CHAPTER 2

Tales of Brothers
Grimm: A Socio- Political Framework
Critics like Jack Zipes\(^1\) have tried to explore a pattern of history in Grimm's fairy tales. He tries to suggest that Grimm's choice of stories may be related to distinctive historical events. Robert Darnton tries to consider these fairy tales as "historical documents" which reflect the mind and culture of specific historical epochs. But Maria Tarter\(^2\) takes an opposite critical position in so far as she disagrees to accept these fairy tales as mere presentations of the social codes of human behaviour and firmly stands against the idea that these tales are the inflated presentations of drab reality. She considers the importance of these fairy tales in terms of their power of ennobling the lives of children and adults. Again Max Luthi\(^3\) tries to discover the moral importance of these fairy tales.

In English social history, fairy tales have come to be interpreted in terms of distinctive ideological influences. For instance, the Neo-classical distrust of imagination largely led to an adverse criticism of the fairy tales as essentially fictitious.
Brothers Grimm were born a few years before the French Revolution and grew up at a time which has been regarded as a period of worldwide revolution. In 1798 France was bordered by other revolutionary republics in Holland, Switzerland and Italy. Belgium and the Rhineland had been annexed. Unrest spread through Germany. The emergence of the principles of liberty largely supported by the Rousseauistic and Fichtean ideology created in Europe a significant tradition of romanticism which largely conduced to an active interest in indigenous folklores. Grimm’s fairy tales seem to be interrelated to this new sensibility as against the aesthetics of reason prevalent in the 17th and the 18th century.

It may also be suggested that the transition of the European socio-political ideology from the feudalistic to the capitalist tradition led to the development of liberalist philosophy. The liberalist philosophy which started operating since the Renaissance came to be strengthened in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. The growing importance of the individual enterprise and a new adjustment with the state power led to a more congenial
environment for the development of imaginative sensibility. Moreover the nineteenth century Romantic tradition began to re-assess the significance of the ancient past, of the ancient folklores. This largely helped the development of a new aesthetic sensibility.

Brothers Grimm, working chiefly in the nineteenth century may be regarded as actively sharing the contemporary impact of imaginative sensibility. Their interest in the ancient past is also evident in their philological explanation of the Indo-European language system described as “Grimm’s Law”. The brothers traveled widely throughout Germany and other countries, performing field research for their linguistic work, which involved trying to find patterns in how the vowels and consonants which made up specific words changed over time. To determine these patterns, they needed to hear many different examples of authentic speech by various speakers of different ages and in different regions. They eventually discovered that one of the easiest ways to convince older local residents to give them lengthy examples of their natural speech was to ask the residents to tell their favorite stories to the brothers. As the brothers recorded the style of speech
of the speaker for their research, they also recorded the various stories that they were told, and eventually published them. The stories became immensely popular, and were widely reprinted. Ironically, the brothers are now most widely known for these collections of stories, which were essentially an unexpected byproduct of the linguistic research which was their primary goal. Yet it may be suggested that the linguistic research as well as the retrieval of folklores are associated with the same impulse. In other words, these two aspects of their work are immersed in the contemporary romantic zeal.

Their collection of fairy tales may therefore be regarded as attempts to retrieve the ancient collective memory enshrined in these folktales. It is extremely difficult to configure the exact historical pattern in these fairy tales. But it is probably possible to identify certain distinctive determinants of socio-cultural pattern. It may also be pointed out that these stories may not be regarded as a synthetic vision of a specific socio-cultural pattern. But we may consider some fairy tales and may identify a critical frame that
may explain some distinctive socio-cultural aspects revealed in these fairy tales.

The society that is represented in these fairy tales is essentially feudalistic in character. It is a world that largely celebrates the power of the king. In other words, it is a world governed by the king, the queen, the prince and the princess. But this hierarchic order places the poor and the helpless at base. In this feudalistic structure of society, there is a noticeable dependence on divine power and magic that can only protect the helpless and the insecure. The belief in divine power may seem to be related to the traditional Christian faith. But the idea of magic can also take the form of black magic that seems to largely operating through the wicked witches.

Thus the fairy tales collected by Brothers Grimm from Germany and various parts of Europe were not merely simple amusing stories. These tales may never be regarded as scientific documentations of the socio-political pattern of primitive past. These tales, chiefly oral in character, were handed down from generation to generation. But if we carefully examine these tales, it
seems that we may locate an alternative socio-cultural pattern in them. These tales do not necessarily document real events and real situations, which may be validated by authentic history. But we may discover a cultural history – the social and ethical ideals, their superstitions, their religious beliefs, their thoughts about human relationships etc. This alternative segment of history may help us to find out a design of cultural pattern.

