensued to uncover the gender stereotypes perpetuated by them. There have been found serious implications of these tales in conditioning the young minds of children. According to Kasner (2004), when children are exposed to fairy tales they may believe the stereotypical roles of male and female to be true. Thus, the manner in which gender is represented in the fairy tales may have a significant impact on children's attitudes and perceptions of gender

appropriate behavior within society. Dominant reading practices will make students accustomed to the texts and as a result identify themselves with the characters in many stories. Many of the social stereo types and cultural symbols that children learn over time come from the books they read.

“Fairy tales are the bedtime stories of the collective consciousness.”, wrote Madonna Kolbenschlag in her book *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye* (1979: 2). As thumbprints of history, fairy tales teach about the cultures of people while entertaining and explaining the world to the next generation. Cherland (2006) points out that the messages portrayed in children’s literature may hinder their self-esteem and may limit their perception of their own abilities in life. Cherland further states that by the age of three, children are able to distinguish between themselves and the other sex and the stereotypes formed early in a child’s life will tend to stay with them for the remainder of their years. Not only do children find out what happens to the various princes and princesses, woodcutters, witches, and children of their favorite tales, but they also learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances (Lieberman 384).

Fairy tales were originally intended to provide guidelines for boys and girls on appropriate societal behaviors, values, and attitudes. According to Schnellbach (2013), these fairy tales are used to explain the harshness of the world to children and to explore the darkest places of the human psyche while doing it in a fantasy world. Later, in the hands of their male interpreters when they were penned down by people like Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault, fairy tales started incorporating gendered portrayal of the characters therein. Gender is portrayed in many ways in fairy tales. As pointed out by Kasner (2004), male characters in fairy tales are depicted typically as adventurous, rescuers, fighters, and as capable, symbolizing ingenuity and perseverance. On the other hand, female characters are represented either as victims, seldom triumph if not beautiful, passive, submissive, and dependent, or as ugly and evil if otherwise. Stereotypes in literature can quietly condition children to accept the way they see the world; thus, reinforcing gender images. Louie (2012) highlights that fairy tales play a major role in reinforcing gender stereotypes as well as transmitting society’s expectations to children. He further points out that, in fairy tales, girls are taught to be sweet, naïve, passive and self-sacrificing, whereas boys are encouraged to be strong, adventurous and self-sufficient heroes and saviors.

Historian Sylvia D. Hoffert defines a gender ideal as “the cluster of characteristics, behavior patterns, and values that members of a group think a man or a woman should have, a set of cultural expectations.” In most fairy tales, females character fall into a dichotomy. The heroine is the ideal good girl. She is unequivocally beautiful, kind, and compassionate. She does not complain or gets angry. Instead, she takes her burdens as they come. She is also, in most cases, naïve and sometimes downright foolish. She never tries to save herself, nor does she ask others to save her from misery. As scholar Kay Stone notes “heroines are not allowed any defects, nor are they required to develop, since they are already perfect.” In the end, the heroine is saved by a noble Prince and gets her happy ending because she is good. Perhaps ironically, the villain is also generally female. She is cunning and ambitious and, in most cases, she is jealous and malicious. She will go to any means to achieve her end. As good as the heroine is, the villain is just as evil. These characters suggest if a woman shows agency and takes action, she is automatically evil. To be good, one must be docile. Good and evil appear as strict categories in fairy tales where the good is rewarded, usually in the form of the docile princess marrying off a handsome prince, and the evil is punished.

The hero in fairy tales is never wrong. He is handsome and wealthy and generally reputed to be brave. However, in many fairy tales, he does not actually do much. He is simply the character who seems to cause everything to work out. Upon closer study, it is clear that the supporting actors are those who play the largest part in ensuring that the hero saves the heroine. Still, the fairy tales tell us that the Prince is the ideal. He is the man every woman wants. He is also the one who guarantees the happy ending needed for a fairy tale to be complete. Yet, he has virtually no personality. He rarely shows any emotions save ‘love at first sight’ or devastation upon seeing his love ‘dead.’ He has no ambitions, no goals, or even any friends. He is simply the person who arrives to rescue the heroine.

Fairy tales are, thus a form of perpetuation of patriarchal dominance structures (Haase, 2004). In this perspective, fairy tales would contribute to the legitimization of exploitative gender role models, and to the consolidation of their social salience (Lieberman, 1972). While the tales are valued as a kind of historical archive and a great source of entertainment, researchers have found that fairy tales have an impact in shaping the ways children view the world (Kuon & Weimar, 2009). The fairy tale princesses were primarily prized for their beauty, ability to clean, and were passive in their own stories,

typically allowing events to happen to them, and not taking charge. Furthermore, feminist critics find the endings to many of these fairy tales unsettling since many fairy tales end with a wedding.

Fairy tales portray women as passive objects, as romanticized innocents, as victims of mental and physical abuse (Stone, 1994). Beauty is a constant device in fairy tales where the prettiest girl is invariably singled out and designated for a reward (a prince most likely) and this beauty is the girl's most valuable asset. Good temper and meekness are regularly associated with beauty in fairy tales, while ill-temper and assertiveness is most often connected to ugliness. Louie (2012) states that beauty ideal in fairy tales is viewed as an oppressive, patriarchal practice that objectifies, devalues and subordinates women. Women who lack in these patriarchally subscribed values are depicted as evil, cruel and treacherous, always envying and causing trouble for the heroine who subscribes to these values.

Two most popular fairy tales, namely *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* can be taken up for illustration of these qualities generally ascribed to the male and female characters. In *Cinderella*, the eponymous heroine Cinderella possesses all the good qualities that patriarchy ascribes to her gender – beauty, meekness, homeliness, passivity, dependence, patience, etc., whereas her stepmother and stepsisters are depicted as epitomes of evil – treacherous, jealous, ugly. This fairy tale portrays women through its heroine as people who cannot defend themselves. Thus, they wait for a male figure to rescue them. Moreover, the females in this fairy tale are associated with the house work. Cinderella does all the house work and does not worry herself about the outside world. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* also teaches the females to obey the instructions from the males as it shows that the failure to obey them may have serious consequences, as the heroine Snow White suffers on account of not paying heed to dwarfs' warning regarding going out of the home alone. In both the fairy tales, females are posed against females as stepmothers, stepsisters or as witches.

Thus, we can see how fairy tales can have negative implications for children's perception of the gender roles in the society. They tend to establish the patriarchal values which are inherently gendered in nature. Not only can they inculcate gender bias among boys, but may also give rise to unreal hopes among girls. Hence, there is a need to rewrite these fairy

tales so that they can inspire the young minds positively instead of conditioning them to believe in these negative or inappropriate gender portrayals.

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