

From Passive Princesses to Empowered Heroines: The Evolution of Gender Roles in Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Fairy tales have long played a vital role in human culture and child development shaping cultural ideas about gender, society and identities. For centuries, traditional fairy tales portrayed princesses as submissive, docile and reliant on male heroes for her happiness, safety or rescue. Their recurring depictions of men and women frequently mirror the gender norms and social values of the societies in which they are created. These images sustained traditional notions of femininity where beauty, silence and marriage were often regarded as the defining hallmarks of the perfect lady. However, contemporary fairy tales' retellings have begun to challenge these conventional storylines by showcase strong protagonist who defy patriarchal conventions and exercise agency over their own lives. This paper examines the evolving portrayal of women in fairy tales by analysing the transition from conventional traditional heroines to strong empowered heroines. Using a feminist literary perspective, it explores how contemporary retellings of famous tales emphasise women's voices, autonomy and resistance, by presenting protagonist as engaged member in their own stories rather than characters whose futures depend on external rescue. This chapter illustrates the meanings of femininity, heroism, bravery using a few instances from both traditional and modern fairy tales. It makes these transformations are of larger social and cultural shifts in how gender and women's roles are seen. The paper demonstrates that follow this pattern to adapt to changing societal norms standards. In addition to gender portrayal in children's literature, the conversations show how great retellings of fairy tales have become vital for challenging stereotypes and dispelling prejudices by serving as a platform for eradicating prejudices and envisioning more inclusive and potent narratives.

Keywords: *Fairy Tales, Gender Roles, Feminist Literary Criticism, Female Agency, Women's Representation, Fairy Tale Retellings*

Introduction

"Whoever tells the stories shapes the culture."-Peggy Orenstein

Stories have the ability to shape cultural values, beliefs, and social expectations in addition to being a source of enjoyment. Fairy tales are one of the several narrative genres that have a significant influence on how gender roles are conceptualised and passed down from generation to generation. These stories, which are frequently introduced during childhood, are more accurate in defining ideals of femininity and masculinity, making them important cultural texts rather than just stories for children to form ideas of gender and masculinity that reflect and reinforce the values, principles and ideologies of the societies in which they are built.

These cultural presumptions exhibit themselves in a number of ways, one of the most visible of which is via gender. Through the use of contrasting roles and opposed placement, traditional fairy tales have consistently portrayed women and men in a manner that is contradictory to one another. Additionally feminine characters are associated with beauty, compassion, patience, obedience, and domesticity. It is common for masculine characters to be associated with courage, authority, and independence. The protagonist may go through difficult times with these characteristics. Even if the protagonist may be going through a terrible period, her happiness or transformation usually relies on an external source, most commonly as a male rescuer. These characteristics are

notably obvious in tales about princess, where the protagonist may be going through difficult times. As a consequence of this, the traditional protagonist of a fairy tale is often shown as someone who waits for her circumstances to change, rather than having the capacity to change them herself.

It is particularly clear that these gendered stereotypes are present in fairy tales that are centred on princesses. In these stories, the future and personal worth of the protagonist are often connected to marriage, beauty and seeking male acceptance. Cinderella offers a particularly noteworthy example among the numerous classic fairy tales that replicate these traditions since its story has been frequently modified and reinvented in various historical and cultural contexts. As a result, the narrative provides a helpful framework for analysing how conventional notions of femininity are created and how modern retellings aim to subvert them. Cinderella is one of the most prominent fairy tales and is well acknowledged across all cultures and traditions. The classic narrative depicts its protagonist as enduring, compliant, kind and aesthetically pleasing whose tribulations are finally compensated by marriage with a prince. Marcia K. Lieberman asserts that these stories contribute to the socialization of girls by glorifying beauty, submissiveness, and reliance while depicting marriage as ultimate pinnacle of female virtue. (Lieberman385). Similarly, Karen E. Rowe argues that traditional fairy tales promote romantic notion that led women to choose reliance self-denial and external salvation rather than autonomy (Rowe239)

