

**Negotiating Spaces for Women in Society by Retelling Fairy Tales**



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November 2016

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A Thesis

Submitted to

The Department of English and Humanities

of

Brac University

by

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Student ID: 15163013

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

November 2016

This work is dedicated to my feline babies, Captain Claw and Daisy. Your innocent skin, your childish call, your beseeching eyes, I'll no longer touch, hear or see. Rest, my babies. Rest long and well. You've worked your infant bodies way beyond their limits; So much that they could no longer bear the weights of your magnificent souls. But rest, my babies. Rest long and well. Mama will see you soon.

And to Dollsy, my brave little warrior, who's still hanging on.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank life itself, for throwing crazy challenges and adversities at me when I am in the worst states of mind and simply could not deal with another issue on my plate. You lose, I win. I completed my thesis.

Secondly, I would of course, like to thank the ENH department at BRAC University, especially my supervisor, Dr. Rifat Mahbub, for putting up with my excuses, my emergencies, my whims and my tantrums and being supportive even when you least appreciated my attitude. I would also love to thank Dr. Firdous Azim and Dr. Shuchi Karim, for all the feminism classes, without which I could not have thought of this thesis topic.

Thirdly and perhaps mostly importantly, I would love to thank my mother, without whom none of anything would have been possible. Thank you for being the amazing mother you are. Thank you for raising me when I know how difficult it was for you, and thank you for standing by me in almost everything I decided to do. Mostly though, thank you for the late night cups of tea, without which this thesis would remain unwritten. You rock Ammu!

Lastly, thank you Mr. William Henley for your poem “Invictus” and Ms. Maya Angelou for your poem “Still I Rise”. They have gotten me through some pretty rough times.

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which fairy tales affect our socio-political realities, and how by manipulating these tales we are able to manipulate the roles we actually play in the society. This paper believes that fairy tales are a tool of patriarchal acculturation, and we retell these stories to fit a feminist narrative, we challenge this acculturation, and we are able to negotiate spaces for women in society. It looks at the idea of space and the archetypes of the princess and the witch. While in traditional telling they are binary opposites, retold versions show how princesses need not be passive paragons of patriarchal virtue, and a witch is only human.

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## Chapter 1

### Fairy Tales: A Genre, A Social Roles Handbook

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms” – Muriel Rukeyser

The importance of fairy tales, as every child and every parent who have each other know, is paramount. Children are exposed to fairy tales at an incredibly early age. It is all around them. They breathe it in. They internalize it. They enact it. They become it. To children, and to parents raising them, the universe being made up of atoms is far too dry a concept, when it could easily be made up of stories.

Fairy tales are rooted in oral traditions and ...were never given titles, nor did they exist in the forms in which they are told, printed, painted, recorded, performed, filmed, and manufactured today. Folklorists generally make a distinction between wonder folk tales, which originated in oral traditions throughout the world and still exist, and literary fairy tales, which emanated from the oral traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print, and continue to be created today in various (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale 2*)

However, what is more interesting is that while these stories are there to be enjoyed and cherished, it is not remotely their only purpose. Fairy tales serve the purpose of acculturation. They serve as a guidebook/ handbook of sorts that teach us our roles within the society. Back when I was a child, every story in my storybooks came with a moral. Cinderella had a happy ending because she was obedient and kind. Snow White had a happy ending because she was kind and gentle. Belle had a happy ending because she looked beyond what she could see and sought goodness in a place where it may or may not have existed.

One could argue that these are only stories! These do not necessarily affect grown up people's psyche! Well, perhaps. However, I have heard multiple women complain, "Why can't our lives be like a romantic comedy?", and after years of being attentive audience to romantic comedies, I can vouch for one thing – They all have their bases in fairy tales. The story of Cinderella has been adapted over and over again, from *Maid in Manhattan* to *A Cinderella Story*. I grew up subconsciously identifying with Cinderella. I didn't care much for Pocahontas or Mulan. Cinderella it was. I took great pride in being miss goody two shoes, because I genuinely believed in the virtue of being one and must have subconsciously believed that I would be grandly rewarded for all of this someday. I was barely six, and fairy tales had already taught me my role in society- to be the virtuous woman who suffers in silence and always obeys.

As I grew up, of course, Cinderella became ridiculous. It was unrealistic. Life did not work that way. I noticed that what all the princesses who I once admired for their pale skin, lustrous long hair, splendid gowns, had a few things in common: they never did anything other than sit around and wait. Belle read books and Mulan went to war, but my favorites, Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty never seemed to do anything other than household chores. Thankfully my inherent aversion to household chores made me decide I did not want to be them after all.