In fact, the tales of the ancient past always create a pattern of collective memory arising out of a distinctive cultural pattern. It is therefore worthwhile to consider some specific aspects of this design. The aristocratic class would spend their days in luxury. The children who were brought up in wealthy conditions often became adamant and would not follow the ethical values. They did not behave properly with those who were not handsome and ignored the helpful person. It was often found that the children belonging to the aristocratic stratum of society would often become a victim of their parents’ erratic conduct. Though born in the royal family they had to undergo a series of misfortunes. Deep love and affection between the brother and sister were also projected
through these tales. Though they had to face hostile circumstances, yet they would remain lovable to each other. In our present self-centered society we are oblivious of what 'love' is; but hundred of years back, it was found profusely among the people. On some occasions, it was seen that even parents were unduly partial to their children i.e. one used to get more affection than the other. We have found in some stories of the Grimms an intense bond of love between brothers and sisters; but in the tale *Little One Eye, Little Two Eyes, Little Three Eyes*, we come across a portrayal of how two mischievous sisters having one eye and three eyes try to endanger the life of another sister having two eyes. But the happy ending of this tale, and of many others, possibly indicates a distinctive moral and ethical code: goodness and piety finally lead to happiness.

However it was also found that people with boundless ambition of reprehensible acquisitiveness would bring their own destruction. In that society there were people who were not pleased with their own position and always craved for prosperity. When wealth was received in abundance without toil, their aspiration and
greed became limitless. They even failed to discriminate between good and evil. To be affluent and powerful was their only mission in life. But to achieve economic success and vigour, it was not always necessary to be born in a royal family or have outstanding potentials. A common man could reach the ultimate point of fulfilment through intelligence, probity and diligence. There were many hindrances in social life but people with aforesaid qualities could easily overcome the obstacles. People with pleasing and elegant personality were loved and admired by all. In Little Red Cap, Brothers Grimm tries to show the life of ordinary people during that period was perilous. The wolves which caused terror at that time made the lives of the people precarious. The story begins with little Red Cap going to meet her sick grandmother. She meets a malicious wolf on the way. The wolf collects the address of the old lady from the little girl, goes to her house and gobbles up the poor old lady. When the little girl reaches the place, the wolf pretends to be her grandmother lying on the bed, jumps out and swallows up poor Red Cap.
In the story **The Handless Maiden** we get an idea that the wicked may support a person who is in poverty but they always have an evil intention behind it. Children are usually found to be pious and they were prepared to perform anything for the sake of their parents' welfare. People believed in prophecy and were certain that it was inevitable. They had a firm conviction that the Lord defends his men and that faith in God would help them to overcome all impediments. A certain Miller who is in great poverty receives plenty of wealth from the Evil Spirit, which cleverly wants to take away his beautiful and pious daughter. As the Evil Spirit finds it difficult to carry the noble maiden, it wants to cut off her hands and persuades her father to do it. The beautiful and faithful girl consents to her father and so both her hands are cut down. After spending many days in great misery, the maiden receives her hands by the grace of merciful God and gets married to the King. In numerous tales, the Brothers Grimm have pointed out that in this form of society which goes hundreds of years back there were delightful persons who were accepted everywhere. As they were innocent people with a clean heart, they always had a
desire to help others and we see that only with this noble quality they could improve their economic condition. Religious and ethical values were deep-rooted among the people of that time. Simultaneously wicked and malicious people were also present in the aforesaid society. These people with their endless greed and spiteful behaviour caused trouble to others. In the story **The Singing Bone** we see how a covetous person kills his own brother for the sake of prosperity. However those malignant persons could not escape but were definitely punished by the society. A king proclaims profuse wealth and his only daughter in marriage to someone who will be able to kill the terrible wild boar, thereby making his kingdom free. The younger son of a poor man who is innocent and ignorant kills the wild boar with a magical spear presented to him by the good little dwarf. When the elder brother comes to know all these incidents, he is jealous of his brother’s fortune and kills him telling that he has performed the task and so marries the princess. The wonderful white little bone discloses the fact and the elder brother is sewed up in a sack and drowned.
The stories of the Brothers Grimm indicate that the rustic people as well as the townsfolk were humble, modest and innocent. They might suffer from destitution but they would always carry out the moral principles or values. Never for a moment had they lost their loyalty to the Almighty. They were conscious of any help or support provided to them by someone and always tried to reciprocate it. Honesty was their only capital, which converted poverty into prosperity. Although some people always haunt for prosperity but abundant supply of wealth as also of material objects could not always suffice for mental peace and happiness. In other words, it may be said that the rich were not always happy. Money could not bring remedy to their tension or anxiety.