By portraying female character as active actors rather than helpless objects in need of a rescue passive figures, modern fairy tales retelling subverts conventional notions about gender. Modern authors depict human who challenge patriarchal conviction declare their independence and create their own identity. A notable example of by contemporary writer is “Cinderella is Dead” (2020) by Kalynn Bayron, which re images the traditional Cinderella tale with a heroine who actively defies repressive social norms and present chapter offers a comparative reading of the traditional Cinderella narrative and Kalynn Bayron's Cinderella Is Dead. By using feminist literary theory as its major framework, this paper investigates the shifting construction of femininity, female agency, and power that occurs over the two tales. The portrayal of the protagonist, the function of patriarchal power, the value of beauty and marriage, and the modification of the traditional “happily ever after” are all areas that get special focus in this work. It is argued in this paper that Cinderella is Dead does not just an update an old fairy tale; rather, it radically undermines the gender assumptions that have traditionally defined the story of Cinderella. Through this transformation, the passive princess becomes an active heroine whose story is defined not by rescue but by resistance, choice, and self-determination rejects the idea of a “happily ever after”.

The paper offers a comparing reading of the conventional story of Cinderella to Kalynn Bayron ‘Cinderella is dead. In the chapter the shifting construction of femininity, female agency and power in the two tales is mainly explored via the prism of feminist literary criticism, special emphasis is placed on the heroine’s presentation, the role of patriarchal power, importance of beauty and marriage, and the evolution of the traditional “happily ever after”. The chapter argues that Cinderella is Dead is not only a contemporary adaption of popular fairy tale but an essential questioning of gender assumptions that have historically redefined Cinderella’s story through this transformation the passive to an active heroine whose tale is not a story of rescue but of resistance, choice and self-determination.

Fairy Tales: Gender Prejudice and Patriarchy Ideology

Fairy tales are often linked with the stories of animation, magic, adventure and moral lesson but their treatment with gender is another important aspect, the roles assigned to their characters also reveal the social expectations attached to gender. Men and women consistently positioned differently in traditional fairy tales. Characters that are often linked with masculinity are typically connected with action, courage, authority, and independence. On the other hand, female characters are frequently praised for their beauty, compassion, patience, and obedience. Fairy stories do not live in a vacuum; rather, they function as a “potent cultural discourse “that has a direct impact on both individual behaviour and the structures of society (Zipes 1-3). An influential cultural medium that actively shapes human relationships, social behaviour, and fundamental beliefs, fairy tales serve as a potent cultural medium that moulds conduct and core values.

While female characters are often praised for their beauty, compassion, patience, and obedience, male characters are usually linked with action, courage, authority, and independence. Fairy stories do not live in a vacuum; rather they serve as a “potent cultural discourse “that has a direct impact on human behaviour and societal structures (Zipes 1-3). Fairy tales serve as a potent cultural medium that actively shapes human relationships, social behaviour and basic beliefs. The contrast between these two narratives provides a occasion to examine how the

passive, dependent princess can transfigure into a strong heroine whose identity is defined by resistance, power autonomy and agency.

Cinderella: Constructing the Passive Princess

The first description of Cinderella is markedly since her identity is primarily constructed from the traits, qualities usually attributed to the traditional femininity: compassion, tenderness, patience and moral virtue. Charles Perrault addresses Cinderella as a girl of “unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper” (Perrault). The first description of Cinderella is markedly since her identity is primarily constructed from the traits, qualities usually attributed to the traditional femininity: compassion, tenderness, patience and moral virtue. Rather than introducing Cinderella as ambitious, independent or actively resistant, but instead her virtuous character. Her goodness is the key quality through which she is distinguished from her stepmother and stepsister, setting up a contrast between virtue and vanity.

