CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER-TWO

‘TRADITIONAL’ FAIRIES IN ‘FEMINIST’ AVATARS

“Myth, tale and tragedy must be transformed by bold acts of reinterpretation in order to enter the experience of the emerging female self.” (Carolyn G. Heilbrun)

The Fairy and Folk literature appear

as important and indispensable as history and mythology; a way to approach and embrace reality when it seems hard to take it on the face value. The fairy tale corpus relies on the sheer potency and effectiveness of its ‘readymade’ and popular symbolism to maintain its power and allure. Masses are mobilized, conditioned and socialized by these manipulated/beguiling stories they hear or read. The impact of these orally and literally transmitted stories is so deep that it appears impossible to gauge their hold over the popular imagination. Suggesting the puissance of oral and literal tales Gilbert and Gubar expostulates, “…fairy tales often state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts.” (qtd. in Zipes 201). In the ‘Once upon a time’ world of tales, the most elusive and marvelous things are in reality the most obvious; their apparent naivety is pregnant with existential dilemmas and their resolutions. Generations after generations of human population have not only absorbed the content rather they have internalized and assimilated the fairy tale plots and motifs, as commented upon by Marcia Lieberman in her ground-breaking article “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale”, she asserts that people “learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances.” (187). Fairy tales are distilled, symbolic representation of our day to day reality, a fantastic portrayal of our material existence; and this reality can be rearranged keeping in tandem the changing social scenario.

Fairy tales thus become a crucial and indispensable medium in denoting and forming the myth of sexual, gender and class hierarchies of our societies. They prescribe and endorse patterns and blueprints according to which men and women could achieve their ‘fairy endings’; depending on their biological reality. If we maintain that fairy tales are as potent and power-wielding as myths then, myth of
'happily ever after' needs to be discarded or reformulated to see 'how deep the rabbit hole goes'. In the emphatic postscript to Carter’s controversial work *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) she evokes the necessity to repudiate and overthrow all the boundaries that history and myth have circumscribed women with: “History tells us that every oppressed class gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that women learn that lesson….” (151)

The history of folk and fairy tale literature discloses the process of socialization and acculturation of the population to imbibe and internalize consciously or unconsciously the reigning patriarchal ideology. Acting as guiding manuals for the female milieu the male-authored tales have conditioned them to derogate their own sex and collude in their own subservient status. Patriarchal hegemony has hindered the female lot from realizing their productive and creative possibility. They have ‘interpellated’ to use Althusser’s term, the female population to such a degree that they are left psychologically and emotionally stunted, fearful and paralyzed at the idea of ‘freedom’. They are taught to expect ‘external’ agencies and forces to rescue them, made to feel dependent; always in the need of protection and security; that only men could afford to impart. Critic Colette Dowling has very scathingly emphasized this aspect of the tale naming it as ‘The Cinderella Complex’, she asserts:

Personal, psychological dependency—the deep wish to be taken care of by others—is the chief force holding women down today. I call this ‘The Cinderella Complex’—a network of largely repressed attitudes and fears that keeps women in a kind of half-light, retreating from the full use of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to ‘transform their lives’. (Dowling 21)

In the popular canon the female figure of the ‘chaste, virtuous maiden’ is entrapped, closeted within actual or perceived social and cultural perimeters. The popular, mass mediated tales illustrated, appreciated, advertised and endorsed ideologically-driven prototypes to strengthen the hold over the popular imagination. They reinforced the universally sanctioned heterosexual, stifling codes, according to which men were placed at the centre of the action and women at the margins. There
was reiteration of the prevailing socio-cultural framework in which ‘male’ was the norm and ‘woman’ the aberration; man the master of the house and woman the brain-washed servant to his commands.