The point of that rather personal anecdote was to demonstrate that fairy tales really do shape a child's psyche and prepare them for their future roles in society, and the roles that these tales typically prepare women for, are being obedient children, wives and dutiful mothers. The space that is allowed to women in society by these tales is painfully limited, and what was needed to expand these spaces for women was more than just to create jobs for them in the job



market, but to create space in their own minds to allow for it. Thus the fairy tales needed to be retold.

This thesis looks in detail at how existing models of fairy tales have only pushed women further and further into the peripheries of society, and how when we reshape these tales, it becomes a lot easier to allow for women's space in society to expand and change.

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## Chapter 2

### Happily Never After? : Redefining Feminine Agency and Feminist Spaces through the Retelling of Fairy Tales

The oldest fairy tales that we have in written record right now are possibly the ones by the brothers Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm. Even though the stories that are written down by the Brothers Grimm, published in 1812, are the oldest known written forms of the fairy tales that general readers of English have access to, the origins of these tales are even more ancient than they were initially assumed to be. Some of them are retellings of stories by the French author Charles Perrault, published circa 1690s, but the origins of a lot of other ones are estimated to be even older. Even in case of the Danish fairy tale master Hans Christian Andersen, whose fairy tales are thought to be original works, are derivations of stories he had heard as a child. Over the years the fairy tales have changed and evolved into tales that have little resemblance to what they may have been originally. However, the interesting thing is, the way in which these tales have evolved, reveal traits of the human psyche and unveil themes and motifs that have transcended the bounds of space and time. Dr. Jamie Tehrani, a cultural anthropologist at Durham University says, “by looking at how these folk tales have spread and changed it tells us something about human psychology and what sort of things we find memorable”. Neil Gaiman says, “We encounter fairy tales as kids, in retellings or panto. We breathe them. We know how they go”. At this point it is perhaps worth mentioning that the majority of the audience for fairy tales, at least in recent times, has been women, and more often, it can be observed that a good number of fairy tales are cautionary tales or didactic instruction manuals for girls and women. So for at least a

couple of centuries, women have been breathing these instruction manuals that taught them “that a good female is generally submissively accepting of her lot in life while waiting for the prince to appear and take control of her destiny” (Neikirk 38). He said: “Little Red Riding Hood is about violation or rape, and I suspect that humans were just as violent in 600BC as they are today, so they will have exchanged tales about all types of violent acts.”

The interesting thing to note is that these fairy tales did not necessarily reflect how things work in real life, but rather as a yardstick to measure how gender roles should work. A lot of people dismiss folklore and fairy tales as simply means of entertainment, but folklorists argue that these tales “have always been one of culture's primary mechanisms for inculcating roles and behaviors”. (Rowe 210).

The ostensibly innocuous fantasies symbolically portray basic human problems and appropriate social prescriptions. These tales which glorify passivity, dependency, and self sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity. (Rowe 210)

Recently, however, there has been an insurgence of retold fairy tales. Despite having concrete written forms of the tales which preserve them in their earliest known versions, there has been a trend of deliberate retelling. Many of these retellings are consciously feminist. This

paper explores three fairy tales in their various versions and speculates the various ways in which these retellings can change the perceptions and expectations of femininity in the society. The three tales explored are those of Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, and Bluebeard. This paper believes that this conscious retelling is aware of and makes use of the fact that fairy tale audiences are mostly female, and makes a deliberate attempt to change the idea of patriarchal femininity that has been perpetuated through the older, or even the slightly newer Disney versions, and instead instill an idea of feminine agency and space that defies gender norms and empowers the female reader through the exploits of the female protagonist. If Simone de Beauvoir was correct in stating that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman”, then the ancient tales have played a major part in making women out of females, and now authors like Neil Gaiman, Angela Carter and Roald Dahl attempt to make a different kind of woman out of present day females, perhaps one that is more assertive and more free of patriarchal constraints imposed upon their sex.

