

Study of Beauty Myths and Gender in *The Little Mermaid* and *Rumpelstiltskin*

Dr. Mayank Ranjan

Associate Professor, Department of English Studies, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi-835222

***Dr. Ranjit Kumar**

Associate Professor, Department of English Studies, Central University of Jharkhand,
Ranchi- 835222

*Corresponding Author: reach_ranjiii@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

The present paper delves deep into the concepts of beauty-myths, motherhood and gender in the select fairy-tales and analyse how these terms work as an ideology and affect the minds of the children. In the fairy-tales they are innocuously presented and hide their adverse impact on the minds of the children. So, right from the childhood days children are made to internalize these ideologies and when they grow up their minds are already conditioned. So one cannot consider these tales as innocent.

Key words: Beauty-myths, motherhood, gender, fairy-tales

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For most of us childhood days are reckoned as one of the most special period of our lives, period which is etched in our memories as the most innocent one, the time which was free from all the mundane problems. What makes this specific span of life more memorable are our cherished memories of those stories of fairy tales that used to transmit us into the entranced and enchanted world of fairy tales, stories of Panchatantra and Jataka stories. We have all grown up with these tales. In fact, these tales still live with us and are very much embedded in our consciousness. All of us have immensely learnt innumerable lessons from such tale without ever realizing we are subjected to learning. Origin of Fairy tales can be traced within an oral storytelling tradition and it was quite later that they were printed and published. Regarding the origin and development of this genre, Prof, Jack Zipes writes that “the fairy tales become an acceptable literary genre first among adults, it was then disseminated in print in the 18th century to children. Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairytale in Europe agree that educated writers purposely appropriate the oral folk tale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about Mores, values, and manners so that the children and adults would become civilised according to the social code of that time. (Zipes1983)

To define fairy tales, these are the stories of magic and wonder that eventually end in marriages. All the struggles and difficulties are finally over at the end of the story and protagonists live happily ever after. The world of fairy tales is replete with fairies, elves, goblins, dwarves, giants, mermaids, goblins etc.. Such tales are found in all cultures and civilisations. There are always some moral lessons which are entailed with these tales for children. Good and evil clash and ultimately good is rewarded while evil beings are punished. These tales culminate with ending of two people’s difficulties occurring at the initial phase of their lives. Afterwards they live happily ever after. Usually these tales begin with once upon a time, thereafter problem arises which is solved and end with happiness. The theme of family relationship, love and marriage is the recurrent theme in fairy-tales. Mostly such tales revolve around the protagonists’ adventure quest. Magic and fantasy are the two most important ingredients of fairy tales and these are the elements which make such stories appealing to the children.

However, one must realize that these are not innocuous and innocent tales. Rather, these tales have insidious implications on the minds of the children as they condition the innocent minds with certain patriarchal codes. These tales are heavily gender-biased as they confine girls and woman to particular sex roles and privilege male characters. Female characters are portrayed in one dimensional manner within which they appear as subservient, weak, powerless, dependent and meek while the image of men are described as dominant, aggressive, brave and powerful. The image of Women are converted into beautiful objects lacking free will. There have been severe feminist criticism of these texts who believe that these texts inscribe and reinforce traditional patriarchal values. So such tales need to be revisited, re-read and re-written. Andrea Dworkin summarise this feminist position when she contends that “there are two definitions of woman (in fairy tales). There is the good woman. She is a victim. There is the bad woman. She must be destroyed. The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified.....(the ending of these tales) tells that happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimised, destroyed or asleep....It tell us that happy ending is when we ended, when we live without our lives, or not at all.” (Dworkin 1974)

Feminist scholars have stressed on the need of appropriation of such children's literature particularly focussing on Grimm's and Anderson's fairy-tales and *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Some of the prominent stories which such scholars have reworked from feminist viewpoint are Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chambers*, Fay Weldon's *The Life and Love of a She Devil*, Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*, Adrienne Rich's *Snow Queen*, Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, Elizabeth Bishop's *Interrupted Story*, Sylvia Plath's *Mrs. Grimm*. These scholars have effectively negotiated the illogical construction of womanhood, idea of beauty including prescriptions to modesty, chastity and silence. Their primary concern in this interrogation is marked by a transition from "the dependency of opposition" towards the search of their own self-defined individuality and identity. Anjela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is regarded as one of the most subversive texts where she has revised and revisited fairy tales from feminist point of view. Carter argues that "My intention was not to do versions or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, adult fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories.....I was taking....the latent content of those traditional stories and using that; and the latent content is violently sexual" (Haffenden 1985).