At a cursory look at the genre it seems farfetched to grasp and understand that how fairy tales could be transformed and acclimatized to accommodate the idea of women’s emancipation; whereas they have been accused of their role as a medium to “acculturate women to their traditional social roles.” (qtd. in Zipes 185). Remanded and pushed to the backdrop of the social scenario, women are trapped and crushed beneath the weight of patriarchal tyranny; made to be fearful and susceptible of their own sexuality. On the other hand ubiquitous patriarchal figure devise stratagems to obliterate women’s freedom. At the hands of patriarchal authority women were divided into polarized dichotomy of angel and the monster; setting them against each other. This prominence of contrasting and antagonistic images of one’s sexuality i.e. of the predator/prey, active/passive offers a paradigm for confounding ambivalences. Functioning more subtly to exemplify and reiterate the cultural expectations, the tales repeat the age old narrative patterns and prevailing mores of gender and sexual asymmetry. Commenting on the nefarious outcome of and internalization and instrumentalization of folk and fairy tales Dorothy Dinnerstein opines:

It is senseless, I shall argue, to describe our prevailing male-female arrangements as ‘natural.’ They are of course a part of nature, but if they should contribute to the extinction of our species, that fact would be part of nature too. Our impulse to change these arrangements is as natural as they are, and more compatible with our survival on earth. To change them, however, we need to understand not only the societal mechanisms by which they are supported, but also the central psychological ‘adjustment’ of which they are an expression. What makes it essential for us to understand it: it is a massive communal self-deception, designed to allay the immediate discomfort and in the long run—a run whose ened we are now approaching—suicidal. (Dinnerstein 9)
With the advent of Renaissance and circulation of ideas of individualism and humanism middle-class appropriators and collectors of fairytales like Charles Perrault in France and Grimm Brothers in Germany envisioned in the genre a huge potential to indoctrinate the masses, suppressing any attempt to foment a revolution to overthrow the repressive patriarchal regime. With their collections, editions and publications of these perennial source of ‘peasant entertainment’ they monopolized the literary scenario and snatched the yarns of tale-telling from the hands of women storytellers. Exposing and condemning the bourgeois politics regarding the genre Carter notes in the introduction of her fairytale collection, “Old wives’ tales — that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact time as it takes all value from it.” (Intro. xiii). The statement skillfully highlights the hypocrisy and the suspicion of the bourgeoisies regarding the inherent revolutionary potential of the genre. Furthermore, these male transcribers of classical tales infiltrated and infused these tales with notions, ideas and ethics of their age; modifying their ingredients to suit and please the tongues of bourgeoisie. The male-controlled areas of writing, editing and publication of classical tales obliterated all chances for women liberation and emancipation. The genre became a repertoire of male creation and projection. The traditional tales with the ethics of bifurcation and dichotomy intact covertly eroticized the relations of domination and submission: ascribing these positions to men and women respectively.

The male collectors/translators found the adult texture of the traditional tales provocative and unsuitable for the ‘refined and civilized’ minds of their times. So, they took their tools and chiseled the rough and savage contours of the traditional tales to make them appear seamless artifices of honey-dipped reality. Male collectors/transcribers of the fairytale corpus fuelled by their ideological motives portrayed glamorous, rapturous display of violence and aggression supposedly the essential characteristics of male sexuality. The genre started being viewed as tool of encouraging and affirming the gender and sexual fixities by placing the male in the active position while assigning passive role to the female character. The folk and fairy tale corpus have been used by the moralists tellers like Grimm Brothers and Perrault, who acting on the part of the bourgeois class forged a falsified version of the universe to enslave the minds of the listeners and base their domination. Critic Roemer and Bacchilega points out the biased/prejudiced nature of Grimms’ collections, they didn’t
pay attention to the socioeconomic conditions of their informants, “Thus the Grimms would take notes on the basic plots of the tales and then flesh out these verbal skeletons as their own perspectives inclined them. They reinforced the Christian aspects, the homey sayings, and the violence, while deleting sexual references.” (Roemer 10). This subtle, covert edifying process sowed the seeds of misconceptions regarding the closeted, conservative nature of the traditional tales; which prevails even to the present day. Some critics like Karen Rowe have stressed the fact that tale-telling has always been a women-specific art, though the popularization and commercialization of the genre was headed over by the male appropriators; overshadowing the efforts of countless women folk; pushing them back into the place of anonymity. Highlighting the matrilineal heritage and history of the canon she argues:

To have the antiquarian Grimm Brothers regarded as the fathers of modern folklore is perhaps to forget the matrilineal lineage, the “mothers” who in the French veillees and English nurseries, in court salons and the German spinnstube, in Paris and on the Yorkshire moors, passed on their wisdom. The Grimm brothers, like Tereus, Ovid, King Shahryar, Basile, Perrault, and others reshaped what they could not precisely comprehend, because only for women does the thread, which spins out the lore of the life itself, create a tapestry to be fully read and understood. Strand by strand weaving like the craft practiced on Philomela’s loom or in the spinning of Mother Goose, is the true art of fairy tale—and it is, I would submit semiotically a female art. (“To Spin a Yarn” 68, 71)

