

*Female  
discrimination  
in fairy tales*  
*A feminist critique*

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**Russian Fairy Tales**  
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As long as there have been civilizations, there have been stories that are told to children. This story telling is a means of not only comforting and amusing a child, but of teaching the child the societal norms of their nation. They can pass on history and tradition while illustrating the codes of conduct. These tales are memorized by children and remembered forever. In turn, when these children become parents, they retell the beloved stories to their children. Children idolize their favorite character, the character they have most in common with and are best able to identify with, and try to emulate that character's actions. From these fairy tales children learn proper etiquette and the role they should play in society. What actions are good and what actions are bad are clearly displayed. By means of these stories cultural beliefs can be passed on from generation to generation. However, this imparting of societal rules through fairy tales can be used to manipulate and brainwash children into continuing the dominance of a group. One such group that is afflicted with the lessons of fairy tales is women. Fairy tales are used to sustain common cultural customs that maintain the role of women is to be subordinate to men. The majority of fairy tales support a patriarchal government. This is illustrated in the qualities and characteristics that female characters in fairy tales demonstrate. Good women in stories are to be silent, passive, without ambition, beautiful, fertile, and eager to marry. Imbedded in these tales are warnings to little girls of what will befall upon them should they choose to exhibit non-female traits. Thus, teaching little girls that it is immoral to have goals outside of the household, and wrong to be dominant and outspoken. The roles women are given in fairy tales also further convince readers of the belief that it is better for women to be subservient. Fairy tales associate weakness, passiveness, and emotionality with the female sex. These attributed characteristics to the

female gender allow for submissive convictions about women to be instilled in young children, so as to further a male-dominated society and government.

Silence, is the most blatantly illustrated theme in fairy tales. It is wrong for women to speak up and to demand that their opinions and wishes be heard. Such ramblings are an embarrassment to the husband, for gregariousness is associated with witches who are in league with unclean forces. In other words it is evil to be outwardly verbal. A proper woman in fairy tales does not speak until spoken to or granted permission to speak. And under no circumstances does she speak back to anyone. In *How a Husband Weaned his Wife from Fairy Tales*, the husband severely beats his wife when she argues and interrupts his lodger even after she is told not to do so (Afanas'ev 308). This is a warning to girls against speaking without permission. Women are not to speak according to their own will. Rather than taking initiative and inquiring about subjects women in fairy tales "almost never pose a question, and their general helplessness leads them to cry out often" (Bottigheimer 127). Such verb use in fairy tales describing the speech of women as inferior allows the belief that they have nothing of importance to say to continue. *The Merchant's Daughter and the Slanderer* illustrates the importance and value placed on a silent woman. Before the king will even consider taking the merchant's sister as his wife and queen he inquires about her manners. As soon as the merchant replies that "she is quiet and chaste as a dove," the king remarks "she will be queen" (Afanas'ev 416). Such value of silent women comes from the extremely strong correlation between speech and power. Speech in fairy tales is strongly associated with authority and people occupying authoritative positions, which are of an overwhelming majority of males. However, some women do have the power of speech in

fairy tales, but they are not virtuous women. They are most often sorcerers or witches. Women have power over all when they have the power of speech. This is because in fairy tales a woman with the power of speech, such as a sorceress, can cast spells upon all of her enemies rendering them helpless. Of course these women with such dominating speech power are considered evil. Men can fully dominate and control women if they can keep them silent.

Passivity is the next most valued and honored attribute a woman can possess in a fairy tale. It is not the female who should save herself from harm or an undesirable situation; it is the male that must save her. An assertion of herself and her rights would be viewed as wrong in fairy tales. Hence, a woman must endure the hardships of her life as a damsel in distress until her knight in shining armor comes to her rescue. Two occurrences of passivity happen in *The Footless Champion and the Handless Champion*. First, their sister must bear a dragon flying to her every day, and then growing unrecognizably thin because of its visits, until her brothers get back from a hunting trip a week later. She does not attempt to hide, run, escape, protect herself, nor fight the dragon in order to save herself. She merely waited helplessly for her saviors to come (Afanas'ev 272). This facilitates the view of women as weak and helpless, unable to take any initiative to persist. Nevertheless an attempt is made on part of the princess to be active. The princess wishes to leave an undesirable situation. She attempts to leave the prince and even cuts off the feet of Ivan the Naked during her escape. However, despite her efforts to be active and assertive, she is inevitably dominated by the male. Her desires were thwarted and she was punished for her efforts. Ivan's reprimand was harsh as he grabbed "her braid and dragged her around the yard until she repented and solemnly

promised to obey her husband in everything” (Afanas’ev 273). Once again these stories serve to warn little girls of the repercussions for disobedience and self-assertion. The job of a woman does not include bettering her own situation. It is not justifiable for a woman to take the active role of the male. Hence, once again the woman is dominated by the male by keeping her passive and unwilling to actively assert herself no matter what the circumstances are.

