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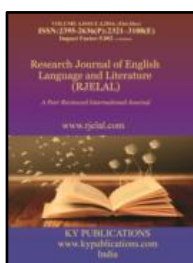2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

FORWARD FAIRY TALE, DELETE ROMANCE:
A FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION OF RED RIDING HOOD

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to revisit a typical children's narrative, the fairy tale that has transfigured the romantic imagination of generations of young readers.It will be an attempt to see how a bed time story has been cast into a text of female bonding and women empowerment, how the revisionist agenda is to rework these short stories into the current dialectics of feminist ideology.The paper will also look at how recent reinterpretations of this iconic text has been implanted with the attributes of post-modernist socio cultural polemics.

Jack Zipes (1979) in revisiting fairy tales had declared that, "our lives are framed by folk and fairy tales', (xi). They have been stuff that has made the repositories of the dreams, hopes and fantasies of generations of girls. Subsequently millions of women the world over must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self concepts and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish from their favourite fairy tales. The romantic paradigms have continued to tailor the aspirations and capabilities of generations of avid takers, but their long term influence can be gauged from not only the wide range of spectacular performances by school children through the ages, the operas and the musicals based on the fairy tale themes, the Disney Vintage productions with fairy tale motifs and plots but also the continued use in advertisement, window decorations, T.V. commercials, banners, posters, T-shirts and household goods, plastered with fairy tale designs. In today's cyber culture the internet is full of hypertexts, illustrations, reviews, bibliographies and anthologies they are the most consumer viable literature. Despite the unrealistic reality that they project they keep on invading the inner sanctum of our subjective world.

The tales have also undergone a change in implications. Their poisonous apple unconsciously instills into the innocent minds the patriarchal plot of female subservience. They have encroached upon the imagination of the unconscious mind and feminists advocates of the fairy tales see in it an emancipatory potential that is so aesthetically conceived. They believed that the fairy tales developed with 'revolution and provided the discerning mind with a critical measure about the feasibility of utopian alternatives. This tremendous sway of the fairy tale as a mode of communication has projected that the fairy tales are no longer receptacles of a romantiddelination but also have the power to create more just and equitable social orders and at the same time make people think about the way they live. This means that besides the fantastic and the magical the fairy tales are also political.One might ask what the enchanting, lovable fairies, elves, ogres, kings, queens, princes, princesses, dwarfs and witches have to do with politics. Only a slight rethinking will make us reflect

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of how these contain the power struggles, the effluence that money brings the enchantments that beauty decides and these are indeed the shaping needs and desires of the world. These are also the socio-political connections with us and our times despite the fact that these stories begin with 'once upon a time'. Jung and Freud were most active in diagnosing the patterns and figures of the tales in relation to the archetypes of the collective unconscious. In his famous essay Jung "The Phenomenology of the spirit in the fairy Tales" (1958) draws a connection between the dream symbolism and development.

While Vladimir Propp was the first to look at the morphological patterns and structures and relate them to aesthetic laws, structuralist and literary scholars moved from this purely formalist approach to include the folk tale in a larger cultural development. These implications paved the way for interpretation and reinterpretations and were used for various agendas including politics. Even before literary critics such as Lewis Seifert in *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France, 1690-1715: Nostalgic Utopias* and Patricia Hannon in *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France* have combined political, historical, and feminist approaches to study the important vogue of French fairy tales, while John Stephens and Robyn McCallum have analyzed the importance of ideology in the retellings of folk and fairy tales in the realm of children's literature. Clearly, the scholarship in this field has simultaneously played a part in casting a magic spell over the vital quality of the tales, diluting their socio-historical import and often obscuring problems with extraneous material, while at the same time exposing social contradictions and the ideological nature of cultural production.

More importantly they have also been developed as feminine myths that perpetuate the essence of female being. That is to say that since times pristine they have also had a gender bias–the listenership and readership being predominantly female; *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White* for young girls, Superman, Spiderman, Batman for boys. As Donald Haase (2004) points out: "The female voice in the fairy tale had initially been conceived as

a historical voice.... and recognition of that collective female voice was an opportunity to reassert women's ownership of the genre" (14-15).

