Re-thinking Fairytales: Happily "Never" After?

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ABSTRACT: Fairytales occupy a special place in the mindset of youngsters while consciously and subconsciously shaping their outlook regarding the issues mentioned in those tales. Occupying almost every child's hearts as bedtime stories, fairytales describe it all. We are given a brief description of a prince, a maiden or a princess, her sorrows and sufferings and a heroic and adventurous narration of the prince rescuing the princess. This paper shows the way politics of patriarchy is put to work through these mere fairytales. It further explains how telling and re-telling of these stories "normalize" the situation in such a way that women in general feel the necessity of being under patriarchal rule. For this paper, several versions of some famous fairytales were analyzed that showed how all the variations end up delivering partially or completely the same kind of messages. This paper used the computer animated film *Happily N'Ever After* directed by Yvette Kaplan and Paul Bolger as an example that emphasizes the observations made here about these fairy tales. Finally, it also details how a new kind of re-telling can go a long way to bring about a change in these stereotypes.
KEYWORDS: fairytale, films, stereotype, happily ever after, patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Fairytales seem to be very innocent in general sense. But little do we realize that there might be more elements in these tales than it meets the eye. As Jack Zipes suggests fairy tales are not intended solely for children, that they have a purpose in "socializing [all] readers" (Zipes qtd. in Brown par 2). Fairytales, in the beginning, may have had entertainment as the sole purpose but later on, they became more like a tool, serving for historical purposes. When youngsters are listening to a story that has a beginning like "Once upon a time in a land far away..." their minds are drawn automatically into a land of kings and queens, of rivers and hills and snowfalls, scary witches and fairy godmothers. Finally when the story ends with a happy note saying "…and they lived happily ever after", which happens most often, a sense of completion fills up their hearts with joy. But the question is, with the change of time did the purpose remain confined only to entertainment or was it modified to meet the needs of the society? If the latter is taken to be true, then what impact did it have on the outlook of the people? These are the questions regarding which I give my opinions in this paper. I show how the idea of a 'perfect' fairytale is subtly mocked at in the film *Happily N'Ever After*. Also I express the process through which, I believe, a change can be brought about.

II. FAIRYTALE: WHAT ACTUALLY WAS ITS' PURPOSE?

The inception of fairytales goes far back in time. Fairytales by Perrault or Grimm Brothers' were only rewrites intended for children (Bacchilega 3). They were different from prior tales because they omitted sex, limited violence to bad characters, and had "virtuous" heroes or heroines and a moral (Bottigheimer 8-9). These tales were used to define the social conventions and norms and make the children aware of it.

> "…in old days the primary purpose of folktales was less to entertain than it was to train. This is not to suggest that fairy tales had never since been used for training, but that stories in the old days were like survival guides of sorts, training people in survival strategies and practical wisdom and were used for, besides explaining the mysteries of life and nature, providing people with such practical wisdom as not to dream too big, as opposed to stories that are now produced primarily for entertainment before anything else" (Dutta 2).

Even when the fairytales started serving entertainment purpose primarily, these were not meant for everyone in the society. The modification was made mainly for the higher class audience, and most of the modifications were made regarding the portrayal of the female characters-

> "… the stories over the years lost some of their feisty women characters, and were replaced by more passive, patiently gentle, helpless and docile women characters, as these qualities came to be regarded as desirable in women" (Dutta 2).

Later these stories were started to be used as a great way to help in a child's psychological growth. Tales ending with a moral tone often helped a child realizing the significance of conforming to values. This way the fairytales had spread largely in almost every society.

> "Fairy tales have passed from generation to generation, almost as a rite of passage, throughout western civilization. Whether it is the tales of the Grimm Brothers' or modern Disney versions, fairy tales have permeated society for ages. The question is whether they are merely stories told to children for entertainment or something more. Every tale offers children morals to live up to such as not trusting strangers to being kind to animals. Are morals all that are provided though? Fairy tales seem to have a much more lasting effect on a child's psyche than simply a lesson learned." (Patel 1)

Based on what Henal Patel has said, this question can be raised easily. From this point onwards, I will go on discussing what has lead to these modifications and the stereotypical beliefs resulting from it.

