Objectification: Examples of Female Characters in Selected Traditional Fairy Tales

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Abstract—No one can deny the vital role that fairy tales played in forming the personalities of successive generations across various regions worldwide. All adults should have pleasant memories with these books during their early childhood. These memories make these tales enjoyable for children and adults, as all adults consider reading these books a part of the nostalgia for these past peaceful and cheerful days. On the other hand, many studies proved the passive and hazardous impacts of fairy tales' implicit themes and hidden messages. For instance, these themes heavily influenced the stereotyping of feminine roles in society.
Furthermore, these books enhanced the gender roles with the advantage of the masculine, active role. Throughout the wide range of these books, the readers can quickly identify male characters as saviors, supporters, and always positioned in the center of the women's life. Moreover, the traditional happy ending should be associated with the marriage of the rich and handsome prince/ gentleman. The author will examine the portrayal of the prominent female characters in selected traditional fairy tales to shed light on the concept of "objectification" as a central concept in structuring these characters by making them passive, helpless, and naïve. Accordingly, these portrayals served to present these female characters as mere objects to satisfy the sexual and psychological fantasies of men.

Index Terms—objectification, fairy tales, passive girls, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella

I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, fairy tales and their long-extended history have delightful memories in the minds of most people taken from their childhood. These stories mostly end happily and are written in a simplistic writing style. One of the main features of fairy tales is that they usually include stereotypical characters like a simple or innocent princess, a brave prince, wicked witches, and evil stepmothers. No one can deny the importance of the lessons learned from these tales as they represent most of the cultural heritage of specific cultures. Nevertheless, no one can deny the harmful impacts of the usual and frequent passive portrayals of female characters. These stories have usually enhanced certain stereotypes like male characters should be brave and available to support and save beautiful young girls at the last minute. On the other hand, female characters are presented as helpless objects and wait for assistance from the male characters in the story.

The vital question is, what message can these stories convey to young girls? The answer to this question has attracted many critical commentaries, and many critics throughout history have examined the content of these fairy tales to identify the possible portrayals and stereotypes of the female characters in most popular stories. The outcome of many critical studies is that there is a feeling that those fairy tales have confirmed the "passivity" and "nonactionable" character of those girls. Also, these tales always portray heroines as forceful objects to male desires or fantasies. In other words, these stories have intensified the objectification of the female characters to the extent of considering them as "unable to act self assertively, with total reliance on external rescues, willing bondage to father and prince, and her restriction to hearth and nursery" (Panttaja, 1988, p. 186). Unfortunately, many fairy tales have praised this passivity and considered it the key to being accepted in society and being loved by the prince can be the ultimate gift for the girl in this life.

Moreover, many readers usually associate this social acceptance with physical attractiveness and beauty. They learned from these tales that the heroine should be passive and beautiful enough to be rewarded at the end for her patience. This paper will examine the link between the concept of objectification and the female characters in selected fairy tales. Throughout the discussion, the paper will draw attention to fairy tales' important messages that affect young girls' personal development long after.

II. OBJECTIFICATION: MEANING AND FEATURES

Fairy tales camouflage beneath their bright and pleasing surface many of the gender stereotypes and unpleasant images of women. Due to this reason, most of the traditional fairy tales have received harsh criticism for opposing these traditional gender roles and standing to support gender equality and other women's rights. Throughout centuries, these fairy tales have taught young boys and girls how to behave according to gender (Brackett, 2009, p. 116). For instance,

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these tales presented most male characters as saviors and robust supporters of weak women who needed assistance. On the other hand, the tales portrayed female characters as the lower or weaker gender and dependent naïve creatures with limited mental and physical abilities. Accordingly, they must behave as good (unquestioningly obedient) girls or devoted homemakers who should care for their families and revolve around the centrality of men's power. In addition, they should act as helpless objects to satisfy the males' sexual or psychological desires. In short, the traditional versions of fairy tales enhanced the concept of objectification linked to the female characters, whether young girls or older women.

The concept of objectification is hard to be defined as it is "slippery" and "multiple" precisely (NUSSBAUM, 1995, p. 251). However, the readers can generally point out objectification as considering or treating a woman as a (helpless) object. In most literary texts, the reader can find that the focus of women's objectification is mainly on sexual objectification and referring to the sexual traits of the woman's body to satisfy men's desires. According to some feminist thinkers, patriarchal contexts usually value and appreciate women for their physical looks and appearance (Bordo, 2004, p. 143). In other words, those women must conform to the standards of feminine appearance for their time and culture to be accepted, appreciated, and, more importantly, required.