In the modern outlook the need to revisit and reutilize the canon was felt by the writers; who aimed to disrupt and displace the prejudiced conventions extolled by the traditional corpus. This rewriting process was part and parcel of the feminist debates of the late 60s and 10s which endorsed and stressed the importance of revising the age-old and prevalent canon to find out useful cultural and literal material that the feminist writers could use for their own ends. One of the pioneer French
feminist Helen Cixous aligning her argument with the viewpoint of Jacques Derrida that “writing has the revolutionary potential to counter the phallogocentric system” (26) suggests:

Writing presents an unbounded space in which the self strives to constitute itself through mastery of the other is relinquished and in which the other can finally be received. Consequently, she suggests that the feminist writer’s task is to actively inscribe the heterogeneous promptings that are thrown up by the process of writing, an endeavor that will bring into being an alternative mode of perception, relation and expression to that decreed by the prevailing schema (qtd in Sellers 26)

The classical canon forfeited women’s attempt to express their concerns, their experiences and most importantly their sexuality; which was defined only in relation to male ‘norm’. In the framework of the romantic fairy tale women are preserved as objects, they are rarely acknowledged as subjects and potential recipient of the story’s action. Forced martyrdom and perseverance are the only available attributes that women must aspire towards. Exposing the atrocious and tyrannical captivity of the fairy tale heroine Lieberman proposes:

So many of the heroines of fairy stories… 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 (192).

The single-faceted convention of sexual reality lulled women into a sleep ‘longer than a hundred years’ in this case. The canon by the virtue of its myth like aura and grandeur have maintained and pampered the status quo through imposing the classical attributes of both masculinity and femininity. Women are consciously or unconsciously made to emulate and internalize the role models available to them through the medium. Focusing on the rite of passage, tales lay out the sanctioned socio-cultural paradigms regarding the male and female behavior. The most damaging
and harmful impact of this form of literature is that it provide prototypes, role models who are infused with subtle, biased cultural imperatives as have been suggested by Andrea Dworkin in *Women Hating*:

>The point is that we have not formed that ancient world—it has formed us. We ingested it as children whole, had its values and consciousness imprinted on our minds as cultural absolutes long before we were in fact men and women. We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity. Between Snow White and her heroic prince, our two great fictions, we never did have much of a chance. At some point the Great Divide took place: they (the boys) dreamed of mounting the Great Stead and buying Snow White from the dwarfs: we (the girls) aspired to become that object of every necrophiliac’s lust—the innocent, *victimized* Sleeping Beauty, beauteous lump of ultimate, sleeping good. Despite ourselves, sometimes knowing, unwilling, unable to do otherwise, we act out the roles we were taught. (Women Hating 32-33)

The quintessential fairy tale heroine- a passive, docile, virtuous virgin, for all we know about her, exists through male collectors/translators. This figure comes to, first and foremost through the literary channel as a male-authored icon. In the large as life, timeless tradition of the folk and fairy tale canon we seldom find meaningful and powerful alternative to the archetypal passive, meek maiden. The women in the tradition tales “… wait, are chosen, and are rewarded.” (189). In the contextual and narrative framework of the tales being beautiful and docile is corollary to being helpless and inimical. The heroines’ sufferings, trials and ordeals in the fairy tales have amounted to the glamour of the tale. Her objectification and victimization are extolled and revered as true ‘feminine’ attributes; enhancing and glamorizing masochistic tendencies amongst the female readership; keeping them transfixed in their place of subordination. Sandra Gilbert and Gubar in their evocative article *The Queen’s Looking Glass* analyze the role of fairy tales in the imprisonment of women in patriarchal prisons both literally and metaphorically. Exposing the restrictive and
claustrophobic nature of tales, with regard to women especially, they say: “Either they are inclined to immobilize themselves with suffocating tight-laces in the glass coffins of patriarchy, or they are tempted to destroy themselves by doing fiery and suicidal tarantellas out of the looking glass.” (Gilbert 208). Such biased and fatalistic attributes are sentimentalized so that these overtly ‘saccharanized’ tales ‘interpellate’ the masses and they without being aware, in a hypnotized state surrender before the dominating authority and collude in their own subjugation.

