

# **Revolution in Depiction of Female Gender in Fairy Tales and Walt Disney Films: An Exploration**

Dr Amara Khan

## **Abstract**

Children's literature demands serious consideration because it promotes and invites critical theory, especially in the scholarship of the texts relative to children's development as readers. The article documents certain moves in this approach so as to establish the progress of a discipline related to scholastic response and contemporary exploration. Thus, conspicuous areas of my focus in feminist theory will contain discernment in sex/gender, subjugation, economic bias, control and dominance, gender roles, and stereotypes. I have observed the dual opinions about the female character, presented by the patriarchal fairy tale, delivering mainly recognisable consideration to the absence of care to the traditional inactive princess, and the consequent presentation of the resilient horrific woman character. In the article, I realise the girl in the text of the fairy tale in relation to its depiction in Walt Disney adaptations in order to ascertain an assortment of perspectives on girlhood across borders.

**Keywords:** Dominance, Fairy tales, Gender roles, Patriarchy, Stereotypes, Subjugation, Walt Disney

It is through social interaction that we attain gender. For several people, the activity is initiated already prior to their birth, with the parents choosing names when they know the sex of the unborn baby, and by embellishing the new baby's chamber and picking her/his playthings and garments in specific colours that denote social expectancies and orthodox attitudes. In patriarchal societies it has been observed that from childhood onwards, it is specifically the girls who are visibly controlled by family, peer groups, media, and the society at large, who explicate to the girls what is normally expected from them in terms of their looks and the way they must live their lives. I here discuss fairy tale narratives to realise how gender depiction in the fairy tales suits the cultural experience of the society in which they are communicated. Besides, the purpose of the study is to explore how and why many of the texts published in recent years along with their film adaptations should be judiciously compared with their precursors to define the scope to which their content and their style of exhibiting specifically female gender adapt to the norms into the twenty first century.

The archetypal conclusion of majority of the fairy tales is that the virtuous girl gallops away with a prince, who averts her gloom and she weds him to be the royalty in his palace with the delighted approval of the Prince's parents. What does such conclusion communicate to a little girl-reader? Perhaps that it is only when the prince marries a girl, she starts to live a satisfied life.

The purpose of this analysis is to highlight that children's literature demands serious academic concern and that children's literature promotes and invites critical theory, especially in the study of the relation of texts to children's maturity as readers.

The article documents some contemporary moves in this mode so as to establish the progress of a discipline apt for academic response and contemporary study.

Fairy tales have presented the female in her miscellaneous aspects: virtuous and disagreeable. While numerous of the woman figures in fairy tales are inactive, for example Snow White and Cinderella, there are women who endeavour to complete their social ambitions. But, we see that such striving females in the fairy tales are constantly considered as vindictive, terrible, conniving, and scheming other females and males. Nowadays that our current society is becoming more progressive of various exhibitions in life, do we genuinely need to specify to our offsprings that women are soft and delicate and survive when a male intercedes?

Even when we have made a lot of progress in science and challenge the existence of truth in all aspects, the fairy tales are nevertheless a gratification to read. We like the characters we grow up learning from the books and movies. There are stories that support the notion that intelligent women are often not the desired ones. If women want to modify the stereotype, then the tales of castles and princesses require a little change.

### **Research Methodology**

Patriarchy's important elements specifically in the 20th century onwards are the male domination and male identification persona. For the sake of accuracy, it should be observed that the expression *patriarchy* is used in three distinguishing meanings in modern English. Firstly it can be used in the clerical sense, affirming the authority of men as Christian heads. Secondly, patriarchy is used to state the authorities of the husband/father over his spouse and children (Ruth 1998: 57). Thirdly the expression is

used in feminist critiques to discuss the male authority over women. In the article, it is second and third inference of the expression that is executed. Some researchers use other terms in discoursing the same idea; for instance, Holter (2005) prefers the expression “structural gender inequality” to “patriarchy”. It is similarly of importance that the theory of patriarchy is only one of the numerous theories describing the propagation of power between men and women. We can say that patriarchy is cherishing masculinity and downgrading femininity. Thus, striking areas of my attention in feminist theory will comprise of bias on the base of sex and gender, fiscal disparity, authority and suppression, gender roles, and stereotypes.