This idea is developed further by Cinderella’s place in the family. After her father remarries, she is reduced to domestic worker and is considered as inferior in her own family. Her story remains mostly in the domestic sphere, doing household works while her stepsister engages in the social world beyond the house.

Her name itself becomes connected with the ashes from the fireplace, reinforcing her degrade social status even more. But Cinderella does not formally oppose the power that restricts her. She answered with patience, stillness, perseverance. This pattern is significant from feminist viewpoint in that pain is not a situation the heroine actively seeks to alter but is subsumed her moral excellence.

The fairy godmother’s involvement makes the transition from the household confinement to the ball at the palace feasible. The miraculous attention offers Cinderella the clothing, the transportation and the social exposure she could never have in her usual condition. Perrault’s contribution of the fairy godmother, the pumpkin carriage and the glass slippers are of special significance to the traditional structure of the Cinderella story. Ultimately, Cinderella does profit from the metamorphosis, but the agent that effects that transformation is an external magical figure. So, her circumstances change with the support, not with the continuous act of self-determination.

In addition, the ball establishes link between female identity and admiration from society. It is mostly due to Cinderella’s peculiar appearance that the king’s son takes notice of her when she undergoes a transformation and becomes the main focus of his attention. When this occurs the glass slipper serves as a tool distinction. In addition to being a magical item it also serves as a narrative device that validates centralised identity and validates her status in society. It is thus via beauty, metamorphosis, and male of attention that she is able the transition from being an overlooked girl to an acknowledged lady.

Maria K. Lieberman’s perspective on the influence of the fairy tales in the cultural conditioning of girls Helps clarify this trend. Classic fairytale heroine often repeated Examples of femininity where beauty, virtue romantic Satisfaction, and social acknowledgment art tightly interlinked (Lieberman 386). Karen E. Rowe Likewise explodes the connexion among fairy tale romance, women’s passivity waiting and outside salvation (Rowe 256). Cinderella’s ultimate union with the prince serves not only as a romantic conclusion, but also acts as the story’s recompense for her virtue and patience. Cinderella, seen through Simon de Beauvoir’s feminist viewpoint depicts societally imposed femininity. The attributes highlighted by the narrative-beauty, compassion, patience, and submission form a particular picture of the “ideal “woman Cinderella’s altered, therefore relying on factors outside her control: magical aid, social recognition, and marriage. Perrault ‘s narrative therefore forms the traditional passive princess, whose happiness is gained via recognition and outside support. This concept is especially important when contrasted to Kalynn Bayron’s Cinderella is Dead, in which the protagonist ‘s fate is more determined by resistance, choices, decisions and self-determination.

Cinderella is Dead: Reimagining the Fairy-Tale Heroine

The question that Sophia poses in Kalynn Bayron’s Cinderella is Dead instantly indicates a substantial difference from the conventional concept of the protagonist in a fairy tale. “And if I don’t want an easy life “(Bayron 37). In contrast to the story of Cinderella by Perrault, in which the protagonist’s life is changed by the intervention of a magical being and the prince’s ultimate acknowledgement of her, Sophia, on the other hand, challenges the societal structure that decides what her life ought to be like. Therefore, her rejection to embrace a “easy life “is not only a statement of young disagreement ;rather it is a symbol of her unwillingness to give up personal choice in return for social security. This is because she is not willing to give up individual choice in exchange for social security.

Therefore, Bayron turns the traditional heroine into a figure who actively questions and fights her fate, while the old heroine was a figure who received her destiny. Bayron's transformation of the conventional heroine is more significant.

The society of Marseilles exemplifies the evolution of the romantic narrative of Cinderella into an instrument of societal regulation. Two centuries after the tale of Cinderella, adolescent females are required to participate in a yearly ball where they will be chosen as prospective spouses by male contenders. The ritual reduces marriage to a societal duty, since women possess little agency over their own destinies. The societal framework of the narrative thus uncovers the patriarchal beliefs that can underpin the seemingly romantic conclusion of the conventional fairy tale. The formal commemoration of Cinderella's narrative is notably ironic, since the tale intended to symbolise, joy is used to restrict women's options.