To begin with, this paper delves into the tale of Sleeping Beauty and how the evolution of the story changes the perception of femininity from docile and submissive to active and warrior-like, thereby expanding the scope of feminine space and agency. One of the oldest known versions of this story is “Sun, Moon and Talia” by Italian poet Giambattista Basile, published in 1634, where the princess Talia falls asleep after touching a spindle, not because of a curse, but due to a prophecy, and is discovered in her sleeping state in the forest by a king who was passing by. Enamored by her beauty, the king proceeds to rape and impregnate her. In her sleep, Talia delivers two babies, one of who sucks on her finger, removing the splinter that caused her death-like sleep and revives her. Talia wakes up, finding herself a mother of two children. Of course, her maternal instincts take over and she loves the children dearly. The king, missing his sleeping

beauty in the woods, passes by the forest again, only to find Talia awake with two children. Even though he already has a wife, he pursues his relationship with Talia, and begins to visit the woods to see her everyday under the pretext of hunting. His queen wife being suspicious of his changed behavior, appoints a spy, and finds out about Talia and her children. Angered by this betrayal by the king, she orders the children, Sun and Moon, to be cooked and fed to the king, and Talia to be thrown into a giant vat of fire. The king, upon finding this out, has the Queen thrown into the vat instead, and lives out the rest of his life with Talia and her children. The story ends with the proverb, “Those whom fortune favors, find good luck even in their sleep”, demonstrating that being raped by the King was “good luck” for Talia. Though the story is about Talia, throughout the entire story, she has absolutely no role to play. “Through the majority of the story, the heroine's beauty, rather than her actions, drives the plot” (Neikirk 39). Also, the woman who does have some degree of power and agency, the Queen, is portrayed as evil. The story makes absolutely no attempt to point out that she was the woman who was wronged as her husband cheated on her with someone prettier, younger, more docile and powerless, while the Queen is punished for seeking revenge. She comes to represent the “hysterical” or “mad” woman who stoops to murder and deviousness to execute her revenge plans.

The 1959 Disney version of the film brings about a new order of patriarchy and standards of femininity.

The murder of an angry woman that presents herself in the form of a dragon is the necessary duty of the male lead. The double-fold message is that violence is a necessary trait of males and that females, when angry, become unruly and violence may be necessary to control them. Additionally, the ugly older woman was attempting to disrupt the social

order. By destroying her, social order is restored (Deszcz, 2002). This again perpetuates and reinforces the common theme that women cannot trust each other (Neikirk 40).

However, these messages have been consciously subverted in the newer retellings of the Sleeping Beauty tale. Disney's "Maleficent" puts the vengeful evil antagonist at the forefront and attempts to give her a voice. Neil Gaiman's book *The Sleeper and the Spindle* merges the storylines of "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White", the two famous sleepers in Western folklore. These retellings can be viewed as spatial revolutions that are taking place to expand and redefine feminist space and feminine agency. By reimagining these feminist spaces, the scope of feminist political choices are also increased. Maleficent reimagines feminine agency and space in an almost Irigaray-like way. Luce Irigaray views "philosophy and society... as products of a male subject.... Irigaray's strategy is to bring the feminine into view and into play within the space of knowledge- and politics" (Robinson 288). She envisions space of transformation in a utopic past or a distant future, something like which is pictured in the film "Maleficent" as the film is set in an unspecified time and space. The film is still set within a very masculine space; however, the older angry female is brought to the forefront and made the protagonist. She too is vengeful, but instead of condemning her, this retelling makes the audience empathize with her and the betrayal she had to face simply because she was powerful and the male subjects felt threatened by this powerful female figure. So they try to vanquish her and neutralize the threat feminine power had over masculine agency and subjectivity. We are shown how she was wronged, and she recounts that to Princess Aurora, saying "I had wings once, and they were strong. But they were stolen from me" (Stromberg, *Maleficent*). To be specific, her wings were cut off by her lover, who goes

on to become King Stephan and Aurora's father, in her sleep, not unlike Talia being raped in her sleep. In previous versions, the woman who takes control of her own fate and sexuality is punished for her audacity, and the woman who submissively waits is also victimized, but is rewarded in the end for her feminine virtues like patience, passivity and chastity. "Once she becomes a victim to violence, rather than avenging her victimization, she waits for her "prince"" (Neikirk 41), and thus her patience and youthful, virginal beauty is the reason she is "saved" in the end. The woman who proceeds to avenge herself, however, is condemned and stripped of her powers, as is seen in the case of the Queen in Basile's version of Sleeping Beauty, and in the case of Maleficent as portrayed in the 1959 film.

