



## CINDERELLA: THROUGH THE LENS OF FEMINISM

SHARMIN SUMAYAH

Lecturer, Department of English, City University, Bangladesh

Email: [sharminsumayah@gmail.com](mailto:sharminsumayah@gmail.com)



Article Received:19/06/2020

Article Accepted: 18/07/2020

Published online:23/07/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.3.51](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.3.51)

### Abstract

The paper aims at the attribution of socially recognized stereotypical qualities on women as a pivotal factor of protagonist and antagonists in *Cinderella*, which build a connection between beauty and goodness as well as between ugliness and evil. There is clear indication of beauty being good, and ugly being bad in fairy tales which create a barrier in the mind of readers as well as in the society. The paper also shows the portrayal of the importance and influence of male characters without being present throughout the story over female characters in fairy tales. These attribution through these tales have a great influence over the readers of these stories, the paper also reveals the impact of invisible hindrances on the young girls which are created within their mind by connecting themselves with the storyline of the tales.

**Key Words:** protagonist, beauty, ugliness, antagonist, heroine, obstacle

### Introduction

Fairy Tales are the genre of folklore which tells the stories of typically featured entities such as dwarfs, dragons, elves, fairies, giants, gnomes, goblins, griffins, mermaids, talking animals, trolls, unicorns, or witches, and usually magic or enchantments. For ages, these tales have great impact on children especially the mostly targeted reader of these stories are young girls, who are far from the realities of the world. At the beginning, the fairy tales were not genre, rather these were presented orally or sometimes enacted dramatically rather than written them down. Some of the stories that were celebrated mostly later on were 'Grimms Fairytales'. The Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, collected old fairytales over one hundred years ago. Research has shown that they gathered the stories primarily from German women, the majority of these tellers were spinners, to preserve the oral traditions of Germany.

Women have been playing prominent role in fairy tales both in written tales and tales made by the Disney Corporation. Female characters in *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* and so on are portrayed either as a beautiful figure for the representation of the heroines, or as ugly beings who are the villains of the story. Thus the fairy tales has idealized beauty which depict the heroine is always a beautiful figure possessing long hair, fair skin, submissive behavior, expert in every household works, and also is suppressed by a villainous step mother who is over ambitious and sometimes ugly also.

Cinderella from the most famous fairy tale *Cinderella* is the perfect depiction of the so called idealized heroine and her step mother and step sisters as villains. Being widower, Cinderella's father remarries, from the wife he has two daughters. After the death of Cinderella's father, Cinderella becomes totally dependent on her step mother thus the story

progresses till the marriage of Cinderella. Through the passage of the story we find Cinderella an overtly suppressed personality whereas her mother and sisters explicitly despotic, rude and unethical characters.

### Literature Review

The term 'Fairy Tales' was first introduced by Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy (1650) in 1697 during the publication of her collection of tales celebrating eternal youth, beauty, love, affection and passion. Aulnoy (1650) through her works represented the social and political condition of her own time

Many of the fairy tales read by the children represent one prominent message of 'feminine beauty ideal'.

As Naomi Wolf (1962) says:

"The quality called beauty objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women; beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless."  
— 'The Beauty Myth'.

The most read fairy tale *Cinderella* was published in 1697 when there was much deprivation of women in the society.

As Diana Willen wrote in 'Women in the Public Sphere in Early Modern England: The Case of the Urban Working Poor'-

"Women frequently predominated among the recipients of poor relief in England, 1550-1700, the result of economic, demographic, and cultural factors."

Earlier that time, there was less participation of women in public sectors. It was totally prohibited for them to go out and work, rather they were totally

dependent on their male counterparts. Which has the reflection on the fairy tales where the protagonist is always a female and bound to stay home and work. It is a great irony that, though the female is the protagonist, they are under the suppression of any other female negative character, and moreover they are dependent on a male character who will come and rescue her from all her encaged life, though in name of marriage to a prince the heroine eventually engages herself in an another cage. Women thus in fairy tales like *Cinderella* who are beautiful but passive and calm are considered to be good and heroine, whereas women who are not beautiful but aggressive, chaotic, ambitious and oppressive are bad and villains.

