ARE FAIR-Y TALES REALLY FAIR—A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN *THAKURMAR JHULI* AND GRIMM BROTHERS FAIRY TALES

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative study between two famous collections of folktales, Thakurmar Jhuli from Bengal and Grimm Brothers from Germany. The study analyzes the similarities and differences in themes, characters, narrative style, and cultural context of these two collections. It also examines the impact of socio-cultural factors on the development of these two collections. The paper argues that while both collections share commonalities in the use of folklore as a means of cultural preservation and entertainment, they also display distinctive features that reflect their respective cultural contexts. The study contributes to a better understanding of the role of folklore in shaping cultural identity and offers insights into the cultural exchange and diversity of human civilization.

Index Terms – **Fairy Tale, Folk Tale, Comparative Study.**

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that fairy tales are an integral part of every society's cultural heritage, shaped by its unique cultural influences. The origin of fairy tales can be traced back to the oral traditions of different communities. For instance, in Gaelic tradition, the tradesmen such as tailors and shoemakers would narrate stories to the townspeople, while in Wales, families would gather around the fire and share tales they had heard. In Germany, women engaged in spinning would tell stories at night to keep themselves and their company awake. Similarly, in ancient India, oral storytelling was a popular means of passing down stories from one generation to the next. Over time, efforts were made to compile these stories into printed versions. The Grimm brothers were among the first to preserve the characteristics of oral tales, while Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumder played a similar role in Bengali literature.

Fairy tales are now commonly associated with children's bedtime stories or as a means to impart moral lessons. However, the simplicity of these stories may be deceptive. Therefore, in order to explore the complexity of fairy tales, a comparative study between Thakurmar Jhuli and Grimm brothers' collections of fairy tales is proposed.

Matthew Arnold has famously stated that comparison is integral to understanding any event or literary work, as every event or literature can only be comprehensively understood in relation to other events or literature. Therefore, through comparative analysis, a better understanding of both Thakurmar Jhuli and Grimm brothers' collections of fairy tales can be acquired.

1.1. DEFINITION OF FAIRY TALES

The term "fairy tale" is ubiquitous in popular culture, and almost everyone can recall at least a few examples from sources such as Thakurmar Jhuli, Grimm brothers' collections, or Disney adaptations. However, what exactly constitutes a fairy tale remains a subject of inquiry. Generally, fairy tales are short stories featuring archetypal characters, including princes, princesses, kings, queens, dwarves, elves, fairies, witches, giants, trolls, mermaids, wicked stepmothers, and gnomes, and imbued with elements of magic and enchantment. Fairy tales differ from legends, other folk narratives, and moral tales, such as beast fables. They are characterized by unusual happiness, typically concluding with a "fairy tale ending" or a happy ending, and often present stories that could not possibly be true.

However, fairy tales are not always grounded in historical truth, and are instead usually set in an imaginary time and place, such as "once upon a time". Moreover, the presence of fairies is not a defining feature of fairy tales, as J.R.R. Tolkein has argued that fairy tales refer to stories about the adventures of men in "Faerie", the land of fairies, princes and princesses, dwarves, elves, and other magical creatures. Talking animals and the presence of magic are more common in fairy tales than fairies themselves, according to Stith Thompson.

Some folklorists prefer to use the German term "Marchen" or "wonder tale" to refer to this genre over "fairy tale". These tales are usually told orally and are a sub-category of folktales. The oldest forms of fairy tales, from Panchatantra to Pentamerone, have undergone considerable revision from their original oral forms. The Grimm brothers were among the first to attempt to preserve

the characteristics of oral tales, and similarly, Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumder made efforts to retain the freshness of oral tales in his work. Rabindranath Tagore attested to Majumder's success in preserving the tales told by thakurma or grandmother.