Suniti Namjoshi in her renowned *Feminist Fables* has envisioned Aesop's and other familiar fairy tales and fables. She contends and resists simple binaries of good and evil, male and female. In her famous appropriation and transformation of Hans Christian Anderson's tale of the ugly duckling into "The Female Swan is the story of a female duckling who studies everything there is to know about swans, but when she is made an honorary Swan, conflict breaks out among the ducks: some are delighted at such progress; others resist the attempt at equality, and yet other feels the duck has betrayed them. They turn for advice to Anderson, who suggests that it is time to move beyond the binary of duck or swan: they are now questioning 'the nature of ducks and the values of swans' and thus 'learning to fashion [their] own fables.'" (Namjoshi 2012).

Fairy tales represent cultural values which play extremely important roles in the process of socialisation as the child who reads such stories inculcates a gender identity. Thus fairy tales engender gender norms in a child as they function a symbolic discourse. Marcia Lieberman writes that "millions of women must surely have formed their psychosexual self-concepts and ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and of nature of reward its self, in part from their favourite fairy tales." (Lieberman 2014) It is pertinent to examine how fairy tales appropriate children's literature for discursive control. In these tales of children's literature one has to discern there is always already a hidden adult which come to terms with question of identity, sexuality, femininity, psychological trauma and familial space. The patriarchal codes percolate in such tales to perpetuate its mastery and hegemonic control over the lives of woman and control over their lives is inscribed and maintained by the construction of discourse around the beauty-ideal itself which works as an effective institution to subjugate and subordinate women. This present study problematizes and interrogates the innocence of fairy tales, foregrounding the hidden ideology which meditates the issues of the hidden adults in the domain of entertainment. Anglo American feminist scholarship is drawn to problematize and challenged fairytales as patriarchal discursive practices that intends to reposition woman into always already predetermined social positions.

The concern of the present research is the story of *The Little Mermaid* taken from Danish Den Lille havfrue meaning "the little mermaid" and is a well-known fairy tale that was written by Hans Christian Anderson, a Danish author. The tale was first published in the year 1837 and narrates a story about a young mermaid. The Little Mermaid in the tale sacrifices her own life and very identity of her as a mermaid in her abortive strife to acquire and win human soul and love of a human prince whom she loved profoundly. Since its first publication, the tale has been republished in different media which include musical theatre and animated film. The story opens when the little mermaid is in her adolescent life and emerges above to the sea-surface, notices handsome prince on a ship. She is instantly hit by cupid and falls in love with that prince who is unlike her as he belongs to a human race. In a slew of events, the tempest occurs in the sea wrecking the ship. The Little mermaid manages to save the prince who was almost about to drown. The Unconscious prince is taken to the shore near a temple. There is another girl who finds the unconscious prince. When the prince comes out of his unconsciousness he only finds this girl and not the little mermaid. Thus, the Prince is not aware of that fact that he is saved by the little mermaid as he never sees her. The little mermaid comes back to her abode underneath the water. She asks her grandmother whether human can live forever, can they breathe underwater. The grandmother explains to her that humans have a much shorter lifespan compared to mer folks about 300 years, but when mermaids die they turned to sea foam and cease to exist. However, soul of humans are eternal and goes on existing in heaven. The little mermaid is unable to give up her longing for the Prince and an eternal soul.

Eventually, she visits the Sea Witch, expresses her desire. The sea witch, after listening to her story sells her a potion through which she acquires legs but in exchange she has to give the witch her tongue. It is also significant here to remember that the little mermaid possessed the most beautiful and enchanting voice in the world. The sea witch however, warns her that once she becomes a human, she will be unable to return to the Sea. After drinking the potion she will feel excruciating pain as if her feet being pierced with sword. Yet, she chooses to accept this deal and when she gains her consciousness, she has two beautiful legs, and is able to dance like no human has ever danced before. However, during all the while she constantly feels as if she is treading on the sharp knives. As a result of this, her feet bleed continuously and most terribly. In addition, she can obtain a soul only if her lover truly loves her and marries her, afterwards a part of his soul will flow into her. If that does not happen, at the dawn on the first day after the prince marries another woman, the little mermaid will die heartbroken and would dissolve and disintegrate into sea foam. She is clearly aware of the dangerous consequences of this deal that may befall on her yet she drinks the potion to receive human love and reaches the prince who is completely mesmerised by her beauty and muted grace. Most of all, he loves to watch her dance. The little mermaid dances for him despite her experiencing excruciating agony. This continues for some time but soon things begin change. The prince's father ordered his son to marry the neighbouring king's daughter but the Prince informs his father about his unwillingness to marry the princess from the neighbourhood as he does not love the princess.