The questions of masculinity and authority are normally expected as supplementary; thus, male authority is also of concern in the article. Primarily I have perceived to what level the male authority becomes manifest through the actions of the male characters in the fairy tales and their adaptations; do they really set their authority into action? Or, are men only the projections of women’s points of view? The character of the father of the family represents daunting power over women; nevertheless, the character can correspondingly be considered more than this – a challenging analysis is whether his actions are explained somehow. My other purpose is to treasure examples how women themselves are (even without being aware of it) involved in assisting patriarchal structures.

I comprehend the artfulness of the adapted female through the study of the twin opinions about the female character, presented by the patriarchal fairy tale, giving chiefly close deliberation to the scarcity of support fundamental to the traditional inactive

princess embodiment, and the ensuing villainy of the determined outrageous female disposition. I study these representations through distinctive patriarchal accounts of the fairy tales.

How are girls portrayed in scripted and graphic texts, and how do these representations evaluate our consideration of girlhood? In the article, I see the girl in the transcript of the fairy tale in relation to its representation in Walt Disney adaptations in order to discover a series of perspectives on girlhood across borders and in relation to their place in society. In academic texts, there are girls who are presented as dependents on male gender yet simultaneously we see girls who empower themselves and others with long-lasting influence.

### **Literature Review**

There is no contesting the information that Brother Grimm's fairy tales are acclaimed across the earth. They are the select tales for children and have been adapted to films as well as TV dramas. I here perceive the trends in the elucidation of female gender in fairy tales and their film adaptations as vehicles for considering how gender construction has advanced and developed, and to focus on the gaps in knowledge and analysis. My motive is to encourage new directions in the field of female gender representation in academic texts and film adaptations to assure true female portrayal in the succeeding years.

The fairy tales are connected with beliefs, values, and experiences of people. As a model, the story of 'Sleeping Beauty' suggests a recognisable fairy tale that describes a gorgeous sleeping princess, a tremendous witch, and a gracious prince

who saves the princess. The well-known story has its origins in verbal accounts that date back to uncountable times. The fact that this account has lasted countless times, joined with the seriousness of the fairy tale crux due to which it is generally available and hence extremely consistent, is possibly why current researchers assert that the academic fairy tale personification can be observed as a plan that frames the character of society and performs as a depiction for pointing out common social experiences (Zipes 7). Nevertheless, this proof of the fairy tale understanding is perplexing as the key noteworthy situation we have to the initial developing fairy tales are the academic tales that have continued in scripted practice; a distinctiveness that was saved for the accomplished and lucky men for disseminating visibly patriarchal ideals of supremacy through a re-articulation of woman character and a domination of the female attitude. The fairy tales normally place the female as the miserable target whom a witch threatens and who desires to be freed by a patriarchal prince.

The patriarchal academic fairy tales expose gender discords through the exhibited depiction of gender fundamental to the fairy tale standard, and particularly through the depiction of females; what Max Luthi considers the 'stylised, starkly structured' (Luthi 53), way of the 'tendency to the extremes' (Luthi 43), that displays through the analysis of female character in the characters of respectable and corrupt, dutiful and influential, flawless princess, and a witch. These splits postulate that the conformist, virtuous female is a non-violent wife and mother whereas the female who discards this description would be seen as unconventional and, thus, malicious.

Unpacking the twin woman figures exposes that the women are not as diverse

as the patriarchal fairy tale plot recommends, and an analysis into the various fairy tales discloses that female trouble may be recognised by understanding the gender discords that ally 'masculine' with 'active' and 'feminine' with 'passive'.

We see that in a fairy tale, the protagonist is normally flawless. She is gorgeous, concerned, cooperative, and sociable. But simultaneously she is consistently helpless, lacks brain, and is passive. She has no motivation in life as well. Alternatively we see female characters who show signs of cleverness and determination but they are considered as vindictive and terrible. I believe that the females portrayed as passive and delicate in the initial account of fairy tales was perhaps for the women's social standing. Women were shown as accessories to men. However, fortunately the social standing of women has elevated with time.

Marie Catherine d' Aulnoy's fairy tales praise the everlasting attractiveness, bigheartedness, and affection for the fairies. It was in 1750, that the expression "fairy tale" was used in English for the first time and afterwards the fairy tales have advanced much in importance and are more common and intricate. According to Mason there is a discernment that Disney films are child-friendly (not to indicate childish) entertainments that are absolutely suitable to appreciate when young, but are not of substance for more sensitive adults who have a wealth of more fitting, mature amusement choices accessible to them. (3)

Most of the girls take delight in reading fairy tales. Normally three of the select fairy tales are *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White* and that is perhaps because of Walt Disney. There are chances that a girl reading these fairy tales would fancy

marrying a gorgeous “prince” when she is mature. Nevertheless an accomplished and emancipated girl can consider that why does she have to wed a “prince”? Why does she have to economically depend on her husband? Why cannot she survive alone? The relationships among the characters, especially the ones disturbing the female characters may sway adolescents’ understanding. They may conclude that a girl ought to depend on her husband and obey his commands.