1.2. TARGETS OF FAIRY TALES

In earlier times, fairy tales were not just limited to children's literature but also catered to an adult audience. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, they became more closely associated with literature for children. Despite this shift, fairy tales continue to play a crucial role in the social, intellectual, and emotional development of children. They are seen as instrumental in the socialization process that instills values, morals, taste, and habits in individuals, thereby shaping a well-functioning society.

As Dickens eloquently phrased it, fairy tales have contributed to the spread of gentleness, forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the less fortunate, kindness towards animals, and an appreciation of nature. Fairy tales not only provide a sense of the world and how one ought to navigate it but also work towards freeing and supporting the child, both consciously and unconsciously.

Bettelheim further elaborated on the role of fairy tales in developing a child's desire for higher consciousness and in coping with their complicated emotions. By presenting a predictable outcome where good eventually triumphs over evil, fairy tales help alleviate children's anxieties and fears. The hero or heroine is often subjected to a challenging and trying life, but with the help of fairies, they ultimately emerge victorious in the end.

Geoff highlights the literary value of fairy tales, as they deal with the universal struggle between good and evil. Furthermore, fairy tales captivate their audience's imagination and entice them with the attractive outcome of events, making them a powerful storytelling medium.

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2. Dickens, Charles, 1841. The Old Curiosity Shop. Wilco Publishing House, ITTS House, 33, Sri Saibaba Marg, Kala Ghoda, Mumbai- India.

2. MAIN BODY

2.1. THAKURMAR JHULI

A.K. Ramanujan (1985) posits that folktales from India can be sorted into various categories based on their plots, which include chain tales, ritual tales, trickster tales, and sibling tales. The Thakurmar Jhuli collection is similarly organized into four sections: Tales of Adventure (Dhudher Sagar), Tales of Demons (Roop Tarashi), Animal and Humorous Tales (Chang Bang), and Poems elucidating the rituals of putting children to bed after a story (Aam Sandesh). From its origins in oral tradition to its current digitized version, Thakurmar Jhuli has come a long way.

Two essential factors in this collection are the storytellers, who are predominantly women, and the audience, which is primarily composed of children. Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumder's efforts to compile oral tales from Bengal into a collection may not seem exceptional in today's world, where various authors have published and distributed numerous oral tales across multiple platforms. However, a hundred years ago, his attempt was genuine and distinctive because it was not a scholarly undertaking for the elites of society, but rather a straightforward endeavor to preserve a sense of authenticity from a life of simplicity, removed from the intellectual and learned urban setting.

A widely accepted notion about these tales is that they endure within a specific society because they serve certain social functions, such as recreation or amusement, education, socialization, propaganda, and communication of knowledge (Bhattacharya D.K., 2005)

2.1.1. NARRATORS OF THE TALES

generations, are a window into the thoughts, beliefs, and aspirations of the women who originally narrated them. It is no surprise, then, that the female characters in these stories are often at the forefront, whether as young and beautiful princesses or queens, malevolent demonesses, bitter wives, or unmarried girls. Such tales, while providing a means for rural women to imagine themselves as powerful heroines embarking on fantastical adventures, also frequently serve as cautionary tales, reinforcing the expectation of women's submission and docility.

Nonetheless, some stories such as Kironmala and Kakonmala Kanchanmala challenge these conventions, featuring brave and audacious heroines who take charge of their lives and overcome adversity. Throughout the collection, the overarching message for women is to remain passive yet assertive in the face of challenges.

As these tales are deeply rooted in the everyday life of rural communities, they often include domestic themes such as housework and childcare, adding a sense of familiarity and local color to the narrative. From a demoness' magical quilt to the gift of a certain cucumber, the simple symbols used in these stories offer a glimpse into the everyday routine of homemakers.