We must now look at the indispensable role of fairytale genre in undertaking any study of gender and sexuality and at the fact that what makes the corpus so significant for feminists. As Alison Lurie commented about the genre that, they ought to be “one of the few sorts of children’s literature of which a radical feminist would approve.” (qtd. in Hasse 1). Essaying down the varied possible uses of the folk and fairy tale canon by the modern feminists Ruth MacDonald suggest:

One may present the tales, unaltered, with their traditional endings, and the devil take the consequences of the possible damage to a young girl’s career expectations; one may rewrite the tales, deemphasizing physical beauty and marriage, but thereby violating the objectivity of the folklore collector by imposing one’s language and bias on the narrative; or one may write new tales, using folklore motifs with less conventional endings. (18)

Like all other literary forms in folk and fairy tales, representations are imbued with sexual and gender prejudices. Commenting on the far-reaching and all pervasive influence of the tales which are in guise proscriptions of socio-cultural imperatives; especially on the female imagination Lieberman quotes: “Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales.” (Lieberman 187).

Now coming to the next section of the chapter, a brief discussion of the link between women and fairy tales will be discussed.
The speaker in this case

is a middle-aged witch, me---

tangled on my two great arms,

my face in a book

and my mouth wide,

ready to tell you a story or two. (Transformations 1)

Anne Sexton’s lyrical evocation in her poetic rendition of traditional tales named *Transformations* befittingly captures the archetypal figure of the female storyteller; strengthening and echoing the link between women and tale telling. Women have been associated with the art of storytelling for centuries, making tale-telling a women-specific sojourn. As critic and fairytale scholar Marina Warner notes in her ground-breaking study *From Beast to the Blonde*, “storytelling makes women thrive” (xi). The timeless figures of Mother Goose and Gammer Gretel are evidences of storytellers as women. Women are expected to be well versed in the art of spinning/articulating tales, sharing a common penchant for tale-telling. Many critics like Karen Rowe for instance view fairytale genre as a women specific art, she expostulates the view that, “in the history of folktale and fairy tale, women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the tale.” (57)

The thread that binds women and storytelling is colossal; dating back to the mythical figures of Eve, Pandora and Philomela. Forced to live at the periphery of the social scenario, women found this medium to express their concerns, to connect and contribute to the sisterhood; who could decipher the grim reality couched in humorous playfulness of the genre. Under the repressive and stifling patriarchal regimen the fairy tale corpus with its multi-dimensional and multi-faceted outlook provided these women a way out. In a social setup where women were not allowed to be expressive
and vocal about their needs and desires, the wide reaching appeal of the corpus gracefully incorporated their demands.

Fairy tales have been hailed as primary site for upholding, asserting, deconstructing and subverting gender and sexual ideologies. In the wake of feminist movement of the late 1960s and 70s, there was interrogation, leveling of the gender and sexual hierarchies, previously extolled in the traditional tales. The feminist fairy tale is based on the simple premise that women are as capable as men and the issues and images of the ‘passive princess’ belongs to the vanguard of change.

The revisionists of the folk and fairy literature who were dissatisfied with the tradition of approved female objectification and subjugation that the tradition glorified; perceived the immense potential of transformation of the genre. They used the genre’s malleability affirmatively to destabilize and denounce the idealizations of female passivity and beauty. The feminist writers like Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Terri Windling, Barbara G. Walker, Olga Broumas, Tanith Lee, Marina Warner, etc. through their revisions tried to shatter and denaturalize the fiction of ‘eternal feminine’; accentuating the constructedness of this notion, a sort of ‘performance’ that a woman is forced to enact and deliver. They aimed at finding a threshold where folklore could sit comfortably with modernity. Furthermore, they engaged in assessing and scorning the blatant oppression of the ‘female’ figure in the tradition of tale-telling. These increasingly aware raconteurs tried to topple and supersede the fences put by male hegemony to define and confine the female lot. The multiplicity of the approaches to the canon argues for a plurality of interpretation rather than a simple, overarching model of interpretation. These writers employed the genre which has been used to enforce the sexual and gender mores and codes from time immemorial, to critique the long-held conceptions of gender and sexuality; finding alternatives to modify them. They zealously probed the genre’s crevices and permutations to find place to accommodate the intersecting modern outlooks.

