UNVEILING THE MAGIC SPELL: DECODING THE POLITICS OF MASCULINITIES IN FAIRY TALES

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ABSTRACT

Fairy tales have permeated the society for ages and they always have a profound influence on us. We are introduced into this magical world at a very young age. Through the narrative form, it cast a magic spell upon the readers creating an everlasting impression on their minds. These tales appear innocent but they create and circulate certain gender notions which are inscribed on our mind right from our childhood. They act as a tool for learning traditional gender roles and gender concepts and are responsible in conditioning a child's psyche to act in a particular way. These tales propagate the concept that men are assertive and independent whereas women are weak and vulnerable. This results in gender labeling and stereotyping which act as an obstacle to the achievement of gender equality. Moreover these fairy tale characters proliferates deeply engrained conventional gender attitudes and norms thereby encouraging sex based discriminations.

The aim of this paper is to uncover and describe the ways in which masculinity and femininity are represented in fairy tales. For the purpose of the study, popular fairy tale characters are chosen in order to question the concept of gender and its representations in these tales. These stereotypical characters perform traditional gender roles showing how gender notions are enforced in the minds of the people through this imaginary discourse.

Key Terms: Macho, Hyper Masculinity, Hegemonic, Misogyny, Phallogocentrism

Fairy Tales have a stronger and wider influence on the society for ages. These are not merely stories to entertain children but have a greater psychological impact on every child. Gender is defined and constructed by the society, as Simone de Beauvoir says "one is not born, but rather becomes woman"(301). This indicates that gender is always in a state of flux and is transitional in nature. Gender is nothing, but a set of cultural expectations that every individual strives to achieve. Fairy tales is used as a medium to propagate

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the notions of gender and it is with these fairy tales that various stereotypical gender roles are indoctrinated into the society.

Who is a real man? This is hard to define, because men and masculine subjectivities are defined in terms of social relations. There is always a contradiction between the everyday experiences of men and the ideological constructions of masculinity. Masculinity has gained various meanings through the years and today, the term has even absorbed negative connotations, emphasizing the inhuman acts and behaviors of men. History has given us many examples of masculine heroes who are exemplary versions of ideal masculinity. They are the epitome of all virtues and the embodiment of bravery and heroism. The exhortation "fear not" if you are a man shows the traditional masculine ideals that man should always possess the traits of courage, power and strength. Any deviation from this will subvert the basic notions and concepts of gender.

Ways of being male is something society teaches a boy right from his childhood. "Think wisely, act bravely, remember you are a boy", and the advice of this kind motivates and guides a boy on his way to his adulthood. Teaching and learning gender roles start from home at a very young age. Fairy tales fascinates them and they experience the early lessons of manliness through these imaginary characters who are the epitomes of ideal masculinity. These male figures are handsome and ideal in every way. The distinction of good and evil is presented through these characters that are always right and diplomatic. Free from all flaws, the heroes in fairy tales display different types of masculine virtues that every boy wishes to have. Thus masculinity is defined against various identities and subjectivities and is a series of becoming.

Vladimir Prop, on analyzing the deep structure of folktales and fairy tales in *Morphology of Folktales*, identified different male characters like the hero, the villain, the donor, the helper , unfolding all possible actions in the plot. Each of these characters presents different concepts of masculinity. In fairy tales we observe the Metamorphosis or transformation of beast to a prince thereby revealing the duality of masculine gender. These fairy tale characters reveal the complexity and uncertainty associated with masculine gender. There are types of masculinity like hegemonic masculinity, hyper masculinity, intellectual masculinity and subversive masculinity.

R .W. Connell in *Masculinities* defines hegemonic masculinity as

> "Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problems of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77).

In one of the most well known fairy tales, *Beauty and the Beast*, the enchanted prince was turned to a beast who regains his identity only through his true and sincere love for Belle. The beast initially attempt to possess Belle through power by locking her up in a room. The Beast here shows hegemonic masculinity of domination and subordination. Todd W. Reeser in *Masculinities in Theory* says

> "the binary opposition of male or female or of masculinity or femininity maps onto a binary notion of power since binary opposition often arise because one element of the hierarchy needs opposition to impose its hegemony on the other"(38).

Here the beast tries to exert its power on Belle who is weak and powerless and she occupies an inferior position in the hierarchical structure. But later the beast learns the lessons of moral and manners from Belle, who helps him in his transformation to a gentleman. Gaston, on the other hand is a stereotypical male character who appears as a handsome evil guy throughout the plot. He was always in pursuit of winning the heart of Belle and represents a male stereotype who is rude and numb. Belle, the central female character, exposes the female instinct of being loved and worshipped.

Hyper masculinity means heightened masculinity where men's physical strength, power and sexuality are exaggerated. In many fairy tales we find such men in action and their adventures becomes the ultimate test of their manhood. *Little Red Riding Hood*, one of the oldest fairy tales is the story of a little girl who was rescued from a wolf by a huntsman. The huntsman killed the wolf with his axe to save Little Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother. Huntsman here emerges as a brave and courageous figure who saved the girl by defeating the beast. Here the story conveys the message that men are born to protect and serve others and

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hence powerful. While the female characters including Red Riding Hood are presented here as passive and submissive. Huntsman here is a macho man who rushed boldly, wielding his axe to save the girl. He cut open the wolf thereby expressing his masculinity in an assertive and aggressive manner. In fact there are no stories were women save themselves and in all these fairy tales feminine gender is represented as weak and vulnerable.

Fairy Tales is a discourse that constructs masculinity and femininity. The super heroes in these tales perform various gender roles and are responsible in constructing masculinities. Men who possess virtue of knowledge and intelligence also appear in some fairy tales. Their intellectual superiority helps them to overcome the obstacles that they face and finally comes out successfully. *Ricky of the Tuft* by Charles Perrault is the story of Prince Ricky who was ugly but had plenty of brains. He was a hero with high degree of intelligence that gave him power. He possessed intellectual masculinity and he is admired for being both wise and witty.

Fairy tales shows how gender is being constructed in relation with the society. In *Masculinities,* Connell says "Masculinity and femininity are quite easily interpreted as internalized sex roles, the product of social learning or 'socialization'"(22).Men and women always struggle to meet these expectations .Any deviance from the accepted norms creates a tension and an anxiety among them who always tries to live up to this standards. Analyzing the fairy tales will reveal that the concepts of gender are slippery and are never static. Thus fairy tales plays a significant role in creating and circulating traditional notions of gender and thereby making it more complex.

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