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The Voices of the Silenced: An Analysis of the Cinematic Reworking of the Fairy Tales

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Abstract:

Fairy tales have been prevalent across cultures of the world and have gained popularity among people of all ages. However, they seem to be widely read and admired by the young readers for its content and characterization, which is predominantly a fantastic one. Although the fairy tales seem to have some distinctive regional characteristics but the basic structure of most of the tales remain the same. They share some recurrences in terms of the plot and characters with a little variation owing to the place of its origin. Beautiful princess, damsels in distress, charming princes, knights, the scheming stepmothers, and the wicked witches are some common characters which recur in most of the fairy tales. Popular fairy tales such as Cindrella, Rapunzal, and The Sleeping Beauty also share some common plots, where the female protagonist is caught in misery or distress and is rescued by the prince charming who later marries her. Thus, the story end happily, filling the minds of the readers with happiness and stirring up their world of imagination and fantasy as well. Although these tales of wonder and fantasy seem to be an exploration to the world of magic and enchantments yet they subtly play another significant role. This secondary role of the fairy tales as agents of gender constructs and stereotyping is the matter of concern in this paper. The characters portrayed in these tales belonging to both genders are characterized in such a way so as to fulfill the societal norms of the patriarchs. This results in stereotyping and repetition, which elicits responses among the critical thinkers. The naïve readers fail to perceive the stereotypical representations of the genders, the binaries constructed in the process and the play of the power politics which are covertly presented in the tales. The present paper intends to bring into focus the alternate interpretations of some of the popular fairy tales and their reworking in the cinematic world. Two well-known fairy tales, The Sleeping Beauty and The Frog Prince, and the Hollywood movies Maleficent and The Princess and the Frog, are chosen as texts for analysis. Here an attempt has been made to analyze how the well-known fairy tales have been reworked upon in the movies and how far these movies have been successful in presenting alternate interpretation to the plots and the characterizations as well.

Keywords: fairy tales, subaltern, deconstruction, stereotypes, binary

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.
Simon de Beauvoir (Parshley, 1953)

The genre and narrative of a text often embody a value system that is gendered. Fairy tales are stories of fantasy, magic and enchantments which transfer the readers to a world different from the mundane world we live in. They stir up the imagination of the readers, especially the young minds. However, these ageless classics use gender politics and present certain values in regard to male and female roles, values which are predominantly patriarchal. They present the gender roles which are stereotypical in nature. The portrayal of men and women in these tales present them as brave, strong and assertive or beautiful, kind and passive.

Women figure prominently in the narrative of the fairy tales. Most of the fairy tales are in fact named after the leading ladies, such as Cindrella, Rapunzal etc. The princess or the female protagonists in the fairy tale are portrayed as the epitomes of ideal feminine beauty. Beauty in the fairy tales is often associated with being white, beautiful and economically privileged. The tales usually involve a white heroine with rosy cheeks, thin body, long flowing hair and large round eyes. Although the leading ladies are presented in the brighter side yet they are shown to be passive, gentle, submissive and lacking ambitions. They lack power and authority and dependent on the men folk. Feminist film critic Budd Boetticher speaks about women in films as,

- What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance (Braudy, 1999).

Another feminist film critic Laura Mulvey asserts that in their traditional roles women are looked at and displayed for their appearance. Thus, the women most of the time are treated as “the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” Mulvey’s view is applicable to most of the art forms, where the women seem to be reduced to that of an object who is displayed for the satisfaction of the pleasures of the male characters and the spectators as well. Contradicting these good ladies, there are the evil and powerful women

characters which seem to contrast the goodness and represent evilness. The witches, stepmothers, step sisters fall in the category of the evil ladies who are characterized by jealousy, scheming nature, and wicked planning. Though powerful and ambitious, these characters are not glorified and are often presented in such a way that evokes abhorrence among the readers. Their ugly and sometimes deformed appearance and wicked nature further strengthen the growing dislike for them. This results in the creation of binaries in the depiction of women in the fairy tales, which causes in the emergence of certain stereotypes for good women and evil ones. The narrative celebrates the good and detests the evil, which is symbolized by the victory of good over evil. The tales thus, appear to perform a moral obligation of imparting values to the readers.

However, the common readers fail to perceive the politics underlying the narratives. The critical thinkers are of the opinion that the texts are embodied with multiple meanings which must be analyzed. The feminist critics are interested in interpreting the texts by foregrounding the issues related to women and their portrayal in the various modes of expression. They raise their issues on the grounds of misrepresentation of women and silencing of women in the narrative. It is to be noted that the women in the works of art and literature, are often represented by men. As such the works do not seem to present first hand views and experiences of the women. The representations thus bear the subjective opinions and ideologies of the male writers. Even the female writers and artists seem to adopt the masculine gaze and their ideology also tends to be guided by patriarchy. These (mis)representations and silencing of the women, marginalizes the women to the category of the subalterns, where they do not enjoy any privileges. Moreover, it must also be noted that within this subaltern category, there are certain classes of women who suffer from double marginalization. The evil and wicked women, the poor and unprivileged women and the ones whose beauty do not conform to the ideal beauty established by the patriarchal social order, are more miserably portrayed in the works. Fairy tales rarely have leading ladies who are not fair, beautiful and rich. The wicked women are never focused and they always have a tragic end. Another striking feature is that there is no transformation in the characters and they remain either good or bad throughout the narrative of the story. All these representations evoke strong responses among the critical thinkers and analysts, who look after alternate representations of the stereotypical women characters.

