

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF FAIRY TALES

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Fairy tales bear a long history of more than 2500 years. The art of spinning the yarn was originally women's forte. As Ruth Bottigheimer in her article 'Tale Spinners: Submerged Voices in Grimms' Fairy Tales' quotes Jacob Grimm, "the spindle is an essential characteristic of wise women." (143) Much before the 19th century when fairy tales entered the established literary world they were spun diligently by wise women of the 17th century. These women tale spinners were called 'conteuses' who excelled in telling stories based on the French salon conversations. These conversations were bold, explicit and intended for adult hearing. Obviously the stories of these conteuses were thus necessarily meant for adult consumption. The modern fairy stories we come across as intended for children are the modified, manipulated and appropriated forms of the oral tales made "suitable" for the child reader/listener so that children passively accept and abide by the stereotyped value system generated in the tales.

Fairy tales have a potential and power to influence the process of acculturation and socialisation. Realising this potential the male writers seem to have 'hijacked' the female authored tales and trivialised them for children's consumption. As Jack Zipes's research suggests, modern fairy tales are bourgeois literature which is actually an outcome of the appropriation of the folktales composed mainly by women tale tellers and owned by the community into the written form as fairy tales. Studying the role and influence of socio historical forces of the transition of the oral into the written, Zipes critically examines and analyses the hegemonic establishment of fairy tales by the bourgeois dominant classes, to maintain the status quo and systematically generate the ideas convenient for such maintenance.

Research demonstrates how messages about dominant power structures and relations in society are implicitly or even explicitly conveyed subtly to children through the literature aimed at them including fairy tales. Fairy tales with their fantastic appearance and glossy romantic world do indoctrinate children- girls as well as boys- to the accepted dominant classist, racist and sexist belief systems. A 1972 article titled 'Sex Role Socialisation in Picture Books for Pre-School Children' by Lenore Weitzman and others throws light on this aspect with respect mainly to the presentation of traditional gender roles and identities in fairy tales. Both the fairy tale potential to influence the process of children's acculturation to traditional social roles as well as children's own love for the genre become significant contributors to the manipulation of these tales as the perfect sites for the construction of the set ideas about 'appropriate' social behaviour. As such the tales consciously get institutionalised. By institutionalisation is meant in Zipes's words "the manner in which a certain type of literature develops conventional narrative motifs, themes, semantic codes and character types that are easily recognisable (despite variations); sets up a customary social system that calls for its use in socialising and amusing children in schools or at night time and in providing pleasure for

adults, who can recall childhood experiences or experiment with more complicated versions of the genre; and engenders a production and distribution system that responds to market conditions.” (*Brothers Grimm*, 57) The process of institutionalisation involves ‘mythicisation’ of the tales i.e. giving the tales a look of natural and eternal existence. As Roland Barthes maintains, “Myth consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the ‘natural.’ What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a ‘matter of course’;” (*Brothers Grimm*, 209) The myth according to Barthes is “a type of speech chosen by history” from which history is ‘emptied’ and the empty space is filled with nature. Myth removes human meaning from the objects and renders them insignificant. Thus with its function of emptying reality, myth in a bourgeois society becomes a “depoliticised speech.” (Barthes, 1972, 142) Barthes also calls myth “a language robbery”. (Barthes, 131) Transforming meaning into a form mythical speech constitutes “a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication”. (Barthes, 108, italics in the original) It works on the already available material and re-frames it to suit ideological communication which seems non ideological. It is in this sense that Zipes calls fairy tales “contemporary myths” (209) “a stolen and frozen cultural good” (Zipes, 211) “open for appropriation by society”. (Barthes, 107) From their oral form they were “hardened” into Christian and patriarchal scripts. They are continually in “a motivated process of revision, reordering and refinement” by all the means of media and technology. This revision is done “in the name of the bourgeoisie, which refuses to be named and denies involvement, for the fairy tale must appear harmless, natural, eternal, ahistorical, and therapeutic. We are to live and breathe the classical fairy tale as fresh, free air. We are led to believe that this air has not been contaminated and polluted by a social class that will not name itself, wants us to continue believing that all air is fresh and free, all fairy tales spring from thin air.” (Barthes quoted in Zipes, 211)

Zipes in another book *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale* records six features of the process of institutionalisation of fairy tales for children:

- “ a. the social function of the fairy tale must be didactic and teach a lesson that corroborates the code of civility as it was being developed at that time;
- b. it must be short so that children can remember and memorise it and so that both adults and children can repeat it orally...;
- c. it must pass the censorship of adults so that it can be easily circulated;
- d. it must address social issues such as obligation, sex roles, class differences, power and decorum so that it will appeal to adults, especially those who publish and publicise the tales;
- e. it must be suitable to be used with children in a schooling situation; and

f. it must reinforce a notion of power within the children of upper classes and suggest ways for them to maintain power.” (*Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*, 33)

These features point out the attempt at conscious manipulation and conditioning of child psyche by giving children cultural information about themselves and others, by helping them shape their self image as per desired social, political norms and forces. Stereotypical and pejorative images of women, gender roles, poor and middle classes, races and so on frame, shape and reinforce a belief system for children, their worldviews and perceptions of themselves and the society they live in.