We also come to know that the time when these tales were told people were not highly educated and were ignorant of modern science and technology. Most of them had their faith in moral excellence such as virtue, goodness and so on. The wealthy class celebrated their rituals with splendour and magnificence. At that time people were highly superstitious and were apprehensive of evil powers. The common people and even the king feared the evil
ones. They practiced black arts with which they were capable to harm the most dignified and powerful men of the society. Jealousy and malice were considered as evil forces, which brought only destruction to those who were in the grip of those powers. Sir James George Frazer wrote about some rituals in his book, **The Golden Bough**: "The curious duties discharged by a class of men called 'ramanga' or 'blue blood' among the Betsileo of Madagascar. It is their business to eat all the nail – parings and to lick up all the split blood of the nobles. When the nobles pare their nails, the parings are collected to the last scrap and swallowed by these ramanga. If the parings are too large, they are minced small and so gulped down. Again, should a nobleman wound himself, say in cutting his nails or treading on something, the ramanga lick up the blood as fast as possible...There is scarcely a nobleman of any pretensions who does not strictly observe this custom, the intention of which probably is to prevent these parts of his person from falling into the hands of sorcerers, who on the principles of contagious magic could work him harm thereby. The general explanation of the reluctance to shed blood on the ground is
probably to be found in the belief that the soul is in the blood, and that therefore any ground on which it may fall necessarily becomes taboo or sacred." Thus in the story The Goose Girl we find that 'Three Drops of Blood' of the Queen serve as a safeguard to her daughter and that can protect the princess from the hands of the evil forces. In this tale we notice that the Queen cuts her finger and collects three drops of blood in a napkin and gives it to her daughter (Princess) who is going to her bridegroom. As long as the princess possesses the napkin, no evil forces can cause any harm to her. But when she loses it in the stream, she is immediately captured by evil power and faces many adverse situations.

In many stories of the Brothers Grimm we find that love between the two lovers has been beautifully described. The path of true love as usual was not smooth as the lovers experienced a series of misfortunes; but they would after a series of trials become victorious. Sometimes it is seen that love between two opposite sexes were so great that many sinful activities were even forgiven. In the story The Donkey Cabbages we see that a witch and her beautiful daughter have stolen the valuable possessions of a young
huntsman. With the help of a magical cabbage he punishes both of them, transforming them into donkey. The huntsman falls in love with the beautiful maiden and pardons her fault and brings her back to her previous human form. Finally they are married and live happily. In that society, there were ordinary people who were kind-hearted and showed their sympathy to others, especially to children. Sometimes it was seen that they brought an orphan child to their own residence and gave him proper care and education. The foster child and their own child were brought up with equal affection, which showed their generosity. But simultaneously it was found that there were others who having vicious designs tried to harm children. In most cases, their wicked intentions did not succeed and they themselves met a deplorable end. In the story Fir Apple we find that a forester rescues a child from a golden eagle and brings him up with his own daughter with adequate attention. The cook wants to kill the boy (Fir Apple), though he does not succeed in his evil desire and at the end he (cook) meets a tragic death. From these tales, we come to know that people of that time were acquainted with different skills. They were sincere and tried
to retain the promises once made. Even if the task seemed to be hazardous and difficult, they never tried to escape but kept their words. They also had patriotic feelings and participated in wars for their own land. But unfortunately those talented warriors used to suffer and were not always rewarded or paid properly for their services. The story *How Six Travelled through the World* tells us that a person who knows a variety of arts and is brave enough to serve the army is paid only three dollars at the time of his discharge. From these stories, we have also noted that after receiving proper education, noble attitude grows in man. Sons took care of their parents and helped them in their requirements and tried to work for the well being of humanity. They were even merciful to the malignant persons as education perhaps taught them that all creatures were equal. *The Spirit in the Bottle* is a tale of an industrious and scholarly son of a poor woodcutter. He is very faithful to his father and apprehending no evil he rescues a Spirit which was confined in a glass bottle in the shape of a frog. After being released the Spirit gives the boy a wonderful little piece of rag which can heal any kind of wound. After that he
returns to the university and learns whatever he can and then he becomes the world's most celebrated surgeon. Here we get a picture of poverty in society: the poor class had to struggle a lot to sustain their livelihood; yet they always accomplished their duties. The general view was that the extremely affluent persons had a sinful temperament. Again, one who did not possess wealth in abundance was found to be a conscientious man. We have evidence that there were robbers and mischievous persons in society and they were responsible of causing enormous problems to the city or country folks. The robbers seized the valuable possessions of the person travelling through the lonely path in an unprotected manner and kept him in great distress. We understand that there was penury in society and thus some men were forced to accept unethical professions. A poor servant girl has been travelling alone through a wood with her boxes and gets caught by ferocious robbers. Though her life is saved, yet after losing all her possessions she is left in state of bewilderment (The Old Woman in the Wood).
The tales of the Brothers Grimm indicate that most people concentrated on the Christian religious values. In accordance with the enticement of Adam and Eve by Satan, the concept of temptation and confession has been narrated in these stories. Wise and virtuous men are rewarded but when they commit sin they suffer distress and indigence. When they admit their guilt, they are blessed. We find that Christian idealism and ethical values were followed in society; thus it is found in most cases that people with noble attitude are rewarded while the wicked ones are chastised.