He further tell the king that he can only love the young woman from the temple, who he believes save his life and not even the little mermaid. To his utter surprise it turns out that the princess is the same temple girl, who had been sent to the temple to get education. The prince immediately gave his consent for marriage and the wedding is announced. The Prince and Princess marry resulting into the little mermaid's heart utterly broken. She thinks of all the suffering and pain she had endured and sacrifices that she embraced in order to get the prince. She despairs awaiting for death, but soon before sunrise, her sisters get a knife for her that the sea witch has given them in lieu of their long hair. They tell her that If she slays and kills the prince with that knife and trip her feet on the blood of the prince, she will once again become a mermaid and all her sufferings will be ceased, and she will return to her original abode getting her full life. However, the little mermaid could not muster up the courage to kill the prince who is sleeping with his bride and whom she still loves and instead, prefers to throw herself into the sea as dawn breaks. Her body soon dissolves into sea form, but soon, she feels the sun. She has not ceased to exist, rather, she has turned into spirit, a daughter of the air like some other daughters. The other daughters explain to her that she has become like them because her love for the human prince was too strong and she strove with all her heart to achieve an immortal soul. She can once again earn her own soul by performing good deeds and eventually she will arrive into the kingdom of God.

In the story, Little mermaid's chooses legs over her immortal voice. This act of hers can be compared to an act of bodily transformation which again corresponds to present day plastic surgery. It has been found out that plastic surgery has numerous layers of objectification and the appearance of women undergoing such plastic surgery in order to enhance their looks has grown exponentially. This raise the question and makes us wonder what causes unprecedented surge in the market of cosmetic surgery. It is for their own self or for the men that they want to look beautiful? Concept of Beauty functions as a hegemonic institution of discursive or cultural control which perpetuates patriarchy through subtle internalisation of patriarchal cultures. Its hidden agenda has been to reinforce stereotypes to domesticate women to subjugation, facilitate their helplessness and create values of subservience. Since the notion of beauty has always been associated with women's space in the society, because of patriarchal foundations of love and marriage wherein only the beautiful woman is preferred for love and marriage and beauty becomes an important hegemonic institution. The cultural and specially racial dimensions further complicate this issue often leading to complete destruction of a woman being.

The pursuit of beauty, has always remained an important concern for women in their lives. However, the idea of beauty has been institutionalised and imposed from outside male domain which has been extremely detrimental for the self-perception and self-formation of women's being. In fact patriarchal paradigms of the beauty myth Unconsciously and sometimes forcibly govern woman's lives which they had been made to emulate.

In almost all Fairy Tales, the most successful transformations are carried out by pain. Little Mermaid's story also sends out the widespread message among the women that suffering will lead them achieve their love. Likewise, this story also leads them to believe that love is to suffer which eventually means to hurt. The Mermaid's act of mortifying and mutilating her own body to achieve her love raises graver issues about the value of love which she strives to achieve which eventually leads her to her inevitable failure. The knife beneath her legs on which she wondrously dances for the Prince, literally becomes a surgical knife.

Further, the rise of capitalist ideas have added another dimension to this idea of beauty myth. It was believed that with the emergence of capitalism there would be more opportunities for woman as there would be more of

them joining the workforce. With that, condition of woman would gradually improve with their economic freedom eliminating general inequalities.

However, it was observed that there was increasing tendency among woman to look more beautiful leading them to adopt more complex and harmful measures and controls of the beauty ideal. The very idea of acquiring fair skin and slender figure has become increasingly popular and their desire to be desired by men has immensely been sought after. This has led to the emergence of new multi-billion industry of beauty products and cosmetic surgery. Scholars of feminism have vehemently attacked and problematized this interface of capitalism and patriarchy bringing forth the idea that rise of capitalism has not only fostered the commodification of female body but has also led to the world of self-destruction through its different makeover projects. Through huge investment, mass media advertisements and organisation of different beauty contests such as miss universe and miss world, models of beauty is continuously constituted which exhort and extoll women to copy and imitate. World of simulated image of beauty is created and presented before actual woman to emulate. Paradoxically but with extreme success, it has effectively seduced woman to hanker and pursue after the masculine beauty myth to enamour and seduce men. The purpose of such narratives is to continue and perpetuate the dominant discourse and maintain this patriarchal hegemony at every stage of one's life. These stories prescribe such patriarchal codes as normal and natural and any transgression of these so called normal would have penalising consequences. What could have been simple, ordinary and innocuous act of seeking and providing pleasure become a two-edged code for discipline and punishment. And all fairy tales including this one very much belong to this category. One can discern that little mermaid's wistful desire to acquire legs was not for her own self but for the prince with complete realisation that this transformation would bring pain and tragedy to her. Still she opts for this change in an attempt to make herself desirable in the eyes of the prince. The prince here can be seen as transcendental signifier, which decides and sets up parameters for what it means to be beautiful.