### Discussion

Society has created physical attractiveness as the fixed notion for women as the definition of beauty which is also celebrated in the fairy tales that ignite the idea more and make it compulsive in the society. So the physical attraction becomes the most important asset of women as portrayed in fairy tales.

As we see in *Cinderella* where the prerequisite of a girl is to be attractive and beautiful to become the wife of the prince. Cinderella is abused by her step mother and two step sisters. They make her do all the household works throughout the day. Once a ball is arranged in the palace to find out the bride for prince and all the girls from the province are invited so the prince can choose wife for him. The step mother and sisters put obstacles in front of Cinderella so she cannot attend the party, as she is more beautiful than the step sisters. Moreover, the sisters think the absence of Cinderella will make the prince to choose one of the step sisters. This incident is a clear indication from the writer that a woman is brainless, as in the ball there must be some other so called beautiful girls who can be surely chosen by the prince. Furthermore, there is also a depiction of the two step sisters being envious to Cinderella that whoever the prince chooses but he must not choose Cinderella as his wife. Through this simple incident, the writer puts forward the negative traits of women of being brainless and jealous

Being disheartened, Cinderella cries when the fairy godmother comes there and dresses her up in a beautiful gown and a pair of glass shoes. When she enters the ball the prince becomes enchanted by her beauty and starts dancing with her for the whole evening. As the clock strikes to twelve, Cinderella starts running as she is supposed to leave before midnight. While running back she leaves her one shoe at the doorsteps of the palace. From the next morning, the full squad from the palace starts looking for owner of the small glass shoe. And, eventually they find Cinderella as the shoe fits only to the foot of Cinderella. And the prince and Cinderella get married and live happily ever after.

Throughout the story, there is the celebration of Cinderella's beauty only. Cinderella stays with her abusive family without any remonstrance because the writer wants her to be like this as this quality will make Cinderella submissive which is considered as the prominent quality if an ordinary girl wants to be heroine. So, it proves only a submissive girl can be a heroine of the story. In fact the beauty is not confined only to the facial features and fair skin of Cinderella, rather her small feet also symbolizes the feminine eminence. Where the step sisters possess bigger feet which make them more masculine, Cinderella's small feet make her feminine.

As Bettelheim (1903) writes

"To have such big feet that they don't fit the slipper makes the stepsisters more masculine than Cinderella—therefore less desirable."

Thus the writer fetishizes the beauty through minor qualities of Cinderella.

Moreover, Cinderella is expert in all household works like cooking, washing, cleaning and tapestry as well. On the other hand, the step sisters only are expert in creating problems for Cinderella. So they are ugly and as they want to marry the prince so they are over ambitious too. The step sisters are presented as envious, ambitious and ugly characters. So in the tale there is association between beauty and goodness; and ugliness and evil. As Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz have

written in "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales" author that 31 percent of all stories associate beauty with goodness and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil personified in the semblance of witches, wicked stepmothers and deceitful queens. At the end, while beauty is always rewarded, lack of beauty is punished. As we observe in the tale *Cinderella* also that at the end of the story the prince got married to Cinderella, the epitome of beauty and goodness, without learning any of her virtuous quality, and the step mother and step sisters get punished by losing the prince.

Cinderella is portrayed as a lady who is longing for her so called prince charm who will rescue her from all her agonies and sufferings. She is longing for someone to be loved. The tale ends up with happily ever after ending where the heroine gets the chance to become the maiden of the prince which is considered to be a good luck for her. It contradicts the idea of freedom of a woman, where the woman should be self-dependent, rather the event of royal marriage exemplifies Cinderella's dependency on the prince to become financially and socially free. Though, ironically it creates an opposite picture of dependency where Cinderella is now dependent on the prince, the event proves that it is better to be dependent on a rich man than on a rich woman (Cinderella's step mom).