III. RECIPE FOR A 'PERFECT' FAIRYTALE:
While going through some popular fairytales I realized that with the course of time these fairytales were changed following a similar kind of pattern. Thus it can be said that there is a 'recipe' for almost every story to become a perfect fairytale. No matter how wonderful a storyline is, it cannot be called a fairytale if it fails to meet the 'requirements'. The two most important 'ingredients' for a perfect fairytale can be marked as–

1. A female lead who always ends up suffering and is in some way or the other subject to physical or mental torture, often without a very convincing logic.
2. A male lead, most of the times to be seen appearing out of nowhere only to save his ladylove.

Then there is the portrayal of these characters. As far as the girl is concerned, she has to be an epitome of everything the society assumes is positive. She must have sweetness, beauty, kindness, submissiveness and all those 'good' qualities in her.
> "[…] the beautiful single daughter is nearly always noted for her docility, gentleness and good temper" (Lieberman 188).

In short, she has to be whiteness personified, figuratively and literally. Even mere inner goodness or beauty is not enough. Here the idea of good nature is associated with good looks.

> "This is one reason why fairy tales are based on the attractive physical appearances…This also sends the message to girls that being beautiful also means having a good personality or attitude" (Metz 2).

So to make an ideal fairytale, it is a must to show the girl as a complete package of what everyone 'thinks' is conventional. Anything out-of-the-box is plain evil-

> "The heroine is perfect in every way. She is beautiful, kind, helpful, and compassionate. She is the idealized 'good.' She is also helpless, naive and lacks any sort of intelligence…She is certainly not smart, clever, or ambitious. She does not find her way out of situations with the use of her wit or savvy, but waits for others to save her…When it comes to female roles the message these tales convey is that there are only two types of women: the helpless and the malicious. Good women do not save the day, they do not scheme, nor do they get themselves out of bad situations; they wait until a Prince saves them. Women who have desires and the moxie to achieve them are villainous and will be punished in the end" (Patel 17).

Now coming to the male lead, or the hero of the story, who must be (most of the times) a prince. Generally there is no mention of the prince until one day he suddenly appears out of thin air. Just for the story's sake let us assume he was busy minding his own business till now and the poor fellow got tired and decided to take a 'stroll' for a while, and that too outside his kingdom. In this way, he meets or comes to know about the heroine, falls in love with her at the first sight and so on. I find that Henal Patel's description of such a hero is quite apt.

"The hero in fairy tales is never wrong. He is handsome and wealthy and generally reputed to be brave. However in many fairy tales, he does not actually do much. He is simply the character who *seems* to cause everything to work out. Upon closer study, it is clear that the supporting actors are those who play the largest part in ensuring that the hero saves the heroine. Still, the fairy tales tell us that the Prince is the ideal. He is the man every woman wants. He is also the one who guarantees the happy ending needed for a fairy tale to be complete" (Patel 2).

So what does he do? Almost nothing, as long as one does not count horse-riding and deer-hunting as 'heroic' deeds. Yet, he is the one who gets all the accolades in the end.

"He gets his bride and a happy ending, regardless of the plot. Most of the time, he does not even cause the successful conclusion, but depends on minor characters who are on his side. Regardless, he is still the unequivocal hero" (Patel 26).

IV. THE 'PRINCE CHARMING' SAVING THE 'DAMSEL IN DISTRESS': THE 'HAPPILY EVER AFTER'

This is something almost everyone knows. Those who have heard or told fairytale at least once in their lives are very much familiar with the phrases 'damsel in distress' and 'Prince Charming'. Generally, fairytales include a beautiful girl who is often showed to be in a state of suffering, be it mental or physical and is at last saved by a brave and handsome prince. In famous fairytales like "Cinderella", "Snow-White", "Sleeping Beauty", "Rapunzel" etc the scenario is quite similar. How many times have we come across a fairytale where the prince is prohibited from going to 'The Ball'? Or is made to do all the household chores? Clean the chimneys? Or fetch water from the well? Never. What are these fairytales doing to us then? The scenario unconsciously promotes within us the idea of women being the submissive one, the sacrificing one, the domestic laborer.

"Rarely do you read a fairy tale and not have the women laboring in some way or another....These ideas of women doing housework all the time has probably helped to keep traditional family patriarchy alive today. Fairy tales teach young girls that they should grow up to become good housewives. These thoughts may inadvertently be placed in the minds of girls today. They could feel that their only purpose is to have children and keep house while their husbands go out and live the more active life" (Metz 8).

In "Cinderella", Cinderella is seen suffering because of her step-mother and step-sisters. She is beautiful, gentle- everything the society seeks in a 'perfect' wife. In the turn of events, she finally meets her Prince Charming, gets married and is left to live happily ever after. But what role does *she* get to play throughout the whole story?