These standards may differ from one person to another, and a woman should try her best to satisfy these standards and fight vigorously to maintain her look as per the ideals. Saul refers to these standards as "the criteria of appearance women feel they should be living up to" (Saul, 2012, p. 144). After some time, this objectification can be turned into self-objectification as women can treat themselves as commodities and things that should be decorated to enjoy or satisfy others.

Undoubtedly, the notion of objectification can be strongly enhanced in patriarchal societies (where many privileges are given to men and all authority and control are collected in the hand of men), women are "identified with their body … a thing which … has been regarded as less inherently human than the mind of personality" (Bartky, 1990, p. 130). So, within these societies, the males look at women according to their bodies regardless of their minds or personalities. In other words, this degrading view of women excludes dealing with her as a body to meet the sexual desires of men, like what can be found in the animal realm.

In literature, the reader can find many disruptive images of female characters that match the features of the concept of objectification. Moreover, these "objectifying" images of female characters can frequently exist in many fairy tales in different cultures and generations. To learn more about the features of "objectification" and be able to examine the selected fairy tales in this paper, the reader may check three features mentioned by Rae Langton; "reduction to the body, reduction to appearance, and silencing" (Langton, 1993, pp. 228-229). In this regard, it is important to reassure that objectification can result from the dominating notion within the community and can be enhanced through different media tools and various literary texts to stabilize the idea and become a fact. Unfortunately, fairy tales contributed enormously to ingraining the passive images of women over many years.

III. FAIRY TALES: A HISTORY OF OBJECTIFICATION

To understand the intentions behind the passive images presented in the fairy tales about women, the reader may need to dig deeper into the history of fairy tales. This history can be linked to folk tales that started as a part of the oral storytelling tradition and approached adults and used them as entertainment tools in the early days. Another purpose of these folk tales was to maintain specific communities' and cultures' traditions and values. Many of these folk tales have transferred to fairy tales with specific changes in writing style, way of telling, and purposes. Also, these fairy tales were written and rewritten many times to fit the current audience and the changing ideals in the surrounding society. Jack Zipes states, "folk tales were to be shared and exchanged, used and modified according to the needs of the tellers and listeners" (Fenglin, 2020, p. 25). Subsequently, the readers may find many different versions of the same fairy tale with slight changes to match the standards and traditions of society.

However, no one can deny that fairy tales are rooted deeply in western and other cultures and have played a significant role in forming the coming generations for a long time. So, the reader can understand that the images presented in many fairy tales were taken from the background culture or the dominating traditions. These fairy tales, with their images, messages, and lessons, have become an indispensable part of the community's value system and, to some extent, may reflect or at least "conform" to features of the patriarchal society and enhance the actual status of women. In this regard, Marcia Lieberman clarifies that fairy tales "serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles" (Lieberman, 1972, p. 383).

The clearest example in this history is what has been done by the Brothers Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm, as they modified and purified all of the oral tales collected to fit the German culture and middle-class values. They deliberately tried to "weaken once-strong female characters, demonize female power, and emphasize specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time" (Haase, 2004, p. 12). Accordingly, as per the norms of the patriarchal society, the female characters in most of Grimm's collection presented as "beauties slept in their woods … in their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women" (Cixous & Clément, 1986, p. 5). The reader can find those figures in most of the well-known and familiar fairy tales like *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, which have affected the mentality of millions of children worldwide. According to these tales, the child "boy or girl" grew up according to the demeaning status of the woman and her profound need and

longing to find a suitable male to support her or rescue her from a difficult situation, and then they can live their life "happily ever after." Unfortunately, most traditional versions of fairy tales have ingrained the disruptive image for many years in boys' and girls' minds, and this is the real "threat" that can be taken from these sweet children's stories.

In other words, these stories focus on restricting the status of women in this submissive beauty and helpless "naïve" personality to be rewarded at the end of their patience with the firm and wise man to afford this happy life they dreamed of a long time ago. To validate this idea, according to Sperry Baker, a study has been done to examine the development of many tales from the 19th century and found that most of them presented the leading female character according to attractive beauty. Moreover, the reproduced versions of these tales followed the same notion of attractive beauty (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p. 712).