2.1.2. LISTENERS OF THE TALES

Just as the narrators, the principal audience for these stories are the children who are deciphering the messages contained therein. Although the level of comprehension may vary among children and across changing socio-cultural contexts, these stories reveal a fundamental aspect of Indian life that has endured for decades. While the tales may be retold and adapted with characters depicted in a new light, the core messages remain unaltered. Thus, villainous characters may appear as dominant and dynamic, while protagonists may be depicted as static, eliciting our sympathy. Overall, these stories convey timeless values such as the triumph of good over evil, the importance of fulfilling promises, and the significance of intellect in achieving success. Children's impressionable minds are akin to pliant clay, and as such, these teachings have a lasting impact on them.

2.2. BROTHERS GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES

At the outset of the nineteenth century, two brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, compiled a volume of folklore by collecting materials from storytellers in central Germany. This anthology, which first appeared in 1812, contained a total of two hundred and ten tales. In 1823, an English translation by Edgar Taylor and David Jardine was published, featuring a medley of wonder tales, animal fables, rustic farce, and religious exempla. Among these, the wonder tales, popularly known as fairy tales, feature iconic characters such as Cinderella, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Hansel, and Gretel. In this world, evil stepmothers prowl in palaces, witches lurk in the woods, and the protagonists always emerge triumphant.

This collection contains many of the most cherished fairy tales in the history of literature, such as Little Snow White with its haunting refrain ("Mirror, mirror…") and its three stages of deadly unconsciousness (first the stay-laces, then the poisoned comb, then the red apple); the Grimms' unsettling and ferocious version of Cinderella, in which her stepsisters mutilate their own feet to fit into the glass slipper; Repunzel, The Robber Bridegroom, Fitcher's Bird, and many more. The book is a classic work of art, like a mosaic composed of precious small pieces, each glinting with its own color and character, glassy and crystalline, yet somehow rigid and unyielding.

The brothers Grimm censored the grim stories before releasing their first collection to better align with the prevalent beliefs of their time. Norton's view is that society began paying closer attention to the graphic tales when they moved to the nursery. These tales were dark and filled with violence, sexual overtones, and deception. Society reworked these tales from time to time, but the sexual overtones and the violence towards the wrongdoers persisted, and Christian moral lessons were added. Norton further explains that these evolving tales functioned as education tools, social regulations, and even reflections of society.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, these stories had become wildly popular, giving rise to a new genre of literature - children's imaginative stories that featured all the horrors of childhood, set within concise, poignant narratives filled with poison apples, magic spells, talking wolves, and cannibals lurking in the shadows. This era marked the inception of imaginative literature for children.

3. COMPARATIVE STUDY

Fairy tales are a ubiquitous feature of childhood that serve as a valuable medium for inculcating socially desirable values and ideals. However, it is also a well-known fact that gender bias permeates these tales, whether it is the works of the Grimm Brothers or Thakurmar Jhuli. A comparative analysis is undertaken in order to better comprehend this gender bias.

3.1. BEAUTY CONCEPT

One particular aspect of these tales that has come under scrutiny is the notion of beauty. Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf have expounded upon the "Beauty Myth," which is a political constraint that is especially pertinent to women. Despite the significant strides made by women in the realm of legal and reproductive rights since the 1970s, they continue to feel constrained. This is largely due to the fact that the pursuit of beauty, youthfulness, and slimness has become a major preoccupation in their lives. Images of female beauty are utilized as a political weapon to undermine women's progress by instilling unrealistic beauty standards in them. Fairy tales are often used to propagate this "Beauty Myth" among children. In traditional fairy tales, the good women are typically young, slim, and fair-skinned, with Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Belle being some prime examples. Snow White, for instance, is described as having "skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony." In contrast, the step-sisters of Cinderella are depicted as being fat, dark-skinned, and heavily made up. The stepmothers are old, wrinkled, and envious of their stepdaughters' beauty and youth.