The Little Mermaid inflicts harm to her own body. The choice may appear conscious and self-willed, yet she is tricked and coerced into this act of transforming herself. Infact, this can be viewed as surgical reinforcement of the restrictive patriarchal ideology which limits human love to beauty (leg/dance). It's not just love, rather politics/economics of love that compels little mermaid to desire and become something which she is not. Her own self/image which threatens her as it would make her deprived of her desires, the other, in this case the prince.

She is trouble by her incompleteness which is her non-human existence. She could not tell the truth to her love, the prince that it was she, the mermaid that saved him from drowning. Naomi Woolf in her well known work *The Beauty Myth* rightly points out: "We have entered a terrifying new age with cosmetic surgery. All limits are broken down. No amount of suffering or threat of disfigurement can serve as a deterrent. What is happening to the female body in relation to the cosmetic surgery is like what is happening to the balance of life on the planet. We are at a historic turning point.....The two developments-the means and, more important, they will completely to alter woman-has brought us to an extraordinary mental upheaval surrounding life in the female form. With the shift in rhetoric that recast pain and mutilation into diminished language, female consciousness has had to reckon with the sort of destruction of the rules that faced human thinking when the atom was split. With the huge expansion of possibility came a huge expansion of danger." (Woolf1991) These fairy tales contain patriarchal belief system which needs to be analysed critically and interrogated as they are embedded with male ideology which are presented innocent and innocuously into the garb of children's tales. As the children are subjected to these taled quite early in their lives they are internalised which such value system and when they are grown up into adults they further implement these values into their own children generation after generation. To quote Bell Hooks:

"A truly liberatory feminist sexual politics will always make the assertion of female sexual agency central. That agency cannot come into being when females believe their sexual bodies must always stand in the service of something else." (Hook 2000) The very fact that young girls and woman today are so much overwhelmed by the issues of self-esteem and image of their own body, one cannot overlook the pregnant messages of female beauty which these fairy tales impart into the garb of fantastical story. In fact, I have argued that because fairy tales are unrealistically framed as existing within a pre-cultural context, their messages regarding beautyattains even more potency, since they assume the weight of the "universal."

Rumpelstiltskin is another well-known fairytale from the Brothers Grimm Rumpelstiltskin it's a story of miller who lied to the king that his daughter could spin the straw into gold. Learning this, the King ordered the girl to be locked in a room full of straw and spinning wheel to eat gold out of straw. Since the girl could not spend a straw into gold a manikin appears and volunteers to help her in exchange of jewellery. After a couple of days the girl has nothing more to offer to the manikin and the king still demand for gold out of straw. The mannequin

agrees to help her provided that the girl will give him her first born child. When the girl and the king get married and she gives birth to a child, the manikin appears and asks for the baby. The girl oblique queen pleads for leaving the baby but to no avail and stop ever, he concedes that if the girl could get his name in three days, he will not take away her child. At the end, the girl is able to find out the name of manikin, which is Rumpelstiltskin. And the Millers daughter and the king lived happily ever after.

In the story, the identity of manikin always remains problematic, and various scholars have interpreted it variously, some arguing that manikin represents some old forgotten God. Whatever be the real identity, the fact which is certain is that the story presents mannequin with an ambivalent attitude. It is he who helps the poor, unfortunate Millers daughter to spin straw into gold through his magical powers in the tower room where the girl is locked.

“But all at once the door opened, and in came a little man and said, “good evening, mistress Miller, why are you crying so?” (Grimm 1857)

“Alas” answer the girl “I have to spin straw into gold and I do not know how to do it.”

“What will you give me, said the manikin, “if I do it for you?”

“My necklace,” (Grimm 1857) said the girl.

The little man took the necklace, seated himself in front of the wheel, and whirr, whirr, whirr three turns, and the reel was full, then he put another on, and whirr, whirr, whirr three turns round and the second was full too. And so it went on until the morning, when all the straw was spun, and all the reels were full of gold. (Rumpelstiltskin 55) But this same manikin is later portrayed monstrous who wants to take away her child. It is now motherhood that has been put to question--where the Miller’s daughter is a good mother or not.