The 2014 film, however, portrays Maleficent in a way that blurs the lines between these two archetypes. She is wronged, but she does not await a prince to avenge that. Unlike Talia, who submits to the man who violated her, Maleficent takes control of her own situation and reclaims her authority over her own body, and pleasantly enough, by the end of the movie she is not punished for her agency. Not only does she find love in the little princess she had initially cursed, she also defies the notion that women cannot trust each other and thereby creates a space that connects the pre-existing feminine spaces of the virginal passive princess and the dominant vengeful older woman. Another very interesting motif that defies patriarchal standards in the movie is lack of marriage. All other versions of the story end in the princess being saved by a Prince and then being married to him. However, this story portrays female figures saving each other, where Maleficent saves Aurora from the curse and Aurora saves Maleficent from bitterness and her loss of faith in human emotions. Though Aurora does meet a prince, he is in no way her savior, and nor is he an important figure in the plot. This story is about women making

their own space within a pre-existing patriarchal territory, and doing it successfully without being punished for their audacities.

Another way in which this retelling expands the female space for unthreatened existence and political agency is by merging the figures of the mother and stepmother. In traditional fairy tale narratives, the aging stepmother looks upon her blossoming step daughter with unrestrained jealousy. “The young girl's maturation signals her own waning sexual attractiveness and control” (Rowe 212), and thus they resort to harassing the young daughter to reclaim her own status and importance. On the other hand, the mother, a figure often killed off at the beginning of the story or even before it begins, is the spitting image of the virtuous daughter herself, kind, caring, gentle and nurturing, happily giving away her position to make way for the new generation. Maleficent, however, plays both the roles. By doing so, she legitimizes the insecurities of a woman in a male space, reclaims female anger instead of having it dismissed as hysteria, and also exhibits loving and nurturing traits traditionally reserved for the very one dimensional virtuous heroine or her birth mother, creating a very real, palpable and three dimensional female character, who claims different feminine spaces and connects them.

Neil Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle* also takes a similar path to redefining female space. It merges and retells the stories of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White and although, Sleeping Beauty does spend most of the story as a passive character, it is Snow White this time who comes to the forefront, takes control of the situation and drives the plot. The story begins with Snow White about to be married. She is a queen already, ruling her kingdom, and engaged to be married, when she hears of the princess in the neighboring kingdom lying in her tower, eternally sleeping. Having some experience with eternal sleep herself, she embarks on a journey to revive the sleeping princess, and postpones her own wedding for sake of doing so. From the



very beginning, we see her having second thoughts about marriage. “She wondered how she would feel to be a married woman. It would be the end of her life, she decided, if life was a time of choices” (Gaiman 14). Once again, we find an Irigarayan depiction of feminine space, with a story set in unspecified place and time, and to augment that effect, the characters lack names. We only know Snow White is who she is, from her iconic description of ebony black hair, snow white skin and friendship with seven dwarfs. She too, struggles to make her presence known and felt in a world that is still man's, as we can deduce from the fact that she is expected to get married even though she is not enthused by the idea. The Queen rides with the seven dwarfs to save the sleeping princess, and she makes her way to the bedchamber of the sleeper to awaken her. She leans forward and kisses the sleeper. At this point, through this action, she defies the heteronormative expectations imposed upon her to play the passive role and be kissed. Instead, she actively does the kissing and plays the part of the savior and does not shy away from performing a sexual act with someone of her own sex. Thus Butler's idea of performativity is also being acted out here. Snow White becomes the savior by doing the saving, and by actively performing this role, she becomes what she performs, once again challenging the notions of heteronormativity and limited feminine space. She expands the scope of feminine space and political agency by doing something revolutionary as opposed to being limited to the traditional gender roles offered to her traditional fairy tale narratives. “Even in the most hopeless of situations, women (and men) are busily remaking themselves” (Robinson 289), and through this action, the Queen not only remakes herself, but she remakes the idea of the queen or princess as presented to the audience of the tale, and expands the space and range of political choices available to her and the readers. This remaking is reinforced at the end of the story when she decides to abandon her wedding and her kingdom altogether and wander off in the opposite

direction. She seizes the moment to claim her own freedom and literally expand her space by going away to places she has not been before, and thus she introduces the notion of 'now' into 'one upon a time'. By doing so, she demonstrates Butler's idea that “power itself is productive of change” (Robinson 290). The change is brought about because there was initially a social and juridical power over the young queen that dictated that she get married.

However, regardless of this seizing of the opportunity, the change coming from within the constraints of patriarchy is also limited. While Gaiman's take on the classic tale does create a warrior-like heroine who takes control of her own fate, on the other hand it also gives us a character who did curse the sleeping princess because she covets her youth and beauty, thus reintroducing the idea that while some women do cooperate to stand up for each other, there are others they cannot trust. It also reintroduces the notion that even when women are evil, their evilness stems from something as petty and superficial as jealousy over beauty. Hence, through this binary, “they are also reproducing the gender relations which feminists feel inclined to try and change” (Robinson 289).

