RESEARCH ARTICLE

PERFORMANCE IN FAIRY TALES: A STUDY ON GENDER ROLES IN SELECT FAIRY TALES

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ABSTRACT

From childhood we are ascribed certain roles with regard to our sex. Starting from the colours preferred (pink for girls and blue for boys), the toys given for play and the kinds of advices given, children are made aware of the difference between a boy and a girl, and how they must stick on to these differences. All though these differences are mere creations of the society, they give much hype to the way in which a girl or a boy should act, behave, talk, etc., thus rooting it in their minds.

Knowingly or unknowingly, we are reinforcing these ideas of gender roles to our children through the fairy tales that we narrate to them. Along with the fact that they are transported to a world of fantasy with kings, queens, princes, princesses, dragons and the wicked witch, they also get the idea that as a boy or a girl he or she is expected to be like the brave prince or the damsel in distress, respectively, and only then will their story end as "happily ever after".

Being the vehicles carrying the intended rules and conventions of the society, these fairy tales are of immense importance. As children tend to catch up much of the ideology offered to them in their childhood, these tales act as building blocks of their character. This paper, thus, focuses on how gender roles are presented in fairy tales and how these tend to propagate the intended gender performances in society.

Key Words: Gender, Performance, Performativity

Gender and gender binaries are commonplace in our society. Much of the existing norms and conventions have been moulded from these binaries. Although we commonly accept the notions of gender, it is possible that we usually take the meaning of gender for granted. The most common trend of defining gender is by associating it with the biological sex of a particular person. Thus, a 'man' is the one who has the biological features for a male human being and a 'woman' is the one who possesses the biological features of a female human being. But what actually is gender?

Judith Butler has described gender as "a stylized repetition of acts … which are internally discontinuous … [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (*Gender Trouble*). Although gender is acknowledged as the product of social construction, it still appears to hold some core identity and a true sexuality of the "self". Butler holds that gender identity does not express some inner truth, but is actually the product of "stylized repetition of acts", that is, gender is a performance. Thus, everyday actions, speech utterances, gestures and representations;

dress codes and behaviours as well as certain prohibitions and taboos all work to produce what is regarded as an essential masculine or feminine identity.

It is generally assumed that the performance of gender is assigned to reflect the biological sex and is restricted by it. Butler, however, notes that a sexual (natural) body can "put on" different genders, as they are the product of social construction. Sex, she argues, is a socially constructed category which stems out of social and cultural practices and in the context of a discourse that has a history and its own social and political dynamics. In an interview with Liz Kotz, Butler once said, "I think for a woman to identify as a woman *is* a culturally enforced effect … that 'coherent identification' has to be cultivated, politicized, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame" (*Artforum*).

The fairy tales that are of much interest among children is a vehicle that propagates such social and cultural practices that enforce certain modes of gender performance. Through the fantastic world presented before the children, these tales are able to fascinate them, and also are able to inculcate certain accepted patterns of behaviour and values. For a child, the adult-world is full of complexity and is difficult to understand. However, the fairy tales present this complicated life in a simplified manner and they soon understand, through the interactions among the characters, "cardinal virtues of love and self-sacrifice, confidence, faithfulness, compassion, tenderness, justice, mercy, fortitude, diligence, resolve, and frugality" (Erum, 2).

These tales beginning with "once upon a time" and ending in a "happily ever after" passes down through generations a mythical life, devoid of the taste of reality. We find in each of these stories that the females are "passive, silent, industrious, and rewarded with riches and a man to support them, while male models [are] destined to seek out adventure and take as their reward passive, silent, industrious females" (Jarvis, l06). As these tales are all about dreams and their fulfillment, they directly or indirectly pass on the message that if you remain subservient to your role, as prescribed by the society, your dreams will be fulfilled, and you can live "happily ever after". And if you choose to go against these set gender roles, as the tales illustrate through the lives of other "villainous" characters, you will have to bear the consequences. These gender roles are evident stories like *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Rapunzel*.