In many fairy tales, the reader can find that the leading characters are beautiful young girls. However, the most important attribute that should be considered in most of these female characters is "attractiveness." According to this attribute, the young girl can pursue her life successfully through the expected support she will find from men. According to the many examples in these fairy tales, the best example of those girls is the submissive and silent one who must wait patiently for male help and support. The authors of these stories tried to expose that women should pay more attention to their physical beauty and "the emphasizing message that a women's youthful appearance, especially when paired with the appropriately meek demeanor" (Lieberman, 1972, p. 385). In this respect, the reader can find a tremendous amount of attention paid to stereotyping gender roles through giving the privilege of saving and managing the world to the males, and this life should be revolved around their needs and desires to reach a happy end safely.

On the other hand, females should be obedient enough to be granted this precious support from the males. Additionally, her physical appearance and submissive character can give her the advantage to achieve the status of being "agreeable" and can determine her destiny in the end. By examining many of these fairy tales, the reader can find that the beautiful, submissive, "naïve" and young heroines should be contested by the ugly, wicked, and old women who try to cause many problems for her as a result of their envy of the heroin's beauty and youthful appearance. The message is that females cannot trust each other and that envious feelings are essential in forming relationships. Again, the reader may ask the critical question: What lesson do these fairy tales convey? The critics found these fairy tales were manipulated as "a source and vehicle of powerful self-mirroring images affirming the existing value system" (Deszcz, 2002, p. 85).

Accordingly, the threat of these fairy tales is tremendous and profoundly affects the lives of those children. In other words, fairy tales have played an important role in normalizing these submissive figures and the demeaning status of women, and society deals with them as normal and acceptable. The stereotypes and gender roles have become standard as children learn about them early on and then move to their older ages. All people look at these themes, characters, and ideas with minimal disappointment or guilt as they are familiar with them from an early age and can find them everywhere in society. So, fairy tales mirrored these figures as per the context of telling or writing these stories, enabling society to maintain the patriarchal notion. It is an endless circle, and the victim is still suffering. In this regard, Fine refers to this severe threat as children, even before they reach preschool, are categorized according to gender, affecting their behaviors and attitudes towards the other gender in their future life (Fine, 2011, p. 8).

Comparing the advantages and significance of these fairy tales to the imminent threats of the implicit messages about gender roles, the reader may find a potential to avoid these threats and maximize the benefits by changing these submissive figures of females and trying to offer equalized gender roles to achieve a healthier and more stable male-female relationship. The parents and teachers can inform children that there is no issue of being helpless in some situations, and everyone may ask for help or support. Nevertheless, there is another situation where the woman can help the other gender (father, brother, husband). Through these fairy tales, parents and teachers must teach children that life consists of concessive days and moments, and we may need each other one day. Life will move on through integration and completing each other, not competing and proving the supremacy of one gender over the other.

IV. EXAMPLES OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

To examine the most frequent submissive and helpless figures in fairy tales, the reader needs to check three examples; *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty,* and *Cinderella*. In *Snow White*, the leading character is a young girl who is depicted as a naïve and passive girl and depends on male characters (the hunter, the seven dwarfs, and finally the prince) to be saved in every single dangerous situation from the beginning of the story till the end (Garabedian, 2014, p. 23). The main lesson of this fairy tale is that young girls should wait, and they will be rewarded and saved by the handsome prince. This promise has been passed down from one generation to another and from one culture to another. In other words, the girl must be silent, passive, and submissive to be rewarded by a wealthy young gentleman to support her. On the other hand, male characters are depicted as destined to seek out adventure and take as their reward passive, silent, industrious females" (Erum, 2009, p. 3).

So, the features of good girls are; being submissive, passive, and waiting patiently to fulfill their dreams and hopes, and most probably, this can happen only through the support of a man. Additionally, getting married is the most precious reward the "good" girl can receive for her patience. From another perspective, the young girl is depicted perfectly according to the criteria of physical beauty. The girl is featured with red lips like a rose, black hair like ebony, and white skin like snow (Worell, 2001). So, physical beauty is an essential asset that young girls should work hard to

get and maintain throughout their life. Girls are always obsessed with beauty; attention should be paid to physical appearance regardless of personality and mentality. *Snow White* enhances the stereotypical image of the hero with his extraordinary skills and handsome appearance. This story's classical and expected message is that the passive, patient, silent, and beautiful young lady should wait for the handsome hero to save her and marry her to live happily ever after.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, the depiction of the princess as extraordinarily beautiful has an essential emphasis on pushing the actions of the tale forward and plays a decisive role in shaping the destiny of this young princess. She is exposed as the fairest girl who can ever see with her tall and slender body, long blond hair, and fair flawless skin. Again, the main focus is the physical appearance of this female figure as a gift from the fairy godmother upon her birth. In this regard, the reader can find that the first gift that may be given to the girl is beauty rather than anything else, like intelligence or a powerful personality. It is a clear message that a woman should be gifted with her physical appearance to be considered lucky. Without this beauty, she may face hard times in her future life. It also emphasizes maintaining gender roles and the obsession with physical appearance. Accordingly, the outcomes of these fairy tales with these messages are persons who focus on the women's body and their physical traits than any other characteristics related to her personality, mentality, or even cultural ideas.