Another example of seizing the moment and bringing about change by simply performing in the present is shown in Roald Dahl's retelling of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. In this tale, Red Riding Hood is not outsmarted and eaten by the wolf. She is not even taken by surprise to see the wolf in her grandmother's clothes. She is a smart, brave gun wielding resourceful girl. When the wolf declares “I'm going to eat you anyway”, Little Red Riding Hood “wimps a pistol from her knickers/ She aims it at the creature's head/ And bang bang bang, she shoots him dead”. The presence of a gun in the story and the amazing cleverness exhibited by the young girl induces a very contemporary feeling, instead of a tale set 'once upon a time'. Not to mention, it

renders the bravery and brawn of a man acting as the savior in time of crisis, completely redundant.

This placing of feminist transformation in a utopic time and space, but change also being brought about by seizing the moment under existing constraints brings us to the theories of Julia Kristeva, who insists that change is both present and absent. By extrapolation, retelling of these tales both changes the gender constructions and in some ways reinforces them. For example, in Angela Carter's retelling of the classic tale "Bluebeard", which she renames as "The Bloody Chamber", she not only talks about the young wife's curiosity regarding the chamber her much older and affluent husband always keeps locked, but she also links it to her sexual awakening. The core premise of the story remains the same in both Charles Perault's and Carter's versions: a young girl is married to a much older widower, whose several previous wives had died under mysterious circumstances. Upon arriving at her husband's mansion, she is shown a chamber that she is to never enter. Of course curiosity gets the better of her and she goes exploring, only to find out it is occupied by the remains of his previous wives whom he had murdered in different gruesome ways. The husband, called Bluebeard in the Perault version, finds out and prepares to bestow the same fate upon his newest wife, but at the last moment, she is saved by her brothers who come and kill Bluebeard. In Carter's version, however, we see the husband having a much stronger and eerier hold over his young wife, both sexually and psychologically. Thus when she defies his orders and seeks to explore the forbidden chamber, she is defying patriarchal order of females which dictates their servitude within marriage. But "despite an apparent susceptibility to change,.... Politically and existentially, women still constitute, to adopt Simone de Beauvoir's classic terms, the Other for the male Subject" (Rowe 223). Thus when the husband finds out and threatens her with the same fate, she makes no attempt to fight back or even flee. Instead, she

initially pleads with him to spare her life and eventually prepares for her own death, reestablishing herself to the passive damsel in distress status which she had earlier subverted by disobeying her rather intimidating husband. Thankfully, though she is saved at the last moment from the clutches of her murderous spouse, it is not by her brothers, but by her mother, who puts a bullet right into his head to save her daughter.

Thus, the woman figure, despite these retellings, does not completely move from being the Object to being the Subject, but rather gets stuck in a limbo, where she is both: she is abject. Yet, these retellings have had significant impact on the readers and the audience. While some of the gender norms have been maintained and certain binaries reestablished after facing an attempt at subversion, certain very significant changes have also been made. These changes have redefined the way feminist space of transformation is viewed and female political, juridical and sexual agency is implemented.

### Chapter 3

#### Daddy's Little Princess: Challenging the 'Daddy', the 'Little' and the 'Princess'

Every girl is daddy's little princess. Or so I grew up hearing from all the media products available to me. This idea was used over and over again in TV shows, movies, advertisements, and particularly, fairy tales. My peers too subscribed (and continue to subscribe still) to this role of being their daddy's princesses. If we look into the lives of our fairy tale princesses, we see their close association with their fathers. For convenience, let us look at Disney. Cinderella had a loving father and a mother who was dead even before the story began. Mulan went to war to save her father. Belle gave herself up as a prisoner to a vicious beast for the sake of filial love. In "The Sleeping Beauty", it is Aurora's father who grows paranoid for her daughter's safety and orders all spinning wheels to be burned. Fathers (or as we will discover upon closer inspection, male figures of authority in general) reign supreme in the lives and hearts of their princess daughters. Indeed, when the myth or idea of a "daddy's little princess" is propagated, several agendas are moved into action. For one, we must focus on the word "daddy's". The apostrophe clearly signifies ownership. The father, in this scenario, owns his daughter. This is the first way in which the idea of being "daddy's little princess" takes away agency from the girl/princess. When she willingly gives up the ownership of her being to a male figure, she is reduced to possession, who barely has any say over her own body or psyche. Secondly, the word 'little' goes on to infantilize the girl in question. Since she is little, daddy definitely knows better. It also goes on to establish an unshakable morally upright character for the father figure. Cinderella's father was loving and caring. So was Belle's. So were Mulan's, and Tiana's and Aurora's. These fathers are never wily

men with reproachable vices. Rather, they are quite implicitly, epitomes of virtue, God-like figures. This gives them even further authority over their daughters, as then the fathers are the ones who serve as the lighthouses of morality for their daughters. Thirdly, we must focus on the word princess, and that is where things get interesting.