"After leaving her slipper at the ball she has nothing more to do but stay home and wait. The prince has commanded that the slipper be carried to every house in the kingdom, and that it be tried on the foot of every woman. Cinderella can remain quietly at home; the prince's servant will come to her house and will discover her identity" (Lieberman 389).

Similarly, the Sleeping Beauty portrays passivity herself. She is put to sleep using an enchantment. The only way out for her is getting a 'true' love. When the Prince finally comes and kisses her (in the children's version), she wakes up from the enchanted sleep. Same fate follows Rapunzel who remains imprisoned in a tower and needs a Prince to rescue her.

"So many of the heroines of fairy stories, including the well-known Rapunzel, are locked up in towers, locked into a magic sleep, imprisoned by giants, or otherwise enslaved, and waiting to be rescued by a passing prince, that the helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale" (Lieberman 192).

Now this is quite obvious to ask what is wrong to have such endings. Listening to stories with happy endings is not a problem. The main problem lies in the aftereffects of listening and telling of these stories over generations.

> "Fairy tales affect the way our society in general thinks about girls and their role in society. They also affect the way girls feel and interact with each other….Because fairy tales are read to children in their impressionable years, they imbed thought into the child that affect the way they think about women and "normal" social roles" (Metz 1).

Agreeing with what Metz has said in the statement above, I feel that all the familiar fairytales which are told over generations modify the society's outlook to a great extent. The child and specially the female child, grow up having a stereotypical image of themselves and their future. Their views and beliefs are changed, sub-consciously if not consciously, to such a level that often they themselves fall victim to these. They are led to believe deeply that if they want their part of happy ending, they must be like these heroines. This is because "The female characters that do show signs of intelligence or ambition are evil" (Patel 17). Doing anything to improve their condition or aspiring for a better life may lead to harmful consequences.

> "The princesses in "The Yellow Dwarf," "Goldilocks," and "Trusty John" are described as being spoiled, vain, and wilful: the problem is that they refuse to marry anyone…These princesses are portrayed as reprehensible because they refuse to marry; hence, they are considered "stuck-up," as children would say. The alternate construction, that they wished to preserve their freedom and their identity, is denied or disallowed …There is a sense of triumph when a wilful princess submits or is forced to submit to a husband" (Lieberman 393).

So, the 'good' girls are not even given a chance to decide what do they want to do with their lives, or whether they even want to get married or not. All of this is done "in accord with the social values of their time" (cited in Haase 11). Therefore, all we have to do is get a brave prince, a tamed princess, every piece put into its proper place and we will have the same old happily ever after we are so eagerly looking for!

V. FIDDLING WITH THE BALANCE: HAPPILY NEVER AFTER?

So far, we have the proper ingredients for a traditional fairytale. A prince, a damsel, an adventure and finally the happily ever after; it sounds just perfect. But what happens when one slightly messes up the ingredients?

> "I just wish we could mix it up a little bit…What if we make the seven dwarves seven feet tall? ... What about making Rapunzel go bald?" (*Happliy N'Ever After*)

The statement is given by Mambo, the helper/assistant of the Wizard in the animation film *Happily N'Ever After* directed by Yvette Kaplan and Paul Bolger based on the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. On a surface level, this statement is only meant to be funny. However, on a serious note, I also feel quite similar to Mambo after listening to these fairytales in the same way over and over again. This film also shows the female lead, Ella, having her happily ever after with a lad. But at least for a change, this time it is not the Prince, rather it is his servant, Rick. The film subtly mocks the typical fairytale-ish requirements for a perfect ending and a lot of it is done through the portrayal of the character of the Prince. He is shown following the 'book' that instructs him on almost everything. From this book, he gets the idea of becoming a 'perfect' Prince Charming which even includes cutting his hair "Not too much off the front".

> "Everything must be perfect. Tonight's the night I meet my Damsel it says so right here in the book…"on his 21st birthday"" (*Happily N'Ever After*).