When the girl was alone the manikin came again for the third time and said “what will you give me if I spin the straw for you this time also?”

“I have nothing left that I could give,” answered the girl.

“Then promise me, if you should become queen, you give me your first child.” (55)

Who knows whether that will never happen, thought the Miller’s daughter, not knowing how else to help herself in this strait, she promised a manikin what he wanted, and for that he once more spun the straw into gold. (Rumpelstiltskin). “Rumpelstiltskin” is remarkable in this respect wherein the protagonist herself is later transformed into a mother. It is not overestimate to suggest that mothers or mostly invisible/absent/dead in fairy tales. Mostly their presence is in the role of an evil-step-mother. But in this story, Millers daughter becomes a mother. Yet she has to betray her greedy god-father to guard her motherhood.

Thus motherhood becomes an instrument for enrichment and injury. She becomes the cause of death of our own benefactor:

“perhaps your name is Rumpelstiltskin?”

“The devil has told you that! The devil has told you that, “cried the little man, and in his anger he plunged his right foot so deep into the earth that his whole leg went in, and then in rage he pulled at his left leg so hard with both hands that he told himself into. (56) Though she saves her child’s sublimating her motherhood, yet she cunningly violates her word promise to manikin. The reason for this betrayal is the internalisation of value system privileging motherhood through which..... [a] woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural “calling”, since a whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species. But we have seen already that human society is never abundant holy to nature. And for about a century, their productive function in particular has no longer been at the mercy solely of biological chance; it is come under the voluntary control of human beings. (Beavoir 1949)

It has been surprisingly horrifying to know that Miller’s daughter/queen is able to figure out manikin’s name yet her own does not figure anywhere in the text. Her anonymity is bothering and disturbing as she is found to be living without name. She is found to be playing roles of a daughter, wife and mother. Miller’s daughter’s marriage with the king is also not without problems. The king had threatened her to kill if she didn’t transform straw into gold. Even his decision to marry her is not a consequence of love but greed. Therefore, it is useless to imagine what would have made Miller’s daughter to have lived happily ever after with the greedy king who might have killed her had she not been helped by the manikin. In a way, manikin seems more humane, caring and loving than the king she marries.

This tale has been told a many times with number of revisions. One of the very famous version is Irmela Brender’s version wherein she has told this story from Rumpelstiltskin’s point of view where she questions the justice in the Grimm’s tale. Reading her version from “Rumpelstiltskin’s” viewpoint, Jack Zipe argues that:

“For she has always felt that the poor fellow has been treated fairly. After all what you wanted most was something living, in other words, some human contact. She explains that Rumpelstiltskin did not need money,

because he was capable of producing gold any time he wanted it. He was also willing to work hard and save the life of the Millers daughter. Therefore, the Millers daughter could have been more understanding and compassionate. Blender does not suggest that the Millers daughter should have given away the child, but as the young queen, she could have invited Rumpelstiltskin to live with the royal family. This way Rumpelstiltskin would have been content. The way things end in Grimm's version is for Brender totally unjust. Her technique is a play with possibilities to open up and rigid social relations and concern about private possession. Through critical reflection and narrative shifts the goal of the green story from gold and power to justice and more fairy tales and the art of subversion human relations based on mutual consideration and cooperation." (Zipes 1983) Rumpelstiltskin also suggests that mother his motherhood is to be safeguarded at any cost upholding Christian theological belief. The story can also be found having light motive for many later reworking where motherhood of Millers daughter is revisited to discuss the issue of abortion and in alienable right of mother over her child. In conclusion it can be argued that patriarchal male domination in marriage and motherhood is prominently included in these gendered fairytales. Though these tales claim to be innocent and imaginary, yet they do contain the seeds of oppression. Imagining living in a world where there is no male domination still remains a utopia. Marriage and motherhood seem to be enforced rather a matter of choice. Unless the woman is free to move out this fear of domesticity, her liberation is impossible as Bell Hooks has rightly suggested: "since our society continues to be primarily a "Christian", culture, masses of people continue to believe that God has ordained that women be subordinate to men in the domestic household. Even though masses of women have entered the workforce, even though many families are headed by women who are the sole breadwinners, the vision of domestic life which continues to dominate the nation's imagination is one in which the logic of male domination is intact, whether men or present in the home or not. (Hooks 2000) It is important to imagine a fairy-tale where marriage and motherhood are not destined for women but are subject to her choices.

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