The revised narratives do not adhere to the age old dogmas of form and motifs. They aim to set free the genre of its strictures of cultural, social and literary frames into the open space of ‘once upon a time’. There is an incessant effort to contextualize the genre linking it to the zeitgeist of the times; making the genre viable. These untiring and relentless revisions of the genre underline and impart new
possibilities. The principal task of the feminist fairy tales is to decode and decipher all the ingrained biases that have been imposed by a dominant heterosexual culture. This reutilization of the canon highlights and brings forth the invaluable and indispensable role of this oral wealth in displacing the biased masculine patterns of myth and meaning making. The canon carries evidences of how patriarchal setup have imposed and exercised homogeneity through repetitive sexual and gender stereotyping. The revisions of traditional tales by the writers of the postmodern era try to deconstruct the inherent and imposed patriarchal aesthetic of these tales. Critic Karen E. Rowe in her article ‘Feminism and Fairy Tales’ that came up in 1979 amidst the feminist debates, points out the necessity to revisit the fairy tale canon from a feminist perspective; she opines,

To examine selected popular folktales from the perspective of modern feminism is to revisualize those paradigms which shape our romantic expectations and to illuminate psychic ambiguities which often confound contemporary women. Portrayals of adolescent waiting and dreaming, patterns of double enchantment, and romanticizations of marriage contribute to the potency of fairy tales. Yet, such alluring fantasies gloss the heroine’s inability to act self-assertively, total reliance on external rescues, willing bondage to father and prince, and her restriction to hearth and nursery. Although many readers discount obvious fantasy elements, they may still prey to more subtle paradigms through identification with the heroine. Thus, subconsciously women may transfer from fairy tales into real life cultural norms which exalt passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female’s cardinal virtues. In short, fairy tales perpetuate the patriarchal status quo by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate. (209)

The patriarchal myth of the phallic superiority is debunked and denounced in the modern framework of the fairy tale corpus; accommodating a more liberal outlook towards the issues of gender, sex roles, sexuality and the socialization process. It
scorns and spurns the self-negation of the female milieu that was previously held as an ‘eternally feminine’ virtue. They uproot the various forms of biases regarding sex, gender, race, class which have been imprinted on our minds through the mindless acts of absorbing the content of the tales. The one denominator that brings various and varied forms of fairy tale criticisms is a desire to change the ways in which tales have maintained and reinforced the patriarchal status quo. In this manner, this rewriting process becomes a political act aiming at twin-fold rearrangement of i.e. a.) reinterpreting the classical wealth of the folk and fairy tale canon. b.) discovering new ways in which the connection between the tales and the readers could be modified.

Postmodern writers like Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Jane Yolen, Tanith Lee, Joanna Russ, Olga Broumas, Meghan Collins, Suniti Namjoshi, Emma Donoghue and various others have re-appropriated the canon to revisit the site of gender and sexual inequality; reexamining the concepts of sexual and gender arrangements and power politics. The modern day revisions of fairy tales have attempted to debunk, denounce and deconstruct the stereotypes of male and female both as ‘gendered and sexual entities’. The ‘biological’ reality of both the sexes according to which, women are expected to be self-effacing and self-abnegating and, men to be self-assertive and independent is a fiction, a hoax. Such mythical explanations are in fact detrimental to both the parties. The traditional tales with their gender and sexual seclusion and segregation have inadvertently perpetuated hierarchies. In the hands of writers conscious of the difference between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as malleable and porous categories, these reworked tales tries to push and at times flout the boundaries of gender and patriarchal authority that the classical tales extols. The ambivalence and ambiguity that these bipolar female images of virgin/whore, angel/witch of the old age tales elicits have been highlighted and commented upon by the modern day fairy tale writers and researchers. The feminist wave of the late 1960s and 70s swept away with it a fierce consciousness of the breach between ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’ sexuality. The postmodern writers and revisionists of the canon seek to find a unique blend of female body and realistic female experiences. They conceive a world which is not marred by the monolithic lie of essentialism; in their alternative world the prevailing patriarchal expectations and conventions are either disposed off entirely or radically transformed.
The traditional tales perpetrated and highlighted the patriarchal disdain and dismissal of the literary endeavors of the Old Wives and French Conteuses; who employed the artifice of the genre to veil their critique of social conventions and mores. The tales of the conteuses, writing in the salons and parlors of France were, informed by female perspectives and featuring female characters, the contes offered their creators opportunities to critique conditions of the day, particularly the social institution of forced marriage and the general lot of women in a predominantly male-controlled world. (Roemer 11).