The Prince prepares himself to go to the ball where he is to find his damsel, according to the book, who is "preferably blonde, who is either imprisoned, cursed or distressed" (*Happily N'Ever After*). To succeed in his attempt, he follows the rulebook and tries to "be romantic", "look heroic" in the ball. On the other side Mambo starts playing with the magical ball and in the course of events the very familiar wicked step-mother ends up conjuring the magic scepter. When she discovers about Ella's happy ending she dismantles the balance of good and evil resulting in a wide range of changes in the fairytale endings of the whole fairytale land. Thus we see Sleeping Beauty's Prince falling into a deep slumber himself after kissing the Princess, Rumplestiltskin winning his bet with the queen and taking her baby and so on. When the enchantment on Ella wears off and the Prince is left with nothing except a shoe of her, the first thing he does is check the book for his next plan of action! It is not because he actually loves Ella, but because the book says to save that particular girl that he goes to find her, and that too when she is standing in front of him and trying to talk to him. Even in a crucial moment where he has failed and has been captured by trolls, instead of using his 'Princely' brain he opens up the book for a solution and with the comment "Kiss thy royal butt goodbye" he finds there, all he can do is panic.

The female lead Ella is no less. She keeps waiting for her Prince Charming when she doesn't even know whether or not she stands the chance. All the thoughts regarding the Prince occupy her mind in such a way that she does not realize Rick's true feelings for her. Disillusioned by this stereotypical fairytale-like idea, she does not realize her feelings for Rick as well. Does she ever think of having a life of her own without a Prince for once? Why does she have to meet the Prince and wait for being rescued by him? As we often say, "Self-help is the best help"- then why does she need a fairy godmother and a Prince to help her have a happy ending? The answer is quite simple- it would be an 'imbalanced' fairytale then. It is the 'norm' "that they put the princess on display and exaggerate her passivity" (Seago 16).

Throughout most part of the story, Ella hopes to reunite with the Prince. She never gives herself a chance at love with Rick until the end. Though the film meets a different end compared to the traditional fairytales the stereotype remains there. Ella has her 'happy ending' with Rick instead of the Prince. It shows that she needs to be saved after all, even if it is by the servant. Therefore, we are back to the point where we started from- the whole 'damsel-in-distress' thing.

VI. RE-TELLING: A WAY OF RE-CONSTRUCTING

Apart from fairytales, there are other stories to listen to as we grow up. There are famous classic novels, historical narratives, plays, short stories covering a vast area of themes. There *are* stories where the only lead is a female character, or where the whole storyline revolves around one. But since fairytales are the ones that contribute largely in shaping our outlook it can also be used to bring about a change as well. Through appropriation, the same old fairytale can be shown in a totally different light. Fortunately, some have already set many examples of how this can be done. Very recently some authors have come up with unique ways of retelling well-known fairytales which are mainly of science-fiction genre or set in the current time period, making it somewhat easier for the readers to feel a connection. One such would be the *Lunar Chronicles* series by Marissa Meyer. The author uses known characters, or at the least the known female main character, to retell a tale in her own style. The readers are able to almost instantly connect to the storyline and the hint of fairytale is still there. In the first three books of the *Lunar Chronicles* series*, Cinder, the science-fiction version of Cinderella, is not some damsel-in-distress who needs to be saved. She has her own qualities and talents, setting herself in a stark contrast against the Cinderella of the traditional fairytale. Yet you cannot help feeling a sense of connection to Cinder in a similar way you do for Cinderella. Both have their own evil queens or stepmothers to deal with, but while Cinderella is more like suffer-in-silence kind of a girl, Cinder has a spark within her, a strength to fight back for herself. In this case, therefore, she stands against the traditional notion the society has created through the fairytales- she is not breathtakingly beautiful, has a prosthetic leg, not 'tamed' at all, and most certainly can take care of herself without the Prince. Appropriation has often been taken as a means to freedom, or to assert one's identity. Therefore, it is possible to appropriate the fairytales in such a way that we feel we are still connected to the age-old traditional tales, but these are something more liberating, more refreshing. It is like new candy in an old wrapper.

VII. CONCLUSION

Through seemingly innocent narration and storyline, the former, 'traditional' pattern of fairytales portrays the boundaries set by the society. Fairytales of these kinds influence the readers or listeners to believe in the boundaries as unquestionable norms, resisting them from asserting their individual wills. Using literature to assert individuality is nothing peculiar. Feminists have always tried to break through this hegemonic system through their writings. Specially in today's age of media and technological revolution, movies and retellings like *Happily N'Ever After* and *Lunar Chronicles* can go a long way to bring about a change. Gradually but effectively, it can contribute in redefining the traditional definition of a fairytale and of 'balance'. After all, it is the first few steps that count, no matter how small.

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