All these stories present the female figures as extremely beautiful girls. In *Snow White* (or *Little Snow White*), we find the mother wondering, "Would that my little daughter may be as white as that snow, as red as blood, and as black as the ebony window-frame!"(2).Surely enough, as per her wish, "the little girl grew up: her skin was as white as snow, her cheeks as rosy as blood, and her hair as black as ebony; and she was called Snow-White" (2). Beauty, in *Beauty and the Beast*, "was very pretty, and her nature was happy and good, her presence was sunshine, and she was the joy of her father's heart" (3). In the case of Rapunzel, she "grew into the most beautiful child under the sun" and "had magnificent long hair, fine as spun gold" (6) In *Sleeping Beauty*, the "little girl … was so very beautiful that the king could not cease looking on her…" (2).The names of each of these characters also allude to the immense beauty or grace that they possess, as in 'Snow-White', 'Aurora'(or Briar Rose), 'Beauty' etc. These fairy tales gives emphasis on the power of beauty and how it gives way to a suitable romantic relationship. Although their beauty is a source of jealousy among the other females (e.g. the wicked witch in *Snow White*, the stepmother and stepdaughters in *Cinderella*), the same beauty is a source of attraction to the male figures (e.g. the servant, dwarfs and the Prince in *Snow White*, Prince Charming in *Cinderella*). Thus, these tales provide "the subliminal message … [that] beauty becomes a pre-requisite for a lady to attract a gentleman" (Erum, 5).

A famous French proverb states, "Beauty, unaccompanied by virtue, is a flower without perfume." The fairy tales have always tried to uphold a similar outlook. Not only should the girl be beautiful, she should also be an embodiment of all virtues and goodness. This argument is well made through the example of Cinderella's stepsisters. They "were fair in face but foul at heart" (2) and this is the reason why they failed to secure a suitable relationship. The importance of being good is again emphasized in the advice that Cinderella's mother gives to her daughter, "Always be a good girl, and I will look down from heaven and watch over you" (1). The fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*, "gave all their best gifts to the little princess: one gave her virtue, another beauty, another riches, and so on till she had all that was excellent in the world" (3), so that she would be "… beautiful, and well-behaved, and amiable, and wise, that everyone who knew her loved her" (4). In *Beauty and the Beast*,

the beast, who was cursed by a wicked fairy, got transformed into a handsome prince "when a good girl like you [Beauty] should tell me that she loved me" (22).Through the depiction of evil characters like the wicked stepmother and stepsisters, and the evil queen, "the message that is brought home to girls … is: docility and powerlessness make girls attractive while pursuit of power brings ugliness and doom for women" (Erum, 12).

Another important message brought forth before the younger generation is that, "harmony in life comes from acceptance and resignation to a gender's place in society. The domain of a male is the public sphere and that of a female the private sphere, where "private", in a sense, suggests the home" (Erum, 5). This separation of domain is well presented in *SnowWhite*, where the dwarfs "went out all day long to their work, seeking for gold and silver in the mountains; and Snow-White remained at home" (10). The importance of being a good housekeeper is projected when the dwarfs put forward the following condition "if she would keep all things in order, and cook and wash, and knit and spin for them, she might stay where she was, and they would take good care of her" (10). She would be given security only if she is good in housekeeping. This similar situation is what makes Cinderella "… rise early morning, before daylight, to bring the water, to make the fire, to cook and to wash" (3). Even if "… she had no bed to lie down on, … [and] was made to sleep by the hearth among the ashes…" (3), she had to bear it with patience and grace, just like Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*, who "… was all smiles … [and] rolled up the sleeves of her print frock, and cooked the dinner, and scrubbed the floors, and made herself useful, here, there, and everywhere" (4-5). Thus, theargument is established that the "role arrangement of men in the public sphere and the women in the private sphere leads to harmonious families and society. It is only this way that the ideal state of "living happily ever after" can be maintained" (Erum, 6).

