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BEAUTY AT ODDS

Deconstructing the Stereotyped Notions in Fairy Tales

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Abstract: The concept of beauty, its standards and presumed notions have often taken the world by storm. Irrespective of the age, community, religion and nation, beauty has set apart a no man's land in the minds of people. Believed to be a pleasure or an emotional element, beauty has various ramifications. And as such, many unfavorable notions of beauty have found its place in literature. Most important of these are seen in fairy tales. Fairy tales have a deep impact on people as the images and ideologies conveyed by fairy tales gets integrated into their minds. Exposed from a very young age, these stories even if meant to entertain and create bright, beautiful images of 'happily ever after', unconsciously injects some wrong ideas. This paper attempts to analyze selected fairy tales on the light of beauty. Beginning with the popular notions of beauty, the paper attempts to deconstruct the portrayals of beauty in these stories and the troublesome ideas they put forth.

Keywords: Fairy Tales, Beauty, Goodness, Evil.

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales offer a world of magic and beauty where the whims and fancies of readers gets fulfilled. With a simple touch of magic wand, you can have your heart's desires; frogs turned to princes, pumpkins into carriages and the damsels in distress turn to maidens of beauty and elegance. Although quite captivating, these stories unconsciously or even consciously create certain biases and these in turn get imbibed into the minds of the children at a very young age. These ideas get nurtured as established ideas and becomes the norm as they grow up and face the society. A troublesome concept that has made its presence in the fairy tales is beauty. It's not only that external beauty is a requisite for women; but also, that beauty has its own uninvited baggage of troubles.

The concept of beauty has enjoyed a position of privilege since the earlier days. In realistic world situations, external beauty is often seen to be favoured over internal beauty. But in the world of fairy tales, external beauty becomes a guarantee for internal beauty. Beauty is connected to the inherent goodness of a person while the ugliness is connected to evil nature. Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz in "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales Author(s)" have noted that 31 percent of all stories associate beauty with goodness and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil personified in the semblance of witches, wicked stepmothers and conniving queens (715). A number of fairy tales stand witness to this idea of beauty. However, at a closer look we can find fairy tales that defy this innate relation between beauty and goodness and lack of beauty and evil nature.

Cinderella, the one among the oldest tales that we have come across, puts forth a beautiful maiden who is gentle and pious, but troubled by her evil stepmother and stepsisters. Charles Perrault's version of the story foregrounds the eternal beauty of Cinderella in such a way that even when the stepsisters and mother are covered in riches, they are unable to overcome her pure beauty. "Cinderella, notwithstanding her coarse apparel, was a hundred times more beautiful than her sisters, although they were always dressed very richly" (Lang 64). But, Grimm's version of *Cinderella* has a different story to tell. Grimm portrays both Cinderella

and the stepsisters as beautiful. "The new wife brought two daughters home with her, and they were beautiful and fair in appearance, but at heart were black and ugly" (Grimm 4). Here the external appearances of the stepsisters do not match with the earlier said norms, i.e., beauty is not always a personification of the innate goodness. At times, outer appearances can be deceptive.

A well-known example of the above said digression is Snow White's evil stepmother. "A year later the king took himself another wife. She was a beautiful woman, but she was proud and arrogant, and she could not stand it if anyone might surpass her in beauty" (Grimm 138). The evil stepmother in *Snow White* is the "fairest of all" (138) according to the magic mirror. But as Snow White grew up, she became a "thousand times fairer" (139) than her, which instils envy and fear in the heart of the stepmother. Her extreme obsession with her beauty turns her evil, prompting her to kill Snow White. Here too external beauty does not promise inborn goodness. A matter of special attention is that although she was proud and arrogant earlier, she turns pure evil to safeguard her beauty. In the stepmother's character, the readers can find a beauty of affordable goodness turning into evil all for the sake of beauty.

C.S. Lewis's first Narnia Book *The Magician's Nephew* presents the readers with a beautiful witch unlike the stereotypical hags of the other tales. In the story, the witch Jadis, is the Queen of Charn. She is described as "seven feet tall and dazzlingly beautiful" (36). Even though she is beautiful, her evil nature is evident to the children and the readers. A despot and a powerful sorceress, she finds against her own sister out of greed. In the face of defeat, she denies to submit and instead casts a spell, a curse, that puts the entire life of the land into a standstill. Towards the end of the story, the readers find Jadis whose skin is bleached white. If the whiteness of the skin can be considered as a signpost of goodness, then we have the zenith of goodness in Queen Jadis. However, her evil nature is clearly evident and this again proves that outward beauty is not an assurance of inner goodness.

All the earlier mentioned characters are examples of external beauty being deceptive. The contradiction can work in the opposite direction too, i.e., lack of beauty as a sign of evil. Almost all the fairy tales represent witches, ogres, sorceresses and other evil characters as ugly. Very rarely can we find an ugly one who is kind at heart. However, there has been a character even though ugly has found the favour of children worldwide. Shrek, the character from the picture book fairy tale *Shrek!* by William Steig. Shrek is a horrid little ogre who goes out into the world to find adventure. The very first lines of the book describe his ugly appearance. "His mother was ugly and his father was ugly, but Shrek was uglier than the two of them put together" (2). Although ugly, Shrek does not have any ounce of evil nature in him. He is not trying to frighten anyone, but the repulsive nature of his, frightens everyone away. Here we can see that anyone who lacks beauty need not necessarily be evil natured.

CONCLUSION

Thus, most of the fairy tales link beauty and goodness together. Beauty is considered as a manifestation of the inner goodness while ugliness is the representation of the evil nature. But there are very few contradictions that we can find. But compared to the huge lot of stereotyped representations; these are very small in number. The idea that these fairy tales instil in the children's minds are rather dangerous. Children, from a very young age tend to believe that even if they are good at heart, it does not matter as long as they are beautiful. Same goes for the case of someone who is deemed ugly. It is high time that importance is given to one's personality rather than one's photographic face. A body positive attitude must be instilled in children. Children should be made to realise that even if one is beautiful or not, the goodness of their heart is all that matters.

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