Zipes suggests that fairy tales are not intended solely for children, that they have a purpose in "socializing [all] readers" (Zipesqtd. in Brown 2). Given such a predilection it is no wonder that second-wave feminists have turned their attention anew to explore the women's voice engrained in these tales and rethink how they feed into debates regarding patriarchal hegemony and women's subjugation. This deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction has now emerged as a powerful sub-genre where *Feminism and Fairy Tales* (Karen E Rowe, 1979) illustrates the concerns of contemporary women regarding identity and self-hood. The book *Fairy Tales and Feminism* (Donald Haase, 2004) reflects an interdisciplinary relationship that aims to analyze the process of socialization and acculturation.

This is not to say that earlier feminists had not taken cognizance of this important literature to raise questions about the traditional, patriarchal roles and subversions so inherent in these tales, but it is only recently that an overwhelmingly pronounced attention seems to have been redirected to this creative imaginary literature that has impacted young minds down the generations. Looking back one can see Cinderella being invoked by Margaret Fuller in *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), a book that was perhaps the first public discussion of women's rights. This was followed by Louisa May Alcott who in her novel *Little Women* drew upon both Beauty and the Beast and Cinderella to project how women in her times had to abide by the conventions dictated by men. Subsequently Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Jane Austen during the Victorian era down to Angela Carter, AS Byatt, Margaret Atwood and Anne Sexton, to name a few twentieth century women writers, have delved into this fathomless storehouse to reclaim the gendered agenda lying dormant in their interstices.

It was in 1970 that the archive was revisited from a feminist perspective when Alison Lurie in *New York Review of Books* inaugurated the debate with her article "Fairy Tale Liberation" and its sequel

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"Witches and Fairies" arguing how these stories were repositories of strong female characters. She hailed the fairy tales as one of the few sorts of children's books of which the radical feminist would approve. This was indeed a step forward from Simone de Beauvior who had written in the *Second Sex* (1953) that woman was Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White "who receives and submits" and even Betty Friedan who had considered the fairy tale as merely one of the many socializing forces in that discouraged women from understanding their true worth.

Whether feminists considered the women in fairy tales 'feminine' or 'feminists', attesting or contesting notions of womanhood, the fairy tale had arrived full bloodedly on the scene. With Karen Rowe re-affirming female attitudes, Carolyn G Heilburn re-interpreting the experiences of the female self, Madonna Kolbenschlag re-asserting feminist potential and Colette Dowling reflecting on women's psychological attitudes mirrored in these tales the dialogics moved forward.

A reading of Haase's "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship" reveals that the scholarship falls within three non-discreet, sometimes overlapping stages. During the first stage, scholars began to examine the gender roles embedded in the tales in order to consider what parts of these were culturally determined. In this first stage also, scholars were looking at the ways in which images of the feminine had been changed or "edited" over time. During the second stage, scholarship focuses on the investigation of the female voice in folklore and fairy tales and looks at ways that fairy tales have served as hypotexts for other genres. In the third stage, feminist fairy tale scholars and writers enter into revisionist myth-making, re-interpreting or revising previously misogynist themes (1-36).

According to Haase, feminist scholars encouraged women to study the tales for purposes of liberation and constructing new identities (7). Feminists re-reading of fairy tales identified problematic themes of unrealistic standards for women, female passivity, and restriction of roles for women to marriage and motherhood (Encyclopedia 145). Bacchilega noted themes of "repression" and "man-made constructs of 'Woman'" (6, 9). Maria

Tatar identifies gender-based themes of males who are rewarded and females who suffer "humiliation . . . loss of pride. ... and power" (cited in Sellers 9). Ruth Bottigheimer's 1980-1985 study showed how Grimm's revisions "weakened once strong female characters, demonized male power, imposed a male perspective on stories voicing women's discontents, and rendered heroines powerless by depriving them of speech, all in accord with the social values of their time"(cited in Haase 11).