The Holy Bible says: “Do no evil and evil will not overtake you; avoid wickedness, and it will turn aside from you.” It also says: “The good man wins favour from the Lord, but the schemer is condemned by him.” Society relied upon the Biblical sayings and tried to be worthy of it. The parents taught their children to be virtuous and amiable in every situation. It was remarkable that the little ones always respected and followed the commands or guidance of their elders. People with wicked intentions might cause some initial problems but truth and honesty would triumph at last. We also come to know that the idealistic but powerful men
were impartial and did not distinguish between the rich and the poor. They followed the Biblical view that all men are equal to God and must serve Him according to their ability. The blessings of the Lord will be showered upon the person who always followed the path of goodness. But men with avaricious nature and a tendency to disobey their master were never forgiven and thus they met a tragic end. As seen in the morality plays, people of that society had a firm belief in the motto that men with a clear heart and pious and helpful attitude will be rewarded by God himself. The poor people are generally seen to be following the proper track. But men who had treasure in abundance were full of vices and follies and were punished at the end. In the tale The Poor Man and the Rich Man a good Angel visits the houses of two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man being self-centered and greedy does not behave properly with the Angel. So the three wishes bestowed to him by God’s messenger bring nothing but trouble and vexation. But the poor man with a very clean and compassionate heart shows hospitality towards the Angel. With the three boons the poor man becomes wealthy enough and lives
pious and contended. People believe that those who forgave and never condemned others, God the Almighty showered his grace upon the person. They had complete faith in the supernatural existence and trusted that God would definitely protect them when they were in misery. Their faith in God enhanced when they overcame the hostile forces.

In the stories, Brothers Grimm have given a beautiful description of the kings or rulers of that period. The perfect judgment of the king impresses us most. In the story *The Frog Prince* a king's daughter promises to an ugly frog that she will allow eating from her golden plate, and drinking from her cup and sleeping in her bed if the frog fetches the golden ball from water. Afterwards when the princess declines to keep these promises, the king becomes furious and says to his daughter: "what you have promised, that you must perform."⁷ The king also adds: "He, who helped you in the time of your trouble, must not now be despised."⁸ *The Frog Prince* shows that the mighty king with his strength and power of discernment brought peace and happiness in the kingdom. But in *The Twelve Brothers* we also find a king
with a whimsical character who made the most astonishing decision to kill all his twelve sons when the last child became the girl. We wonder if a ruler behaved in such a manner with his own children, what then would be the fate of the citizens of the kingdom? Surely the ordinary people were in the trap of adverse destiny. A notable quality that we found among the king or powerful men of society was that they appreciated beauty and goodness. Thus whenever those qualities were available in a maiden, they would unhesitatingly marry her without enquiring about her birth and status. The king in *The Giant with the Three Golden Hairs* was described as a man of pernicious temperament. The primary duty of the king was to take care of his citizens; but instead of doing this, he indulged in causing mischief to his people. The kings were not always seen as humble or pious. Sometimes the kings were found to be treacherous and they even broke their promises. They chastised someone and even their own wives but without showing the actual reasons. These types of rulers were regarded as the enemies of the society. In the primitive period, the king used to prerepresent power and hegemony. In other words,
kingship was largely a metaphorisation of autocratic power and authority. In the feudal system, the king's power was largely militaristic and it was directed towards perpetuating hegemonic control. This shows that the king and the nobles would also attempt to organize a mechanism of state control that would highlight the principle of elitist governance. We also come to know that in the aristocratic class or in the royal family, the sons would not always have true paternal love. Every time the sons tried to convince that their affection towards their father was so great that they could accept any kind of arduous work for the king's welfare. But the intention behind it was not true love or duty towards their father but to inherit the wealth and the throne. They could even kill the king for that purpose. But there were exceptions and some of them were noble and really good-natured, having no evil designs and they would naturally win the favour of everyone. The king or the ruler occupied a significant place when these tales were told. We found that some kind-hearted, prudent and efficient rulers did not make any distinction among his people and they were also impartial even to their own children. To determine his successor,
the king tested all his sons in different manners and selected the suitable one to inherit the crown.