In Thakurmar Jhuli, the beauty of a woman is often extolled, with descriptions such as "Kunch Baran Konya Taar Megh Baran Chul" (a woman with a redolent complexion like the fruit Kunch and hair as dark as rain clouds) for Kalavati Rajkonya. The woman's complexion is expected to glow like a full moon, and her beauty should be akin to that of a golden lotus with golden leaves for Ghumonto Puri. Such descriptions weave together fantasy and reality to create an idealized image of female beauty that leads to the creation of an internalized standard. These standards are not modern inventions, as it is still believed in our subcontinent that a woman must have a glowing complexion and flowing, long, dark hair to be considered beautiful and "perfect" for marriage. Such ideals are reinforced by modern advertisements for fairness creams, jewelry, clothes, beauty parlors, fitness centers, and gyms.

The beauty of one woman creates envy and jealousy among other women and attracts the attention of males, as demonstrated by Snow White's story. The wicked queen becomes jealous of Snow White's beauty and hires a huntsman to kill her. However, the huntsman takes pity on her innocence and beauty and releases her. When the dwarves find Snow White sleeping in their bed, they are not angry but rather amused by her beauty. Similarly, in stories such as Sheet Basanto and Saat Bhai Champa, the "Suo rani" and the "Boro ranis" are envious of the beauty of "Duo rani" and "Chhoto rani," respectively, and take measures to eliminate their rivals to win the king's favor. The concept of beauty typically pits women against each other and teaches them not to trust each other.

3.2. GENDER ROLES

Fairy tales convey the message that the concept of poetic justice prevails throughout their narrative, leading to a fulfilling and happy ending. The female protagonist, despite enduring traumatic experiences, is ultimately rewarded by the supernatural agent for conforming to her gender role. This is exemplified in Cinderella's story, where her mother's admonishment to be pious assures her of divine protection, which eventually leads to her being rescued by the fairy godmother. The theme of female vulnerability is apparent as obedient girls wait for someone to rescue them from the evil lurking outside.

Moreover, the weapon to secure male protection is none other than the female's beauty, as illustrated in Snow White's and Ghumontopuri's stories. Thus, physical beauty is inextricably linked with the concept of goodness in a love relationship.

A virtuous female protagonist should possess qualities such as fortitude, magnanimity, grace, constancy, and substance to demonstrate strength of character and inner charm. As Bruno Bettelheim in The Use of Enchantment points out, surface appearance should not be used to determine a person's true worth. Furthermore, Karen Rowe in her article "Feminism in Fairy Tales" highlights that the heroine must adopt conventional female virtues and submit to patriarchal needs to guarantee social and financial security through marriage.

Overall, the message of fairy tales is that kind, pure, gentle, obedient, submissive, considerate, and patient girls deserve a fulfilling and happy life. The readers are encouraged to believe that good people will be rewarded, while the bad people will be punished.

3.3. THE VILLAINS

"We "villains" always get the short end of the stick

            Thrown off of cliffs, impales by ships

            Everyone has it all wrong. […]

            They are so ungrateful, misplacing all their hate

            Maybe I'm hero too.

            But a happy ever after is a dream that won't come true."

                                                              (Musical frat by AVbyte 2014)

Who are the antagonists of fairy tales? The answer is unequivocal. They are the women who possess qualities that are the antithesis of the "good" heroines in both physical appearance and actions, namely those who are ambitious, jealous, envious, and selfish. The villains deviate from traditional gender roles; they are not docile or submissive, but active and assertive, willing to do whatever it takes to secure their own futures. However, despite their nonconformity, they are ultimately unable to achieve the "happily ever after" ending that the heroines enjoy.

In fact, the conflict between good and evil is an indispensable element of any fairy tale. The virtuous female protagonist is constantly challenged by malevolent forces, which take the form of wicked stepmothers and gluttonous witches in stories such as Hansel and Gretel, jealous stepsisters in Cinderella, self-absorbed mothers in Snow White, the rakkhashi rani in Neelkamol aar Laalkamol, the jealous suo rani in Sheet Basanto, the envious bororanis in Saat Bhai Champa, and the ambitious bororanis in Kalavati Rajkonya. Physical beauty is invariably associated with goodness, while physical ugliness is associated with evil. For instance, Cinderella's stepsisters are portrayed as overweight and dark-skinned, while wicked stepmothers are often depicted as old and unattractive. Meanwhile, the rakkhashi rani is considered beautiful due to her mystical qualities.