Throughout the centuries of fairy tale tradition, princesses have formed quite a niche. The princess archetype is recognized and adored by little girls all around the world. All princesses are beautiful on the inside and more importantly, the outside. They are kind and caring and they are epitomes of naivety. They are agreeable and compliant, never questioning the established male authority. They always get their happily ever after and most often, it involves being rescued by a man, a prince, preferably. This matters, because “millions of women...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). “Folklorists counter any casual dismissal of folktales as mere entertainment by arguing that they have always been one of culture’s primary mechanisms for inculcating roles and behaviors” (Rowe 200). When these tales are examined closely, it can be observed that these serve “as material which has undoubtedly played a major contribution in forming the sexual role concept of children, and in suggesting to them the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person’s chances of success in various endeavors” (187). Therefore it can be toxic and regressive to have little girls believe that they have to suffer in silence like Cinderella and Snow White, often for the sake of their fathers, and survive upon the hope that someday their princes will rescue them; all they have to do till then is be obedient daughters, full to the brim with ‘feminine’ virtues, and of course, guard their virginities. However, things have been changing for some time now. With fairy tales being rewritten in various forms, this stock

image of a fairy tale princess is being eroded away. The princess is being redrawn as someone who can decide for herself and take care of herself. This journey from being a possession, an object, to creating a space for herself where she could act as the subject, has been long and arduous and it continues still, as the definitions of subject and object, masculine and feminine and even male and female shift, mingle and blur into each other. As a result, our perceptions of what it means to be a princess, or a woman, is also changing.

When we hear the word princess, what are the things that we immediately associate with the word? I can think of a life of comfort, riches, grace and poise, but above all, tons of pampering. I have had the privilege (arguably) of knowing quite a few of these daddy's princesses in the time I have been alive and in my experience whenever a girl refers to herself as her father's princess, she is referring to the comforts and other forms of pampering her father bestows upon her. Being on the receiving end of these supposed privileges does not come without a price though. In return for the doting, the father expects complete and absolute obedience from his daughter, especially when it comes to her body and sexuality. Coincidentally, or perhaps consequentially, these girls are enraptured by fairy tales and happy endings and often live in very 'feminized spaces', like rooms with walls colored pink or any other color considered feminine, feminine decor, patterns and often lots of soft cuddly stuffed toys. "...Feminizing space seems to suggest... the production of a safe, familiar, clearly defined entity, which, because it is female, should be appropriately docile or able to be dominated" (Best 181). However, this rigid marking of the feminine or feminized space extends beyond the realms of geography and seeps into the realm of the psychosocial. The body of the princess, or of a person referred to as one, is constructed as to fit a certain narrative. Her "... 'sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly

regulated practices” (*Bodies That Matter* 1), which in this case is labeling her a princess and designing her geographical and psychological spaces to fit accepted molds of femininity. The ownership of the girl’s body and her psyche is placed into the hands of the father, and later the husband or other male authority figure, instead of herself. With repeated retellings of these tales, these molds are twisted and bent and reshaped, often, especially in these postmodern times, intentionally, with the aim to subvert the established norms of femininity. The existing idea of a “princess” is broken down or rather, expanded and made more inclusive, in order to make space for a diversified definition and manifestation of female existence. The absolute authority of the male figures is challenged through a scrutinizing look at their characters and morality and the idea of girls being “little” is challenged by upholding the magnitude of their actions, rather than their physical bodies. We are yet to have a plus sized human princess though.

In this chapter we will be looking at the tales of the characters popularly known as Bluebeard’s wife, Snow White and Belle, and trace the subversions of patriarchal ideals to negotiate a changed and enhanced space for the female body and psyche to exist. The Disney movie “Mulan” will also be looked at, in terms of a woman invading a space that is traditionally reserved for masculinity, and performing the role of a man and thriving at it. Patriarchal ideals of what a woman, or a princess should be like, is subverted in these tales in various ways. Some versions of the tale opt to reserve traditional feminine traits in the woman but have her assert her agency within the framework of patriarchy, while some opt to create a fictitious space for the woman to function outside the framework of patriarchy as we know it, and yet some others question the very notions of womanhood and femininity by having a female body perform feats reserved for male ones.