These tales show that the stepmothers generally tortured their stepchildren. Children who lost their mother at a tender age had to face lots of troubles because of their stepmothers. They were not given proper food and education but only difficult tasks to perform. The common view was that the stepchildren were tortured by their stepmothers and in some cases they were even killed. But the tale The Almond Tree is especially striking in so far as it shows great love and affection between stepbrother and the stepsister. However the mischievous women (stepmothers) were punished by the society and sometimes their stepchildren utilised the opportunity to do so. In the story The Almond Tree, we see that a beautiful boy who is killed by his stepmother is transformed into a bird after death. Towards the end of the story, the boy takes revenge on his stepmother. The bird throws a millstone on to her head, so that she is completely overwhelmed. In another story Roland, the maiden kills her witch stepmother with the help of a magic wand. To protect herself, she (Roland) covers the area with
thorny hedge. When the witch chases her, she falls in the bush and the thorns scratched and wounded her so much that she falls down dead. The beautiful maiden who was subjected to her stepmother’s oppression in The Twelve Brothers had to endure the sufferings. We have noted that the stepchildren were feeble and could not protest against their stepmother’s activities and were also deprived of their father’s care. Yet their polite behaviour made all the difference.

Brothers Grimm have drawn a beautiful portrait of the entire ‘female class’ at the time. We have also noticed that their attitude, behaviour, life style have much resemblance with women of present days. Here we find three distinctive characteristic of women which seems to be eternal. The basic instinct of a woman is motherhood. She wishes to possess a lovely baby and sometimes imagines that child’s beauty is comparable to the aesthetic pleasures of nature. It is apparent in the story Little Snow White, where at the beginning the queen wishes to have a child who should be as white as snow, as red as blood and as black as wood. Also in The Almond Tree a similar description is found where the
wife of the rich man who has no children wants to have a baby; "had I but a child as red as blood and as white as snow." A woman's exquisite physical beauty along with her noble conduct impreses everyone. When such persons are in distress, they are generally favoured by others. The beautiful maiden in The Three Little Men in the Wood behaves politely with the dwarfs in the forest. The dwarfs are pleased with the girl and give her boons so that all her sufferings come to an end; ultimately she becomes the king's bride. Likewise in Old Mother Frost the good girl's noble behaviour draws the sympathy of the old enchantress and so she was rewarded and her distress comes to an end.

The female class was also attracted to jewellery and beautiful dresses. The maidens are sometimes so much fascinated with those things that they can perform any arduous work to possess it. In The Drummer we find that three dresses, 'as shining as the sun', 'as silvery as the moon' and 'as glittering as the stars' become so much alluring to a maiden that she even refuses to marry. With these three splendid dresses, she feels so happy and contended as if she has been married. The Iron Stove also shows
how the real princess gets rid of the false bride by presenting her three beautiful royal dresses. The false bride is so happy after receiving the three dresses that she allows the princess to meet the prince. Thereafter the prince recollects everything and is married to his true bride. However in this male dominated world, it was often found that women with abundant wealth but without the support of a man were helpless. They were alone in the hands of blind fate. Many people who were even inferior to them took advantage of the situation. This is largely evident in The Goose Girl. The Goose Girl tells us how the servant ignored the helpless Queen’s generosity and thus became unfaithful and betrayed her. In the tales of the Brothers Grimm the readers are frequently acquainted with a character called ‘witch’. In real life, apart from fantasy, those were obviously the mischievous female characters that created disorder in society. At that time people were highly superstitious and were apprehensive of those evil powers.