Sophia's response to this system distinguishes her apart from the conventional Cinderella archetype. For her, wedlock with a man does not represent the inherent culmination of her existence. Conversely, she wants to choose her own spouse and refuses to acknowledge that another individual should choose her destiny. Moreover, her association with Erin undermines the conventional fairy tale paradigm by contesting the notion that female fulfilment is inherently linked to heterosexual matrimony. When societal norms clash with her own personality, Sophia opts to defy them instead of just acquiescing. The narrative thus emphasises female agency as its focal point.

The rules that govern Marseilles make the importance of this resistance more obvious. Society requires a man to be the head of the family, restricts the freedom of women and controls relationships by means of legal power. Such rules show that patriarchy in the novel is not merely an attitude of individual characters, but is institutionalised in laws and social practices. The Cinderella story has therefore become part of larger ideological structure. Sophia's challenge to the system is therefore also a challenge to the imposed interpretation of Cinderella on her generation.

Additionally, Sophia's adventure redefines what it means to be a hero, in Perrault's story the fairy godmother plays a major role in Cinderella's metamorphosis, and the prince's acceptance results in her social advancement. Sophia turns becomes a change agent in Bayron's recounting. She questions and challenges established customs and traditions, refuses to stay within the confine's boundaries set for her, and ultimately joins Constance in opposing Marseilles' ruling class. Thus, the narrative shifts the focus of the fairy tale story from romantic reward to self-determination and resistance. According to the publisher, the book is a reworking of a fairy tales with a strong female lead who aims to subvert the status quo.

A helpful theoretical framework for comprehending this revision is offered by Cristina Bacchilega's analysis of modern fairy tale alternation. Instead of just reproducing a well-known established tale, a revision might reveal the presumptions in the original story and give its characters new options. Bayron's book does precisely this by taking familiar well-known aspects of Cinderella-the ball, marriage, the royal power, and the promise of a happy ending-and places them in a context where their repressive connotations become apparent. As a result, the retelling consequently challenges readers to reevaluate whether the classic "happily ever after" is always equated with contentment or freedom.

Sophia represents a significant change in the fairy tale heroine. Her beauty, her obedience, or her capacity to win over a prince are not what make her valuable. Her power is, instead expressed in her capacity for inquiry, decision making, resistance, and action. In this way Cinderella is Dead redefines what the heroine's journey means in addition to placing Cinderella in a contemporary environment. An active heroine who works to transform her surroundings takes the place of the passive princess who waits for transformation.

From Passive Princess to Empowered Heroine: A Comparative Analysis

The image of female identity, agency, autonomy and power has significantly changed from Charles Perrault's Cinderella and Kalynn Bayron's Cinderella Is Dead. Although Both stories maintain the recognisable aspects of the Cinderella tradition, but they give femininity, love, and happiness rather distinct connotations. While Bayron's Sophia acquires importance by her determination to challenge the societal institutions that limit her options, Perrault's Cinderella is rewarded traits like patience, compassion, beauty and obedience. Therefore, the distinction between the two heroines indicates more than a change in characterisation; a wider shift in the expectations placed on women rather than just a shift in portrayal.

The creation of female agency is where the biggest difference lies. Cinderella from Perrault is still heavily reliant on external factors. Her metamorphosis is made possible by the fairy godmother, and her identity is made public by the prince's pursuit of the glass slipper's owner. As a result, she moves from household suffering to societal elevation via marriage and magical help. This tendency is consistent with Marcia Lieberman's finding that conventional fairy tale narratives, where the heroine's story frequently culminates in romantic union. Lieberman notes that marriage is the "fulcrum and major event" of tales such as Cinderella (189).