One of the first steps taken toward freeing the female existence is detaching it from its most immediate and active form of male ownership- the father. To begin with, let's take a look at *Mulan*. *Mulan* is a perfect example of asserting female agency within a patriarchal framework. In this 1998 Disney classic, we see Mulan being prepared to meet a matchmaker, but she is too clumsy, and somewhat unladylike to attract a good suitor. The matchmaker is an imposing and intimidating woman and is quick to judge Mulan as an unsuitable bride. This goes on to show the crucial role marriage would play in the girl's life and that she had little value without it. But shattering the gendered expectations imposed on her, she goes to war and saves her country from the Huns, thereby infiltrating a space that is traditionally masculine and accomplishing achievements that are reserved solely for men. The catch, however, is that Mulan does not go to war with the intention of breaking free of patriarchal shackles, or out of fierce protective instinct toward her country, but rather to save her father's life, who was old and frail and would have surely been killed at war. Mulan too is bound to the rule of her father and her going to war only intended to maintain and prolong it. Yet, Mulan is undeniably the first unquestionably feminist Disney princess, who is not a princess by virtue of her birth or her regal passivity, but her agency and accomplishment, as is clear in the scene toward the ending of the film where the Emperor himself bows his head to Mulan and when Mulan father, Fa Zhou, embraces her and says, "the greatest gift and honor, is having you for a daughter" (*Mulan* 1998). By going to war, even though it was to protect the existing structure of her family, Mulan creates a space for herself that marriage and silent obedience to her father would never have offered. She creates her space through defiance and ferocity, and at the same time she maintains traditionally feminine traits such as kindness and warmth. It is worth noting that the morally upright image of the father is

intact here, as with most Disney fairy tales, and it is only questioned much later in more subversive works of literature.

Angela Carter's take on Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's story "La Belle et La Bête", which when translated to English is "The Beauty and the Beast", is one where she tears down the infallible father archetype and gives us a character that is flawed, as actual human fathers are, and one that does not necessarily deserve blind devotion or obedience. Villeneuve's version, which was penned back in 1740, was a more than three hundred pages long and was abridged and republished by Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont, and that version became the framework for later adaptations and retellings of the much beloved "Beauty and the Beast". In Beaumont's version, the youngest daughter of the rich merchant who lost his fortune, adoringly called Beauty, is so attached to her father that she "very civilly thanked them that courted her, and told them she was too young yet to marry, but chose to stay with her father a few years longer". The story "focuses on the intimate bonds between father and daughter that impede the heroine's rite of passage" (Rowe 215) into becoming an adult woman, and limits her to the role of a dutiful child/ daughter. "For a heroine Beauty acts with unusual decisiveness in consigning herself to a passive waiting and in prolonging her allegiance to the father" (Rowe 215). She does it once, in turning away her suitors and once again, the second time in deciding to stay and suffer with her penniless father instead of marry a highborn man who "would have married her, tho' they knew she had not a penny" (Beaumont), and a third time when she determinedly offers to take her father's place as the Beast's captive. She cites this final action as "proof of (her) tender love for him" (Beaumont). These decisions on part of Beauty "establish her willing subservience to paternal needs" (Rowe 215) and her "apprenticeship in her father's house reveals an early

conformity to domestic roles” (Rowe 215), one that she does not quite get out of when she is trapped in the palace with the Beast.

Carter’s rendition of the well-loved tale though, gives us a much different insight into the father daughter dynamic. In her story titled “The Tiger’s Bride”, the character of Beauty, who remains unnamed here as we hear the story from her perspective, is not as reverential of her father as Beaumont’s Beauty or Disney’s Belle. In fact, she wastes no time in letting her audience know of her father’s flaws. In her opening statement she says “My father lost me to The Beast at Cards” (Carter), telling us that her father, being a gambler and inconsiderate of her daughter’s life and status as a human being, is nowhere near a morally upright figure of paternal authority worthy of obedience. And although she is powerless against her father’s loss and the Beast’s claim over her, she does not give herself away willingly or meekly. She protests and complains, even if it is only to the readers, about her situation. She says,

“I watched with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly, while my father, fired in his desperation by more and yet more draughts of the firewater they call 'grappa', rids himself of the last scraps of my inheritance.” (Carter)

This is even before her father lost his daughter. As a side note, this is perhaps the first female fairy tale protagonist who seems to be concerned with worldly things like inheritance and property. So not only does she object to being treated as property and being changed hands like one, she is seething and retaliates in every way she deems possible. Moreover, she shows or feels no inclination in prolonging her stay with a father who did not “value (her) at less than a king's ransom; but, at no more than a king's ransom” (Beaumont). Unlike Belle, she does not wish to

see the condition her father is in during her palatial prison sentence, and with her decisive and resentful attitude, she breaks free of the bonds of filial shackles.