The revisions interrogate and further criticize the disempowered, sidelined female figures of the male tradition. Women revisionists of the traditional canon of Fairy tales intervened and infringed in a male territory by bringing forth international, contradicting perspectives in dialogue with each other. They shared an interest as well as consciousness of the playfully serious nature of the folk and fairy tale medium. So what we get is a dazzling multiplicity of these writers’ approaches to the genre. These writers draw on the canonical heritage and inter mixed the folk, literary element with modern and postmodern concerns; making them viable and useful for their contemporary situation. The feminist reworking of the traditional corpus combat and dispose the ‘constructed’ ideals of the genre; promulgated and illuminated by the patriarchal versions. They showcase active, bold, courageous, willful, headstrong women characters, who take charge of their own destinies and outdo their male counterparts in an attempt to escape and renounce the reductionist, straight-jacketed social reality. These writers ‘post-modern conteuses’ produced a kind of counter-discourse to the century old male-controlled literary lineage. Women writers have employed the fairy tale corpus to engage contest and contradict questions regarding gender and sexuality; creating counter-texts that look back upon the male-penned tale tradition. With the reclamation of the fairy tale genre by women writers the uni/mono-vocal classical tales got substituted with a newly emerged multiplicity of voices. Whereas the male-authored tales eschewed all possibilities of another angles or interpretations; tailoring the genre to fit the moulds of social and cultural customs and beliefs. On the other hand we can see that the modern ‘feminist’ reworking and revisions of fairy tales specifically by women writers attempt to embrace a different
and alternative sexual politics. The rewritten fairy tales of the feminist era aims at exposing the ubiquitous sexual asymmetry that has been voiced through these tales. Not all revisions of this classical canon are that liberating in fervor, some of them resist, reaffirm and widen the porous and malleable boundaries of gender and sexuality that runs parallel to the tales. In order to bring out the true worth of fairy tales for the modern reader, a more nuanced and multi-dimensional look at the genre as the mediator of cultural heritage and constructor of social behaviors and identities are crucial. This sort of writing-back to the popular male tradition of fairy tales embodies a cultural struggle over attitudes towards male and female sexuality; in this case both needing a new definition. The malleability and flexibility of the genre could be utilized by the downtrodden lot to head towards liberation, by voicing their concerns about gender and sexuality.

The need for the reassessment of the classical canon to express the female exasperation at their ‘ordained fate’ is succinctly articulated by Anne Sexton in the following lines:

Why

Should a certain

Quite adorable princess

Be walking in her garden

At such a time

And toss her golden ball

Up like a bubble

And drop it into the well?

It was ordained

Just as the fates deal out
The plague with a tarot card.

Just as the supreme being drills

Holes in our skulls to let

The Boston Symphony through. (Transformations 95)

This unorthodox, complex portrayal of characters (especially, females) further complicates and competes with the previously extolled versions of ‘immaculate, virginal maiden’ who suffers on the account of her belonging to the subservient lot. By taking under consideration the changing and evolving dynamics of history, society, culture and the aligned nature of ideas of gender and sexuality, Carter’s tales illuminate the dark caverns of female social and sexual experience. Nowhere Carter’s stories endorse the bipolar, dichotomized image of fairy tale princess-entangled in the quintessential female rivalry. There are no witches, crones, step-mothers in Carter’s tales. Her heroines are synthesis of evil and good, active and passive, ‘Justine and Juliette’ (Marquis de Sade’s twin female models). They are never simply ‘victims’; ignorant and unaware of the damaging cultural and social aesthetics, that imprisons them. Carter’s heroines unlike their revered, popularized antecedents share equal blame and punishment as their male counterparts. Such depiction of both male and female characters resists and disrupts the expected fairy tale outcomes. The tales do not endorse and advocate unthinkably, the outworn attitudes and preconceptions regarding male and female sexuality. The ideological coloring of the canonical tales has been put under scrutiny by Carter.