Even more problematic was the realization that these "common cultural metaphors and narratives [were being] imprinted on the child's mind while very young" (Palma 1). Chandler noted that "Texts are instrumental in not only the construction of other texts but in the construction of experiences". Feminists rightly feared that repetitive models of female passivity could disable scores of children exposed to them at a young age. Thus it became imperative to rewrite fairy tales to reflect more appropriate coping behaviors for females. In 1978 Heather Lyons introduced the idea of alternative versions of women in some of the lesser known tales and several collections were introduced between 1975 – 1981 which had female heroines or demonstrated the strength of woman (cited in Haase 7). On closer reading Bottigheimer noted that there were "competing views of gender" inherent in the tales' sources (cited in Haase 12). Gilbert and Gubar recognized the "egotistically assertive" stepmother and the passive Snow White and identified the "controlling voice" of the narrative as a patriarchal voice, that of the mirror (cited in Haase 12-13). Feminist scholar Marina Warner cautions against reading fairy tales as anti-feminist since many, in the context of the time they were written, embodied feminist objectives such as a happy marriage based on choice and love (Sellers 14). Paradiz notes that marriage was, in many cases, "women's only realistic economic option" (Bottigheimer 128, Russell 4).

In 1979 Carolyn G. Heilbrun called for reinterpretation of the tales to include the "'emerging female self'" and called for women to identify with male attributes in the tales so that she could find within them alternative parts of themselves (Haase 5-6). A number of anthologies of

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fairy tales by and about women published in the 1980s-1990s included 1983 and 1993 editions of *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* by Jack Zipes (8-9). Zipes tracks the development of over thirty different versions demonstrating variant attitudes toward sexuality, gender roles, and power (Haase 9).

Red Riding Hood has been seen as a parable of sexual maturity. In this interpretation, the red cloak symbolizes the blood of the menstrual cycle, braving the "dark forest" of womanhood. Or the cloak could symbolize the hymen (earlier versions of the tale generally do not state that the cloak is red). In this case, the wolf threatens the girl's virginity. The anthropomorphic wolf symbolizes a man, who could be a lover, seducer or sexual predator. This differs from the ritual explanation in that the entry into adulthood is biologically, not socially, determined.

Whereas in the classical moralizing version, Red Riding Hood was supposed to follow the path of obedience and moral behaviour, the feminists found in these stories a certain degree of eroticism and boldness. Pizarnik (1987) for example finds the woods to be a symbol of otherness which the girl wants to explore and even challenge. What was in the traditional story a forbidden and forbidding place becomes a metaphor of a darker identity which must be found out in order to understand oneself. No longer at the end of the story is Red Riding Hood an innocent, vulnerable figure but has matured into adulthood where she can take care of the values lurking in the darkness. Some women writers have also instilled into their versions desire of women to encounter wolfness and still others have brought out perspectives of matrilineal hierarchy in the story. Marcela Sola (1971) has rewritten the story from the wolf's perspective where he is living in his accustomed habitat and where looking for food is his customary task but when he encounters Little Red Riding Hood instead of her being afraid she willingly prefers his company to visit her Granny's house. Sola gives the little girl a 'Wicked Giggle' signifying her confidence and also makes her toss her hood back as a bold statement of her independence. Sola's Red Riding Hood is resourceful and pragmatic and that the person at a

disadvantage is the wolf and it is the latter that must be wary rather than the other way round.

Another version of the story comes from Luisa Valenzuela (1993), 'If this is life, I am Red Riding Hood' where the wolf is a metaphor for a brute and Red Riding Hood for budding sexuality. In this story the wood is recreated as an erotic metaphor that metamorphosis the girl. The path gradually turns to be lined with 'Very tall, very erect trees. (103) and then evolves into a jungle which has wild and tempting fruits. Moreover the grandmother is shown to have already trodden that path (107) and having tasted it all. As she goes along Red Riding Hood muses why all women, generation after generation, must cross the wood and why must each time been given the clichéd warning about the fierce wolfs waylaying them. Valenzuela transforms the text not only into a parody of the canonical version but also makes it into a meta-commentary where the ritualized text assumes sexist assumptions.