Bayron makes significant changes to his system by means of Sophia, whose agency begins with her refusal to accept the destiny that has been predetermined for her. Her question, "And if I don't an easy life?" (Bayron 37), is significant because it conveys a deliberate rejection of acquiescence despite the fact that is a question. Instead of merely wishing for a different reward within the framework that is currently in place, Sophia challenges the system that determines what her life ought to be. Consequently, her portrayal is centred on her resistance to the situation. She does not sit around and wait for things to change; rather, she takes action against the different structures that are attempting to determine her fate.

The contrast becomes particularly clear especially in the representation of marriage. The traditional resolution and "happily ever after" associated with the Cinderella story are established in Perrault's story through the marriage to the prince. In Bayron's novel, however, marriage becomes a tool of patriarchal control than a romantic reward. When a girl reaches sixteen, she must need to go to the annual ball in Mersailles where men select wives. According to Anjirbag and Joosen, this system uses the Cinderella tale as a tool to control the lives of young women; girls are supposed to learn the tale and strive to be "as good and pure as Cinderella" (Bayron 18).

This difference confirms Jack Zipes's argument that literary fairy tales function as cultural tools for the transmission of social values and behavioural expectations. Anjirbag and Joosen refer to Zipes's definition of fairy tales as a literary discourse that deals with "mores, values and manners" and observe that the genre can serve as a tool for cultural socialisation. This ideological function is made explicitly visible in *Cinderella is Dead*. The palace approved version of Cinderella tells girls how they should act, who they should marry, and what constitutes femininity. Thus, the novel uncovers the social assumptions that may be less obvious in the traditional tale.

Bayron's novel is particularly dependent on the two versions of Cinderella for this transformation. Anjirbag and Joosen discover a "palace-authorized text" and the alternative version kept by the Constance's family. The first reinforces patriarchal authority, the second provides a counter-narrative. The distinction makes Bayron's revision more complicated than just swapping one heroine for another. The novel suggests that the power can be exerted by controlling which version of a story is remembered and told. Constance's advice to Sophia – "You've to set the story you know aside" (Bayron, qtd. In Anjirbag and Joosen)-signals the necessity of interrogate received narratives before any alternate possibilities can arise.

The difference is also evident in the treatment of female solidarity. In Perrault's tale Cinderella faces off against her stepmother and stepsister, creating the familiar split between the good heroine and seemingly evil women. Bayron revises this opposition, arguing that Cinderella's stepfamily was necessarily her enemy. In Constance's alt-history, Cinderella and her stepfamily are allies fighting against Prince charming, Anjirbag and Joosen say. Constance, therefore, undermines the facile classification of women into good and bad by stating that she is "Wicked ?No.Stepsister,yes" (Bayron 140). Women's relationships are sites of historical memory and resistance rather than rivalry.

The transformation aligns with Ella Westland's research on children's reactions to Cinderella-style fairy tales, which found that girls often rejected the traditional princess model and favoured alternative stories with more independent heroines; as a result, Westland characterises these girls as "resisting readers", capable to challenge and manipulate the gender representations offered by dominant fairy tales. This finding reinforces the importance of Bayron's rewriting: the shift toward an independent heroine is not only a modern authorial preference but can also be understood in relation to readers' ability to question conventional gender roles.

The treatment of happiness provides the most obvious difference between the two stories is how happiness is handled. Cinderella in Perrault's novel obtains social security by getting married and joining the royal family. Such incorporation is not regarded by Bayron as an indisputable form of liberation. Sophia's journey instead links happiness to her capacity to make decisions, resist and take part in changing the social circumstances that surround her. In this way, the fairy tale's conclusion itself takes on a different meaning. In the modern retelling,

the question is whether the heroine can control her own circumstances, whereas the traditional narrative asks whether the heroine will be acknowledged and recognised.

Anjirbag and Joosen argue that Bayron's book is a clearly feminist reworking that also "complicates the classic 'Cinderella' fairytale narrative "by redefining gender, sexuality, race and age. Because Bayron does not completely abandon the original story, their observation is especially pertinent to the current comparison. Rather, she maintains its identifiable recognisable components while highlighting their ideological ramifications. Although their meanings are reconstructed, the ball, Cinderella's tale, the prince, marriage and the fairy godmother are still included in the story.