The modern rewritings, revisions and publication of the fairy tale corpus gained momentum in the late 1960s. Armed with a fierce sense of the damage done by the all-pervasive, uni-dimesional patriarchal fashioning of the tales, these writers seek to break away with the classical tradition. Dissatisfied with the popular, male-cultivated discourse of the tales, feminist fairy tale scholarship tries to dismantle the patriarchal assumptions and further, replace and sometimes enlarge the canon. The feminist revisionists analyzed the social arrangements and institutions of the fairy tale corpus as covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. The reformulation of the canon
was an outcome of the female fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of communication with her own inner being.

The feminist fairy tale was an endeavor to dig the wreck of the traditional male-controlled canon and find useful material, with which the ‘liberated’ woman could identify and deploy for her own ends. This refurbished genre speaks for the oppressed lot; who were projected as the brain-washed victims of patriarchal rule. Furthermore, it was imbued with the author’s attempt to critique the derogatory and demeaning socio-cultural mechanisms and alter the ways in which tale contribute in the socialization process. The revised tales analyze and assess those emblematic angles of the tales in which men have a de facto advantage. The feminist fairy tales chips away at the and finally subvert the sexual segregation and gender parity. They widen the repertoire of female images; as the worlds of folk and fairy tales are plummeted with invidious gender and sexual stereotypes.

The revised versions of the canonical literature redeem us of our prejudices, monolithic outlook of ourselves and of our immediate surroundings. They add a different touch, a unique angle to our view of the tales; exposing the socio-cultural parameters which lead to the objectification, reification and exploitation of the women; voicing the notions which were ignored by the male collectors of the canon. They provide an arena, a springboard where the two antithetical, antagonistic world-views confront each other. The feminist criticism of the folk and fairy tale literature has widened the scope of our vision to perceive the social reality; highlighting the ways in which this reality could be reinterpreted and modified.

The reformulated fairy tale heroine of the postmodern times is not fettered by the notions of ‘natural’ male superiority and ‘essential’ female subservience. She devises her own means to resist and escape the onslaught of prejudiced patriarchal authority. She does not depend upon her ‘patriarchal master’ to lay down the rules for her to follow. She is the initiator, the leader; not merely the follower. She rejects the fate that seems to be ordained for her by the paternal figure, i.e. the figure of the object d’art. In her modern ‘feminist’ avatar the fairy princess doesn’t seem to be waiting for the prince coming on his stead to save her, she exhibits fortitude and strength to not only save herself but, in some cases the prince also. Unlike her helpless, inanimate predecessors, the feminist fairy attempts to find tools and means
to break the patriarchal prison; to decline and sidestep her preordained fate. She willfully and vehemently moves away from her ‘object’ position to the position of the ‘subject’, where she is not required and expected to repress and strangulate her inner self. She is voluptuous, willful, headstrong, and ready to leave her home and hearth if that is constraining her in any way. Repudiating the age old ‘feminine’ qualities of passivity and meekness the ‘feminist’ fairy channels her newly acquired freedom to attain other goals. She does not anticipate conformity rather seeks novel ways to shatter the myth of ‘happily ever after’. In the modern, feminist fairy tale world Sleeping Beauty doesn’t wait for the charming prince to kiss her and bring her back to life, Cinderella’s ambition is not just limited to attend the ball, she is able to look behind the enchantment that such notions hold, as has been voiced in following variation of the tale:

I really didn’t notice that he had a funny nose.

And he certainly looked better all dressed up in fancy clothes.

He’s not nearly as attractive as he seemed the other night.

So I think I’ll just pretend that this glass slipper feels too tight.

(Viorst qtd. in Zipes 73)

Here Beauty is not afraid of the Beast, she is willful and formidable to confront him and Princesses are not against the notion of female bonding (in the form of mothers, sisters, step-mothers). Here the grandmother is the wolf herself, withholding and embracing the coarser side of her sexuality. Witches are not ugly, old hags, they are skilled, beautiful women; not inclined towards social lives. Impregnating the canon with such awakened consciousness of the feminist fervor; divested of all binary essentialism could prove to be worthwhile in dispelling the charmed poison of the sugar-coated tales; as all we need in today’s banal and mordant existence is a hope to see the future with a positive outlook; a ‘Fairy Tale For Our Time’ to reiterate the title of Zipes’ story.
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