Angela Carter's (1979) revisions of this tale give voice to a distinct gendered identity and its narrative form also acquires a revisionist gendering. The transformation that Carter gives to the tale refracts what one wishes or fears to become, it highlights desires that unconsciously lurk deep within and find a surface through the subversion. In *The Werewolf* the child who goes to visit her grandmother carries her father's hunting knife which she swipes to slash off the right forepaw of the wolf who had pounced on her. What Carter is trying to comment on is that one must be as conscious of what women can do to women as well. In another story, *The Company of Wolves* Carter once again writes, 'fear and flee the wolf' for worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems (73) and she goes on to say 'Children do not stay young for long in this savage country' (74). The only way to keep the wolves outside is by living well and then one can even befriend a wolf and sleep sweetly between his tender paws.

Two primary texts of the new movement were *Transformations* by Anne Sexton (1971) and *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter (1979), both of which contained powerful re-workings of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In *Transformations* – a volume of seventeen poems based on the themes of Grimms'

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fairy tales – Sexton used *Little Red Riding Hood* to explore the subject of deception – the lies we tell and the lies we believe. In *The Bloody Chamber,* Carter's *The Company of Wolves* was a sensual fever-dream of story that skillfully manipulated the themes, the symbols, the very language of Little Red Riding Hood. In *The Werewolf*, in the same collection, Carter re-examined the fairy tale from a different angle, taking a more historical, less psychoanalytical approach in this dark rendition.

Barbara Walker (1996) has rewritten fairy tales from a feminist perspective where Little Red Riding Hood becomes Little White Riding Hood and the explanation she gives is that since the girl is a maiden, a virgin her colour is white and she is the daughter of the familiar fairy tale heroine Red. Also the wolf has been replaced by man because wolves are not known to eat living people whereas man is a destructive, exploitative character.

This story filtered through centuries of patriarchal culture has been interpreted accordingly where the women are either decorative or customary. With the coming of second wave of feminism these tales were revisioned putting the emphasis on the female characters and reimaging them. These revisions reinterpreted the age old story and reworked the fairy tale.

Anne Sexton's volume *Transformations has* both surprised and confused critics and readers at the time of its publication in 1971, since the author seemed to adopt, if unconsciously, the precept of "writing as re-vision" formulated by Adrienne Rich in her now canonical and well-known essay. She re-writes sixteen tales from the Brothers Grimm, "told in a wisecracking Americanese that simultaneously modernizes and desentimentalizes them" (Ostriker, *Stealing,* 232). Anne Sexton deconstructs the andocentric and masculiníst values present in the original versions of the fairy tales and sarcastically reposes them from a feminine perspective, unveiling altogether the patriarchal inscription they bear. To the extent that the social construction of femininity is ostensibly endorsed in these texts, they can be viewed as well as a political commentary on the ontology of woman as a category defined by modem humanist epistemology. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among others, have indicated, "myths

and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts" (36). Indeed, fairy tales voice the culture's most cherished convictions about the forms that both male and female subjectivity should adopt as they become inserted within a given social structure. They further illustrate how modern power is subtly and cynically wielded on individual behavior but, especially, on feminine performance of language and observance of social norms.

Feminist critics Susan Bordo and Sandra L. Bartky have analyzed the ways in which power is wielded on women in contemporary society. They have used Foucault's notions regarding a non-violent, non-repressive power that has self-surveillance as one of its basic features. Disciplinary power, as this modality has come to be known, is closely allied to the creation of correcting and normalizing technologies that purport to render the bodies docile to the demands of the system. Rather than the repression of sexuality, the French thinker observed an "incitement to discourse" in which a complex set of technologies was generated in order to ensure the control of the individuals' bodies. In his text "Docile Bodies" (1977) he delineates the ways in which bodies are used and managed, "tamed".

The objective consists in creating responsive bodies to the technologies put in practice by given institutions or systems of power. Contemporary feminist thought has endorsed this Foucauldian formulation about the docilization of bodies Sandra L. Bartky has examined a set of disciplinary practices that are being currently enforced so as to normalize not only the physical image of women but their behavior and social conduct as well.

Feminist criticism and re-visioning of fairy tales has centered on exposing the gender ideology that is perpetuated in tales. Criticism has focused on the passivity of young girls waiting to be rescued, the encoded binaries in a text that equate beauty with goodness, the representation of evil stepmothers, and the closures which seal a girl's dependency on a prince. We would particularly, like to raise questions of what kind of changes are being

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made in regard to picture book versions of `fractured' fairy tales.

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