Another aspect highlighted by the fairy tales is the female figures' enduring and unending patience for the arrival of the prince who would rescue them, putting an end to their unfortunate plight. This "patient waiting" is a highlighted aspect in almost all the tales. In *Rapunzel*, we find a beautiful girl with long hair, locked up in a tower, "who in her solitude passed her time in letting her sweet voice resound" (7). Even after finding her prince, she was taken to a desert by the enchantress, "where she had to live in great grief and misery" (12), till the prince found her again. We also find Cinderella waiting patiently, doing her household chores, till the prince comes in with her lost slipper to claim "the right bride" (27). Snow-White and Sleeping Beauty also wait patiently, although unconsciously, for the arrival of the prince to save them from eternal sleep. Snow-White wakes up when the prince lifts her and "the piece of apple fell from between her lips" (24), whereas the Sleeping Beauty was aroused when the prince "gave her a kiss" (12). Thus, the moral of the story is: the female just needs to wait and be "passive", and she will be rewarded by the "active" male who will give her a new life.

Judith Butler places her notion of forced heterosexuality at the base of performative gender identity. She regards the apparently natural division of man/woman as constructed on the cultural meta-taboo regarding homosexuality, and on the forced and regulated sexuality within the boundaries of heterosexuality. Butler points out that the performative masculinity and femininity are defined through heterosexual sexuality, by presenting it as normal or "natural", and marginalizing all other options of sexuality, desires, identities and behaviours as outside the fixed norms.

Fairy tales too conform to this socially accepted norm of presenting the heterosexual sexuality as desirable. Man-woman relationships are the only kind found in each of these tales, omitting out any possible entry of homosexuals or Trans genders. We find romantic relationships unfolding through a single glance, or kiss, or some sweet talk. In *Snow White*, the prince who has just arrived at the scene is able to convince Snow-White into marriage, just by saying, "Thou art safe with me … I love you better than all the world; come with me to my father's palace and you shall be my wife" (24), and in *Rapunzel*, the prince was able to gain the young girl's confidence, who had never seen a man before, just by talking "like a friend" and confiding how "he had been forced to see her" (9). Rapunzel was impressed so much, "she saw that he was young and handsome", that she decided that "He will love me more than old Dame Gothel does" (10). Although we cannot deny a possible homosexual undertone in the relationship between Rapunzel and the enchantress, ultimately we find that heterosexuality triumphs. The characters are ready to go to whatever extent in order to make a heterosexual relationship possible. This is evident from the way in which Cinderella's stepsisters try to fit their

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foot into the slipper, by cutting off the great toe and squeezing the foot in, and also Beauty who was ready to keep up with the Beast, ultimately earning a desirable relationship with a handsome young prince.

The patriarchy-dominated world has always favoured the ideology of gender performativity. As argued and proven by Butler, gender is nothing but a social construct, which includes certain actions specified for individuals belonging to a particular sex. The ideology, on the pretext of the smooth and harmonious functioning of the society, actually enforces these set roles to be performed by individuals, according to their gender. Fairy Tales in the long run have been working in favour of these ideals. Through these tales, the prominence of heterosexuality is reinforced, females are encouraged to remain soft, docile, and full of grace; and men are called upon to be heroes in shining armour, who rescues the damsel in distress. By giving a "happily ever after" ending to all of them, these tales actually drives home the message that one can achieve a happy and fruitful life, only by conforming to the set gender roles. Children who grow accustomed to these fantastic stories, get rattled and unsettled when they realize the existence of a minority ideology, those of the queer, which was suppressed by the propagated dominant one. There have been attempts in re-telling the fairy tales from a different angle, the greatest example being Barbara .G. Walker's *Feminist Fairy Tales*. Being the shapers of a child's ideology, these tales have the power to make a child aware and tolerant to the multi-faceted society. These tales can also break out from the set norms and fly out to a world where gender is not a mere performance, but becomes the "self".

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