When the tale is read under the lens of feminism, it is found that women are always in need. And this need makes women greedy and evil. Just like the stepmother of Cinderella. She got married to a rich widower for the ownership of his wealth. It is the need of the step mother which accelerate her devilish traits. These devilish traits drive her doing evil behavior with Cinderella. This creates an impression that women are mentally feeble, and possess no quality to get succeed unless a rich man offers her to get married and wealthy. Furthermore, when the ball is arranged for the prince it emphasizes that a man has the opportunity to choose a bride for him unlike a woman, who considers herself lucky when gets chosen by a rich man. And to get the opportunity a woman can get herself in any kind of danger as Cinderella does

without having any fear of the presence of her step mother and step sisters to be present in the ball.

In the course of the story there is a glimpse of feeble woman leadership in a home. The story line provides an idea that if the woman is the head of a house then there will be many disorganization in the family. As readers find when Cinderella's father dies the financial condition of the family becomes shaky. In fact the plot makes the reader believe that a woman needs a man to become financially stable and wealthy.

When the look and deeds in the characters of a fairy tale is imagined, it creates an ugly image of the lady who is ambitious and villainous in the story, whereas the submissive, naive and virtuous character is portrayed as the most beautiful one. So fairy tales portray ambition of a woman as evil within, ugly and scheming, even the character is manipulating over the other naive characters in the tales. Just like the step mother and step sisters in *Cinderella* who force the naive heroine to do all the household and abuse her by creating hurdles in her path. On the other hand, Cinderella endures all the torture of her mother and sisters, and she is beautifully portrayed with virtues in the tale. So fairy tales clearly create relationship with ugliness and badness, beauty and goodness. The more interesting thing about the fairytales is a step mother is always bad, repulsive, abusive, over ambitious, jealous and proud.

Fairy tales are read mostly by the young girls, who are easily derived by these feeble storylines. *Cinderella* teaches them to be passive, guileless, suppressive and dependent. So, it is a matter of concern that how young girls can learn to be independent by reading the story of Cinderella. Moreover, the story sets a parameter of beauty through fair skin, long hair, small foot, and blue eyes. So young girls who do not possess these qualities might lack the confidence as they tend to follow the heroines blindly. Even, it make them believe that in real life there will be a prince charming who is going to rescue them from all of their agonies. Furthermore, they might be compelled to think that being ambitious means to be ugly and oppressive,

and stepmothers are always cruel, but in reality there can be some different images in different context.

#### Citations

- Abler, Alice. "The Moral of the Story." *Vision*. N.p., 2005. Web. 11 Feb. 2020.
- Adak, Ankita. "Fairytales and "The Beauty Ideal"." *Indian Folk* (2018): n. pag. Print.
- Baker-Sperry, Lori, and Liz Grauerholz. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." *Gender & Society* 17.5 (2003): 711-26. Print.
- Breunlin, Cynthia. "Cinderella Need New Shoes." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 11.3 (2000): 57-61. Print.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. "Tales, Magic, and Fairy Tales." *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic* (2014): 1-10. Print.
- Hohr, Hansjorg. "Dynamic Aspects of Fairy Tales: Social and Emotional Competence through Fairy Tales." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 44.1 (2000): 89-103. Print.
- Joosen, Vanessa. "Feminist Criticism and the Fairy Tale; The Emancipation of 'Snow White' in Fairy-tale Criticism and Fairy-tale Retellings." *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 10.1 (2004): 5-14. Print.
- Jordanriser. *Methods of Advanced Literary Studies*. N.p., 05 Nov. 2013. Web. 13 Feb. 2020.
- Nanda, Silima. "The Portrayal of Women in the Fairy Tales." *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention* 1.4 (2014): 246-50. Print.
- Nasir, Liza. "Sutori." *Sutori*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2020.
- Randall, Sean. "Feminisney: "Snow White" - First and Worst." *Medium*. CineNation, 04 May 2017. Web. 02 Feb. 2020.
- Raufman, Ravit, and Haim Weinberg. "Fairy Tales and the Social Unconscious." (2018): Print.

---

Winston, Joe. "Careful The Tale You Tell Fairy Tales,  
Drama and Moral Education." *Children &  
Society* 9.4 (2007): 80-93. Print.

---