On the other hand, the prince never met the princess but heard some stories about her and her extraordinary beauty. He is introduced at the end to save the princess and get married after beating all evils in this story. It is clear from the story that he has the decision to support this helpless princess as a part of his leadership in this world. At the same time, the girl is rewarded for her patient waiting. It is clearly stated that "little girls could not help but imitate" (Harries, 2003, p. 10), and giving a clear direction to achieve the status of being a princess, girls have to wait for support from the prince who can change your life and destiny as well.

The exact depiction of the female figure can also be found in *Cinderella*. Special attention is given to the little girl's beauty and how she can expose this beauty to conquer the heart of someone (the prince). Additionally, the girl tries to show her attractive physical appearance through the dance performed among many other girls. In this situation, the tale has a serious message regarding the association between love and the beauty of the woman's physical appearance. As a result of her attractive appearance and dance, the prince is attracted to her directly. So, the reader can find Cinderella's character is an example of the judgment that can be made according to superficial physical traits regardless of any other factors. In addition to this profound message, the reader can find that the other two sisters of Cinderella are so jealous of her beauty. So, her beauty causes many problems for her. In other words, the competition between women is over physical appearance and who is prettier than the other, and this competition can make many conflicts and personal clashes.

Additionally, the young girls who usually read this tale should think about the prince who may come to rescue them from their miserable situations and save them and get married to live happily ever after. This scenario can be difficult or (impossible) in real life, and the result can bear tremendous disappointment for those dreaming girls. In conclusion, *Cinderella* is the ideal example of simple messages and the passive idealization of dreams or wishes. So, it should be read with extensive adult supervision to modify some of its learned lessons and avoid future hazardous impacts.

V. CONCLUSION

As mentioned before, fairy tales place a significant position in the heart of children's literature in a specific and childhood stage in general. These stories have a kind of important part in the mind of every single child through one tale he/she reads, watches, or listens. Moreover, the impacts of these stories still remarkably influence their lives and personal development in general. Fairy tales succeeded in conveying many values, beliefs, and standards of morality. These messages are transmitted from one generation to another and from one culture to another. The readers may understand the tremendous effect on millions of young readers.

However, readers may examine many hazardous impacts and implicit messages about maintaining patriarchal beliefs and unequal gender roles. The reader can identify the most severe threat in these fairy tales by portraying the female characters as submissive, naïve, helpless, and obsessive with their physical appearance. They rarely have an active role in the social life or even in pushing the story's actions except waiting for the gentleman's support. These fairy tales perpetuate the stereotypical patriarchal notion about women's image.

Objectification in traditional versions of fairy tales has been a topic of discussion for many years. The portrayal of women as passive objects to be won, rescued, or punished is a common theme in these stories. Women are often depicted as beautiful, helpless, and in need of a man to save them. This depiction reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and perpetuates a culture of objectification.

For example, in the story of *Cinderella*, the protagonist is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters and can only escape her situation with the help of a prince. The prince falls in love with her based on her appearance alone, without knowing her personality or character. This reinforces the idea that a woman's worth is based solely on her appearance. Similarly, in the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, an evil witch puts the princess into a deep sleep and can only be awakened by a prince's kiss. This reinforces the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to be desired and desired by a man.

The readers can find a deliberate intention to expose the female figures in dependent and subordinate roles. Additionally, her future life or destiny may be decided according to the existence of this prince (powerful male) to get married at the end of the story. The theme of marriage is exposed as the final and precious reward for the girl's passivity,

obedience, and waiting for this young man. Finally, the female figures in these stories are always presented as very superficial, with no worries about their personal development. All conflicts are revolved around being prettier than others. These traditional fairy tales have been passed down through generations and are popular today. However, it is essential to acknowledge their harmful message and work towards creating more inclusive and empowering stories. It is time to move away from the objectification of women in literature and strive for more diverse and representative storytelling.

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