Another warning given to young girls through fairy tales is against ambition and the desire for power or powerful positions. A woman’s place is in the home and nowhere else defends fairy tales. For a woman to hold a position of influence is wrong. Her largest priority should be on maintaining the home and serving the husband. An ambitious woman is obviously putting her desire for power above the needs of her husband and her responsibilities at the household. *The Mayoress* tells the tale of the rise and fall of a wife that was too ambitious and power hungry. The wife asks her husband that she be elected mayoress. Her husband talks to the elders and it is done so to teach her a lesson. However, she is not fit to be the mayoress, as is the same condemnation for all women. Sinning quite a lot, “she drank wine with the peasants, and took bribes” ((Afanas’ev 141). So, when it came time for the poll tax to be collected she could not collect it in time. Thus, she went home to hide. Despite her efforts to conceal herself in a grain barn, she was discovered and severely beaten. The Cossack “began to lash the barn with his whip,” and the woman screamed in pain. From that day forward she no longer desired such a position of power and influence, and no longer disobeyed her husband (Afanas’ev 141). This story depicts a woman as too incompetent to hold a political position, as well as too weak to resist the temptations of evil. Subconsciously, caution

against disobeying you husband is given, for there will be severe repercussions. A message is also sent to males by this story that women are far too inept to make decisions that would affect a large group of people. Once again a woman is to be weak and meek not powerful and strong. The fact that the woman had ambitions of gaining a higher position within the community was a disgrace to the husband, and a joke to the board of elders. It was not even considered that a woman could be competent, hardworking, and influential in this political office. Once more, males keep women in a position of inferiority so as to not allow women to gain enough power to have influence and create change.

Beauty is also highly revered in fairy tales. In many cultures beauty is the basis for many decisions. Most often the beautiful person will be chosen over the ugly or homely person for a position or prize. The same applies to fairy tales. Beautiful girls marry to a higher social standing and ugly girls pass away. Beauty is associated with intelligence, ability, kindness, worthiness, and morality. For instance, beautiful young maidens are virtuous and get to marry the handsome, powerful, and wealthy prince, while her ugly step-sisters perish due to their evil doings. Disney had perpetuated this ideal for many decades in popular tales such as Cinderella. The link between beauty and ability is depicted in *Baldak Borisievich*. The Turkish sultan is attempting to capture a culprit. His eldest daughter approaches him for permission to catch the culprit herself, “give me your blessing and order that twenty-nine maidens, the most beautiful in the whole kingdom, be chosen. I myself will be the thirtieth. We will go to spend the night in those canvas tents and will find the culprit for you” she says (Afanas’ev 91). She requests that the most beautiful girls in the land be gathered, as if the ugly girls would not have the intelligence

and abilities needed to identify and catch the culprit. Immense value is also placed upon beauty in *Dawn, Evening and Midnight*. The story tells of a king who had three daughters of such unrivaled beauty that he locks them in underground chambers and keeps watch over them twenty-four hours-a-day. They are like treasure to him. He refuses to let the sun burn them, nor let the wind blow them (Afanas'ev 141). Such a story perpetuates the idea that beauty is to be treasured above all else. And it even seems that the only reason the king loves his daughters so much is because they are amazingly beautiful. One could deduce from this story that ugly girls are not worthy of such love and the effort of brave soldiers to rescue them from harm. This emphasis on externalities degrades women and prevents unattractive, but intelligent women from excelling in society.

Such an emphasis on surface attributes contributes to a women's quest for marriage. A woman must make sure she is appealing and attractive, so as to gain the affections of a suitor. For if she is unable to gain the attention of a male, she cannot get married, and this, in fairy tales, would hinder the acquisition of her main goal in life. Women are intended to marry and be the woman of a household. Their place is in the home catering to the husband. It is the ultimate achievement of a girl to grow up and find a handsome husband to wed and live happily ever after with. That is why most fairy tales end this way. The girl struggles, triumphs and earns herself a good looking, wealthy man whom rescues her and rewards her with marriage to himself. Once married it is also a woman's responsibility to bare healthy children according to fairy tales. This is a large consideration when a man chooses a wife to marry. *The Singing Tree and The Talking Bird* exhibit this fact perfectly. The king could in theory marry any woman in the land;

however, he chooses to marry the maiden who promises him three children. He is eavesdropping and hears the young woman say, “I should like to be married to the king himself; I would bear him two sons and one daughter” (Afanas’ev 184). Thus, with the promise of an heir to the throne, he rewards her childbearing ability with marriage to the upper class. Neither her intelligence nor her personality is taken into consideration when choosing to marry her. The ability to give birth to healthy children is good enough. Hence, it is emphasized that the place for a woman is in the home taking care of the household chores, children, and husband. Thus, any skills she may have that are applicable outside of the home are of no concern, because if she is an obedient wife, she will never utilize them.

An innumerable number of stories and tales have been passed down from generation to generation. These stories are necessary and essential to continuing the customs and values of a culture. They bind the past with the future. Fairy tales can be used for entertainment and comfort. Often, they can even bond elders with the youth. They can also teach children valuable lessons about right and wrong, morality and immorality. Nevertheless, they are doomed to reflect the prejudices and negative views a society holds. It is unavoidable to prevent the incorporation of discrimination into fairy tales because they are constantly being revised to fit the times. As they are retold the current author integrates some of his or her own beliefs and stereotypes into the tales. Fairy tales evolve and morph to mirror the current society and their present day values. Still, it is unfortunate that groups of people such as women must suffer at the expense of continuing heritage. The roles of women are already changing in today’s culture. And our fairy tales are beginning to recognize the change in societal values. Disney has

recently developed tales such as Mulan, where there is a female heroine challenging the prejudices her country currently has. In her Chinese culture women are not permitted to join the army and fight along side the men. Nevertheless, she does, and in the end is given many accolades for her accomplishments. Her grandfather praises her bravery and is even proud of her disobedience. As opposed to the beatings that women in Russian fairy tales receive after disobeying their husbands or the law. Such a drastic change in the structure of fairy tales shows how culture can change for the better. Hence, society must make an effort to recognize the discrimination it is perpetuation and spreading through its cultural products such as movies and stories. Further they must accept the change of societal values and reflect these changes in its modern works of art. In doing so such negative views, such as those exhibited in Russian Fairy tales of women, can be eradicated.

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