The evil women in fairy tales are always punished in the end, typically by a male hero who vanquishes the villain and rescues the heroine. Passionate love is regarded as an attribute of physical beauty, which the evil women lack. As a result, while a beast can transform into a handsome prince, a witch remains irredeemably heartless and cruel. The antagonists are women who seek revenge for past mistreatment. For example, the evil fairy Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty casts a death spell on the newborn princess after being snubbed by the king. She is ultimately slain by a brave prince who awakens the princess from her enchanted slumber with true love's kiss. In Saat Bhai Champa, the evil bororanis are condemned to be buried with hente kanta upore kanta, and the rakkhashi rani is dismembered as the princes tear apart her pran-vomra.

The underlying message of these tales is that women who become enraged and jealous are prone to unruly behavior, necessitating the use of violence to subdue them.

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4.CONCLUSION

Similarities can be drawn between Ghumonto Puri and Sleeping Beauty, as well as Der Anguley and Thumbelina. Both Thakurmar Jhuli and the Grimm Brothers' compilation of fairy tales serve as a significant body of encoded messages for virtuous, pious, and chaste femininity, which emphasizes wholehearted dedication to the family while simultaneously serving as a set of symbols for the good and virtuous aspects of life. Over a century since their initial publication, the characters in these tales have taken on a more human-like quality rather than being depicted as gods and goddesses. The magical, enchanted gardens, rivers, lakes, and seas in these tales now resemble modern-day forests, while fairies, gnomes, and angels appear as ordinary children. Moreover, with the advancement of technology and the rise of television channels like National Geographic, Discovery, and Animal Planet, animals in these stories now look anatomically correct, departing from the magical descriptions found in Thakurmar Jhuli and Grimm Brothers. However, despite these changes, the primary messages within the stories have remained true to their essence.

In modern times, animated versions of these popular tales have emerged, depicting females in more powerfully independent roles. However, physical beauty is still highly prized in these versions, with many starring the "Barbie doll" as the heroine, albeit with a slight range of hair color. These versions seem to suggest that women can achieve things on their own, but they must also remain attractive to do so. Fairy tales continue to serve as a source and vehicle of powerful self-mirroring images that affirm the existing value system. However, these stories have changed to maintain patriarchally imposed gender roles. By focusing on female beauty as a form of status, it effectively undercuts other achievements of women, which are often more tangible, such as holding a prestigious job or running a successful business.

Despite these limitations, some Disney versions of fairy tales, such as the movie Maleficent directed by Robert Stromberg, attempt to present the viewpoint of the villains. In this version of Sleeping Beauty, the evil Maleficent casts a curse of death on the newborn princess in retaliation for the king's attack on her kingdom and the theft of her wings. Over time, she grows affectionate towards the princess and tries to negate her own curse, but the curse comes true, and the princess falls into a deep sleep. In the end, it is Maleficent's affectionate kiss that breaks the curse, not the prince's "true love's kiss." Similarly, in the movie Mirror Mirror directed by Tarsem Singh, Snow White is portrayed as a strong woman who rescues the prince from the evil queen.

However, even in these versions, beauty remains an important factor, and evil is still depicted as a woman, perpetuating the idea of women's rivalry on the platform of beauty.

In some animated versions of fairy tales, there are songs that question the need for a prince to rescue the princess. However, the message ultimately reinforces the importance of physical beauty, and the need for a man's help in rescuing the damsel in distress, indicating the continued manipulation of women by the patriarchy. Therefore, the question remains, are fairy tales truly fair? Whether it is the old paperback Thakurmar Jhuli and Grimm Brothers' collections or the digitized versions of these tales, it is crucial to critically analyze the messages conveyed in these stories.

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