Disney has always been led by White men and the princess movies have been produced by White men. This provides a rationale for why every princess movie includes some form of gender and racial stereotyping and why “seven of the eleven official Disney Princesses are white” (Cordwell, 2016, p. 15); and, those that are not have been adopted from fairytales that depict women through racist European views. (Laemle)

However, in times, Disney films transformed from the males safeguarding the females, to the females safeguarding the males. Let us prod into the concealed messages that the stories convey. Initial Disney fairy tales showed the means the patriarchal cultures silenced and oppressed women and made them passive. In the sociology of gender, conflict theory focuses on how gender and expectations and partialities about gender disparities identify independence of males, suppression of females, and the simple discrimination of females in relation to males. The gendered power dynamics are established into the social structure, and thus revealed through all the aspects of a patriarchal society.

In the fairy tales we see that it is compulsory for women to sacrifice their lives for their families. Significant fairy tale literature in patriarchal societies supports the



view that females must be married, mothers, passive, and selfless. A virtuous woman in stories is to be soft, inactive, controlled in her wants, gorgeous, and keen to marry. Such a woman is the flawless character of virtue, brilliance, and youth and is here the individual to study her character, social connection, authority, and dominance.

Red Riding Hood is an apt model of a little girl attracting her target, the wolf, after she goes out of her home. In all times family is ultimate and the bravest journeys are undeniably not taken alone. While, Red Riding Hood is self-sufficient, bold, and goes to the jungle independently to get to her granny's home but she becomes a target of a wolf foreboding young girls that they must not go out alone. The first fairy tales are perplexing for a young girl as the fairy tales on one hand exhibit that submissiveness is the main respected characteristic a woman can possess in life but on the other hand, despite all virtues, it is definitely not the female who can protect herself from exploitation or an objectionable state; but always the male that must guard her.

### **Discussion: Cinderella**

Cinderella is a fairy tale printed in 1950 and scripted by the Brothers Grimm. *Giambattista Basile* was the initial composed European account of *Cinderella* that was printed in Napoli (Naples) in Italian. In Basile's tale, the sewing instructor of the protagonist, called Zezolla, encourages Zezolla to murder her stepmother by striking an enormous trunk on the stepmother's head. Zezolla's father thenceforth weds the sewing instructor, who demonstrates that she is even eviler in comparison to the first stepmother, decreasing Zezolla to the position of servant and calling her "Cinderella cat" (Bazzi, 2015).

We have a pertinent model of Cinderella in the initial version of the story who

is happy at the conclusion of the fairy tale as the prince marries her. She is presented as a virtuous girl who has all the commendable virtues to be courted by the prince; she works for the family and endures all whilst staying quiet. The story shows that such women are always compensated in the long run. However, along with the guarantee of compensation are also the forewarnings to little girls of what will occur to them if they would decide to become a rebel. The 1950's film, *Cinderella*, also uses that stereotype. In the story it seems as if women are commodities for men to choose and buy. The woman figures in the original fairy tale are poles apart. One set of females is gorgeous, affable, dutiful, and well-behaved. This is revealed through the character of Cinderella as she attends to her mother's commands, prays to God, and submits to her stepmother and stepsisters. Alternatively are the stepmother and two stepsisters of Cinderella. They are vindictive, terrible, and jealous of Cinderella's attractiveness.

The Brothers Grimm in their fairy tale took a reformist amendment in the story by displaying that Cinderella regularly complained about her circumstances, sobbed and made demands, and Charles Perrault later restated the story. On 13 March 2015, a film of *Cinderella* produced the 1950 live-film. In the current account of *Cinderella*, produced in 2015, the stepmother is also gorgeous like Cinderella. Branagh who directed *Cinderella* said, "the film features an evolution that affects all the characters, reminding us that existence can't just be seen in black and white" (Bazzi). The production endorses Radical feminism where being a woman is perceived as an encouraging thing in itself and believes that patriarchy can be astounded if women realise their own standing and power, start a sisterhood of self-confidence with other women, oppose suppression

judiciously, and set female-based campaigner networks in the inaccessible and local spheres.