A shift from passivity to agency, obedience to resistance, external recognition to self-determination, and prescribed contentment to chosen freedom can be seen in the comparison between Perrault's Cinderella and Bayron's Sophia. While Bayron's heroine Sophia opposes the system that tries to define her, Perrault's heroine is ultimately rewarded by the social structure in which she lives. As a result, the heroine's metamorphosis also transforms the fairy tale. Cinderella is Dead serves as an example of how retelling can serve as a literary critique: by reinventing the well-known narrative, Bayron exposes its presumptions and makes room for an alternative interpretation of what it means to be heroine.

Conclusion

The comparison between Kalynn Bayron's Cinderella is Dead and Charles Perrault's Cinderella shows how changing demonstrates how changing conceptions of gender, power, identity and personal agency also affect how female characters are portrayed. Cinderella's virtues in the classic fairy tale are closely linked to obedience, patience and beauty. In the conclusion, marriage and magical intervention help her transition from domestic oppression to social privilege. Feminist scholars have identified broader patterns in which female fulfilment is often associated with romantic recognition, beauty, and social approval (Lieberman 386; Rowe 239)

By portraying Sophia as a heroine who challenges the social structures that try to dictate her future, Bayron's retelling subverts this traditional model. The definition of female heroism is altered by her opposition to forced marriage, her refusal to embrace an imposed identity, and her quest for a different Cinderella. Anjirbag and Joosen contend that by reevaluating gender, sexuality, and social authority, the book "complicates the classic 'Cinderella' fairytale narrative."

Thus, the comparison shows that modern retellings of fairy tales can serve as significant venues for reconsidering inherited gender ideologies. The purpose of these retellings is to challenge the assumptions that are contained within well-known stories, as opposed to simply giving up on conventional narratives. In Cinderella is Dead, events such as the ball, marriage, Cinderella's story, and the conventional concept of a "happy ending "are all given new interpretations on the page. An opportunity to challenge social control, inequality, and limited choice is presented by something that was once considered to be a natural path to female fulfilment.

Fairy tales 'enduring importance stems from their capacity to conserve, replicate and update cultural concepts. These narratives depictions of femininity, masculinity, relationships and social behaviour can influence readers 'perceptions of gender and society because they are commonly encountered during childhood. As a result, their importance extends beyond entertainment and amusement. Contemporary adaptations demonstrate that well known tales can serve as forums for challenging values that have been passed down through the generations and for envisioning different outcomes.

The ability of fairy tales to preserve, reproduce, and modernise cultural ideas accounts for their lasting significance. Because they are frequently encountered during childhood, these narratives 'portrayals of femininity, masculinity, relationships and social behaviour can affect readers' perceptions of gender and society. Because of this, their significance goes beyond amusement and entertainment. Modern adaptations show that popular stories can be used as platforms to question values that have been handed down through the generations and to imagine alternative outcomes. Ultimately, the shift from obedience to resistance, passivity to agency, and externally defined happiness to self-determination is represented by the transition from Perrault's Cinderella to Bayron's Sophia. Instead of waiting to be saved or recognised, the empowered heroine actively participates in defining her identity and future. Fairy tale retellings continue to have cultural significance because they allow established narratives to adjust to changing social perspectives and create more inclusive, autonomous, and empowering representations of particular women.

In the end, the transition from Perrault's Cinderella to Bayron's Sophia signifies a change from obedience to resistance, passivity to agency, and externally defined happiness to self-determination. The empowered heroine actively contributes to defining her identity and future rather than passively waiting to be saved or acknowledged. Because they enable established narratives to adapt to shifting social perspectives and produce more inclusive, independent, and empowering representations of given women, fairy tale retellings continue to have cultural significance.

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