In the twentieth century with the advent of filmmaking, fairy tales appeared in a new medium. Walt Disney produced fairy tale's movies which propagate the ideological content, with women being associated with domesticity, and men with action and power. The characters in the movies are type casted who do not undergo transformation in the narration. Jack Zipes writes,

- The disenfranchised or oppressed heroine must be rescued by a daring prince. Heterosexual happiness and marriage are always the ultimate goals of the story. There is no character development because all characters must be recognizable as types that remain unchanged throughout the film. Good cannot become evil, nor can evil become good. The world is viewed....as a dichotomy and only the good will inherit the earth. (Zipes, 1997).

However, with time fairy tales are beginning to recognize the change in the societal values. They are being evolved to mirror the current society and its changing values. The roles of women in the society are gradually changing with the recent change in the policies and the spread of female education. The women are moving in the path of empowerment, and are raising their voice against their discrimination and silencing. The feminist critics and theorists are propagating ideas and theories which create awareness about gender discrimination, especially of women. They claim equality both in expression and representation along with equality in opportunity and status in the society. As a result of the initiatives of the feminist critics, nowadays every work of art is analyzed from varied perspectives, giving importance to every marginalized character and idea. The feminist critics analyze the silenced and marginalized women characters in the works of literature as well as works of art. They interpret the work from the point of view of the female characters which are passive and most of the time silenced, misrepresented and sometimes even absent.

In the present paper two filmic adaptations of two popular fairy tales namely, the *Sleeping Beauty* and the *Frog Prince* have been taken for analysis. The said movies are *Maleficent* and *The Princess and the Frog*. The 2014 fantasy movie *Maleficent* is significant because it retells the popular fairy tale from the perspective of the antagonist, thereby giving a new dimension to the tale. Contrary to the popular depiction in the fairy tale, the movie presents *Maleficent* as a powerful fairy, who seeks revenge for being deceived by the love of her life, Stefan, who was ambitious to become the king. Later she places a curse on his daughter, Aurora, in order to avenge her thirst for justice. Although she curses the young princess, yet she offers an antidote at the pleading of the king. The narration of the movie differs from the original source, as *Maleficent* is shown to develop motherly feelings for the young princess. Realizing her growing fondness for the girl, *Maleficent* tries to revoke the curse but is unsuccessful. Despite her attempt to save the young princess from the curse, Aurora falls into a deep sleep after pricking her finger, thus fulfilling the curse. *Maleficent*, intent on saving her abducts Phillip and infiltrates Stefan's castle. However, Phillip's kiss fails to awaken Aurora but when *Maleficent* kisses her forehead asking for forgiveness, the princess is awakened. The motherly tenderness of *Maleficent* proves powerful than Phillip's affection for Aurora. The story is significant for it gives space to the antagonist of the popular tale to narrate her side of the story. Besides it presents a contradictory picture of the popular antagonist who is portrayed as kind hearted and possessing tender motherly feelings. Above all it presents before the audience the reasons on the part of *Maleficent* for cursing the baby, which was in a fit of rage to seek revenge against the King for the injustice done on her. This she regrets and compensates by giving an antidote to the cursed baby, and finally relieving her from the curse by kissing the baby's forehead, an act unimaginable in the original story. The film thus differs from the original source and presents an alternate interpretation to the popular tale.

In a similar manner in the film *The Princess and the Frog*, the filmmakers have presented a dark skinned girl Tiana, from the working class as the one who relives the prince from his frog form. The protagonist of the movie is neither white nor does she belong to the economically privileged class, thereby breaking all the established standards of the female protagonists in the fairy tales.

The two movies with the newness in the depiction of the female characters depict the changes taking place in the socio-cultural scenario. With these changes, there are evident changes in the way women are looked at in the real as well as in the reel life. Gradually

the discriminations on the basis of colour, nationality, physique, morality are being abolished, and equality for all irrespective of gender and status is being strived for. The movies are therefore very powerful ideological tools to bring about these changes and popularizing them among the masses. Apart from entertaining the audience, these movies with a new dimension are instrumental in bringing about a change in the gaze of the audience towards the female characters portrayed on the silver screen. With the change in the representation of women in movies which marks a departure from the stereotypical depictions in the original sources, it can be considered that the efforts of the propounders for women's equality and justice are gradually moving towards realization of their goals.

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