### **Sleeping Beauty**

*Sleeping Beauty* is an archetypal fairy tale composed by Charles Perrault. Brothers Grimm printed a verbally communicated account of the tale in 1697. In the initial account, the Queen Leah had no dialogues in *Sleeping Beauty*. In the tale, the writer unveiled that when the princess (Aurora) was born, three fairies give her the gift of beauty, expression, and long life. The prince in the tale also falls in love with Aurora at the first sight. The witch in the story, who was vindictive, damned Aurora. But in the animated movie: the birth of Aurora and her appearance do not match the initial version. Till 1959 with the fairy tale, *Sleeping Beauty*, we are fixated on women waiting for their “Prince charming” to come take them away.

In 2014, the latest movie entitled *Maleficent* was adapted from the *Sleeping Beauty*. The storyline of this movie is strongly innovative. The basis why Maleficent in the movie is “evil” is elucidated: Stephan, who is the king of human kingdom, harms her to propagate his own power. Maleficent, therefore, resolves to reprimand the king when she knows that Stephan and the queen are blessed with a daughter, Aurora, the Princess. Superficially Maleficent curses Aurora but she also takes after Aurora and guards her surreptitiously. With time, Maleficent discovers that she in fact is fond of Aurora and she distresses for troubling her. She attempts all she is capable of to eliminate the spell, but is disappointed. When Aurora sleeps because of the curse, the prince’s kiss has no worth which is different from the initial story. Only Maleficent’s kiss can make Aurora

conscious. At the conclusion of the tale, Maleficent wipes away the conflict between human kingdom and Moors, and Aurora is made the queen of human kingdom. In the latest tale, Maleficent is not vindictive at all as she is in the initial account.

### **Snow White**

*Snow White* is a renowned German fairy tale. The Brothers Grimm printed it in 1812 in the main issue of their compilation, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. In 1854, they produced the eventual account of the tale. There is the distinction between the vigorous female and quiet in the original story. The Queen and Snow White may be compatibly gorgeous, but they are unique considering their levels of veracity.

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, it is the dwarfs who safeguard Snow White. But it is vital to note that the dwarfs, the males, are clear concerning the circumstances in which Snow White is permitted to stay with them. Snow White, a female, on the other hand is reliant on the dwarfs and does all the house chores truly and, thus, the universal kind of females doing the housekeeping occurs. Snow White says, "Because they are the superior group, white men do not have to do the 'dirty work', such as housework; the most inferior group does it..." thus stressing the birth of the social creation of gender. It is, nevertheless, Snow White's simplicity and curiosity that make her unlock the door and allow the witch inside the house, notwithstanding the fact that the clever dwarfs have alerted her to be watchful. She ultimately endures her condition till a prince rescues her. In *Snow White*, the attention is on a woman waiting for a gentleman to discover her and fulfill her desires which in reality is a "codependency" as the prince similarly requires a companion to live a comfortable life.

In 1937, Disney prepared the *Snow White* as a film. The film shows that the eventual glory is living harmless and submissive, and this fetches Snow White prevalent rewards: the jovial care of wood creatures, the shelter by the dwarfs, and ultimately an attractive and proper suitor (Wilson). The TV movie *Snow White: the Fairest of Them All* ran in 2001. A live-action was created in 2012. In the tale, the Snow White governs the state rather than expecting to take it as a gift for her veracity. In *Mirror Mirror*, a movie that was produced in 2012, the Snow White is clever. She protects the prince when he is under the queen's curse. She kills the giant and also protects her father. At the marriage of Snow White and the prince, an old woman, who is the Queen, offers Snow White an apple, but she does not eat it. Another film is *Snow White and Huntsman*. The huntsman, who could have killed Snow White in the wood, performs the leading character in the film. He transforms Snow White into a rebel and with the aid of the huntsman, the dwarfs, and the prince, Snow White fights with the Queen.