The classical fairy tale has been mythicised, dehistoricised and depoliticised to represent and serve the interests of the bourgeoisie: Thinking of fairy tales the well-known tales come to everyone's, even a child's mind, as if they were part of our day to day life and our nature. These tales have acquired a universal, natural and eternal status in human society and with a neutral and innocent look give their readers what Zipes calls a feel “that we are all part of a universal community with shared values and norms; that we are all striving for the same happiness; that there are certain dreams and wishes which are irrefutable; that a particular type of behaviour will produce guaranteed results, - like living happily ever after with lots of gold in a marvellous castle, *our* castle and fortress, which will forever protect us from inimical and unpredictable forces of the outside world. We need only have faith and believe in the classical fairy tale...” (*Brothers Grimm*, 208-209)

Like the myth which works with already existing material the fairy tale mythicised into the classical fairy tale has worked on the material which belonged to and was orally transmitted by archaic, pagan societies, tribes and communities. It hardened the oral word into a written script – a “Christian and patriarchal” script. (*Brothers Grimm*, 211) like myth which desires its historical, political and systemic development despite the fact that it continues to undergo such development, the classical fairy tale has undergone and continues to undergo systematic and intentional “process of revision, reordering, and reinforcement.” (*Brothers Grimm*, 211)

It is because of this mythicisation of the fairy tale that classical fairy tales like the myth, continue to fascinate human beings and have remained almost an inescapable part of the conscious human existence till date. Mircea Eliade in his *Myth and Fairy Tales* demonstrates how the two share a symbolic connection. According to him myths set ideals for human beings and their behaviour and have the potential of offering to humans genuinely religious experiences, an awareness of the deep roots of history and time. They mainly serve a religious and sacred function in society. Oral folk tales and literary fairy tales on the other hand are secular narratives presenting a mere “structure of an exemplary behaviour.” (Eliade, 196-197)

The 17th century conteuses, their tales and the inventive mode of their story telling that were influential and ideal for more than a century were gradually eclipsed, their attempts and efforts at establishing this genre

were forgotten and sidelined if not wiped out and it was Charles Perrault instead whose tales and model got projected prominently as the original institutionalising model.

The systematic and perhaps deliberate disappearance of the women storytellers, writers and their fairy tales perhaps amounts to what Zipes terms as “patriarchalisation” (*Brothers Grimm*, 194) not just of the matrilineal tales, and literary tradition but of matriarchal society at large. In patriarchalisation of literary tradition female protagonists are replaced by male heroes; rituals celebrating goddesses are substituted with rites upholding male gods and their superiority; and the sun god takes the place of the moon goddess. In fairy tales particularly, patriarchalisation demonises the goddess assigning demonic qualities to the virtuous princesses of the matrilineal tradition, replaces the major heroines with heroes, reinforces patrilineal marriage, degrades female ritualistic symbols, disfigures the mythic structure based on moon worship and transforms young active women into helpless, domesticated, inactive or passive, obedient observers of the male rule.

Patriarchalisation laid the foundation for bourgeoisification of the fairy tale in the literary tradition. This process contributed to and consolidated the institutionalisation of the fairy tale leading to appropriation of the literary tale and its re-appropriation when it was (and is) orally transmitted at home, in school or in the theatre. In fact, appropriation was an important mode for the bourgeoisie to create its own institutions and conventions. It meant usurping the property, goods and cultural forms of lower classes, mending, tailoring, refining and at times altering them to suit the needs and sensibilities of the bourgeois culture. As a matter of fact, historically every ruling class and all colonialists have used this mode over the people and cultures they have dictated and governed or colonised. However in case of bourgeois appropriation, literary education and technological advancement were greatly effective in dissemination and institutionalisation of bourgeois ideas, views and practices. The bourgeoisie could establish its rightful place in German society only by using its culture as a weapon to assert their demands and needs. It was successful in this attempt and as a result bourgeois attitudes and practices were accepted widely by people of other social classes as almost natural standards of behaviour. Attempting to prove one's merit, to rise in social status and being successful through industriousness or at times even shrewdly became almost natural standards of behaviour to be followed by everyone. It is these seemingly natural ideas generated by the bourgeois appropriation of the oral folk tradition that are reflected in the Grimms' tales. The socio-historical context, the existing social norms, accepted behaviour and prevalent ideologies play a significant role in the shaping of a tale at a certain point of time in history. They affect the oral communication of the tales which in turn influences and results in “new literary rearrangements within an institutionalised discourse.” (*Brothers Grimm*, 198) Thus there is a constant interaction between orality and literacy which needs to be considered in the study of the literary fairy tale. For it is the oral narratives which get arranged in a particular order as literary tales in

which social norms, accepted behaviour and thinking of the dominant class are depicted thus rendering the tales representative and exemplary. They are used as ideal role models to be followed by children.

Considering the fascination of the genre and its powerful impact on children, it becomes imperative that the adult facilitators of literature for children become aware of this process of institutionalisation and ‘patriarchalisation’ of fairy tales and be alert while transmitting these tales to children.

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