### **Findings/Conclusion: Reasons of Transformation**

In the initial account of the three fairy tales, the biological mothers have no manifestation; princes forever succeed in the conclusion; striving females are considered as vindictive and terrible, and virtuous females are gorgeous, quiet, enthusiastic to marry, and constrained of any motivation. Karen Rowe (1986) claims, "Fairy tales prescribe restrictive social roles for women and perpetuate 'alluring fantasies' of punishment and reward: passivity, beauty, and helplessness lead to marriage, conferring wealth and status, whereas self-aware, 'aggressive', and powerful women experience social censure and are either ostracized or killed" (237-57). Feminists believe that the reality behind the notion presented in the fairy tales that the beautiful and prosperous females should

be inactive is in reality the story of subordinating women under patriarchy. Before 20th century, the chief purpose behind the elucidation of women as fragile and inactive was the females' social standing at the time. The women were economically reliant on men. They were, thus, inhibited in household tasks. Men, on the other hand, "move in the public domain where they are in possession of economic resources to fund the domestic expenses" (Siddiqui, 2010:1).

The findings of the study clearly show that in the current films, the responsibilities of active females in the fairy tales are being transformed. Fairy tales are starting to identify the modification in communal morals, being advanced and changed to reflect the prevailing culture and their current morals. The responsibilities of females are nowadays varying in today's society and females acquire upper societal standing as compared to early times. However, gender discrimination still occurs in certain patriarchal societies. Allowing the modern adaptation of the fairy tales, the directors modify the feminine duty in their films. The "good" women no longer merely retain physical attraction. They are more progressive and smart. Similarly, the villainous women are no longer only terrible. They are more intricate and conscious.

As several people observe males and females as counterparts, it is vital that the tales young boys and girls are offered represent the choice of conduits presented to them in actual life. Therefore, it is central for the woman to be considered in miscellaneous responsibilities than what were regarded as conventional. The additional responsibilities can incorporate entrepreneurs, single, fighter, and widows to denote the possibilities that females now face. Fairy tales are vital pieces of children's literature that have had a never-ending impression on our culture. The archetypal accounts have been reiterated

over generations and now have been adapted into main film productions loved by not only children but by people of every age. Fairy tales are starting to incorporate the modification in societal ethics, being innovative and changed to impersonate the existing society and their current ethics. Nowadays the responsibilities of women are shifting towards positivity. They have more sovereignty to make choices and more variations in their lives as they use their extraordinarily enunciated ideas.

The previous Walt Disney films exhibit that perhaps Disney considered that America is a nation run by males, and females are subordinate. Fortuitously, as we advanced to current era, this view was discarded. Walt Disney has recently developed tales such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), *Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), and *Brave* (2012) where the female protagonists are not inactive characters but they struggle to make their dreams come true.

In Disney's tempting thriller, *The Little Mermaid*, a defiant 16-year-old mermaid, Ariel, is delighted with life on land. On one of her visits to the surface, which are barred by her dominant father, King Triton, she falls in love with a human prince. Correspondingly Belle is a fanciful character who performs in Walt Disney Pictures' feature film *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle is the non-conforming daughter who longs to desert her village life for endeavour. When a horrid beast traps her father, Maurice, Belle offers the beast her personal independence as an exchange for her father's, and ultimately falls in love with the Beast though he has horrible looks. Belle's determination shows that she has her own idea of how she wants to live her life, henceforth, declaring "Independence".

*Pocahontas* is a great movie for women freedom. The princess follows her heart

and stands up for herself and others. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Esmerelda is a free-spirited woman who refuses to admit being fragile. In the 1997 film, *Hercules*, Meg is a goddess who speaks her mind, and has an exclusive belief in falling in love. In *Mulan*, there is a woman protagonist confronting the chauvinisms her nation practices.

In 2009, with the issue of *Princess and the Frog*, Tiana is presented as a hard working girl, who works hard to accomplish her aspiration. In the 2010 film, *Tangled*, Rapunzel is a blessed girl, who leaves her life behind to follow her fantasy which gives her determination and independence. And in 2012, *Brave* was released and brought us a strange kind of princess. Merida will rest at nothing to design a fresh life for herself. Such an exciting variation in the nature of fairy tales confirms how society can progress.

Individuals must struggle to support the modification in social ethics and imitate these variations in its prevailing works of art (Nanda 2014: 246-250). In doing so the traditional display of the female gender as shown in Fairy tales may be assumed from diverse perspectives, and modern readers might be keener to take them. Researchers having concern in the particular field may embrace oral and written folk fairy tale narrative with reference to its societal, historic, and religious backdrop and to the relationship between literature and oral narrative. The historians' rigorous appraisal of folk and fairy tales as historic documents may have the probability to enlarge the folk narrative scholar's acute awareness of the layers of information given by folk and fairy tales.

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