Neil Gaiman, on the other hand, does not even bother with father figures in his book *The Sleeper and the Spindle*. The story begins with a queen, not too excitedly counting the days to her wedding, and four dwarves crossing perilous mountains to get the finest silks of Dorimar to give her as a wedding present. The queen had long black hair and pale skin. She also “had a name, but nowadays people only ever called her Your Majesty. Names are in short supply this telling” (Gaiman 23). On their journey the dwarves hear of “a sleeping woman in a castle, and perhaps a witch or a fairy there with her” (Gaiman 18), and they tell the queen of the sleeping woman, and the plague afflicting that kingdom, which made everyone fall asleep. She canceled her wedding and rode toward the plague with the dwarves. Upon reaching the castle, “she lowered her face to the sleeping woman’s. She touched the pink lips to her own carmine lips and she kissed the sleeping girl long and hard” (Gaiman 49) until she woke up.

Not only does Gaiman’s telling eliminate the father figures, it does away with human masculinity altogether. The Queen, who is clearly a reincarnation of Snow White, with her “blackest hair... ever seen” (Gaiman 47) and her pale white skin, does not have a father who passed away. She did not await a prince to save her from the glass coffin her stepmother her in. In fact, we are never told how she woke from her sleep in the glass coffin, and all we know is that she slept for a year. In Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, we are directly confronted with the Evil Queen’s attempts to kill Snow White, and thus Snow White’s father, even though physically absent from the narrative, very much exists through the figure of the stepmother.

“For the aging stepmother, the young girl’s maturation signals her own waning sexual attractiveness and control. In retaliation they jealously torment the more beautiful virginal adolescent who captures the father’s affections and threatens the declining queens” (Rowe 212)

In the end, for these masculine narratives of the tales, it all comes down to vying for the attention of a male figure of significance and authority. However, in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, the stepmother figure herself is absent and this absence terminates the power struggle between two women the aim of which is to win the affections of a man. The oedipal aspect of feminine sexuality is also done away with, and hence the Queen finds herself apathetic, or even reluctant, to be married. Thus, when she hears of the sleeping woman in the castle, she does not hesitate to call for her fiancé and postpone the wedding. She is aware that she does not need a man and she is also aware of her already superior status in comparison to her husband to be. Before leaving on her quest she calls for him and says “they would still be married, even if he was but a prince and she a queen” (Gaiman 21).

Not only does Gaiman’s version of the tale do away with the father, it also as a result does away with anything stopping the girl from becoming a woman. In no part of the narrative is the girl “little”. In male narratives like those of Basile, Perrault, the Grimm Brothers and Disney, even when the girl undergoes her sexual awakening and goes from being her father’s child to being a woman, she remains powerless and retains absolutely no control over her situation. “‘Romance’ glosses over the heroine’s impotence: she is unable to work independently or self assertively; she relies on external agents for rescue; she binds herself first to the father and then the prince; she restricts her ambitions to the hearth and nursery” (Rowe 211). She continues to

play a passive role, much like infants, where everything is done to her, rather than taking control of her situation. However, in this telling, the woman is not a woman in the sense that she comes to terms with male sexuality, but that she crafts her own sexual identity and fluidity, and takes control of other things that are generally left to the control of men; a kingdom for instance.

The Queen in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* challenges not only the idea of being a princess, but also that of being a woman. Her version of womanhood is not tied to any man, and neither is her sexuality. We see the fluidity of her sexuality in that she was about to marry a man, but does not hesitate to lean down and kiss the sleeping woman in the castle. In her book *The Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray talks about how discourse shapes power relations, and how female subjugation is normalized through anatomical discourse. She writes that from the point of view of Sigmund Freud, “in the name of anatomical destiny, women are seen as less favored by nature from the point of view of libido” (71). Hence, the effect it has on women’s lives is that women are “deprived of the worth of their sex” (Irigaray 71) and the “important thing, of course, is that no one should know who has deprived them, or why, and that “nature” be held accountable” (Irigaray 71). However, nature in no way stops the Queen from taking control of her fate and being “nonaggressive, nonsadistic, nonpossessive”(71) instead, and nor does nature innately determine the social, political or sexual space of a woman.

A good example of that, as mentioned earlier, is Disney’s *Mulan*. *Mulan* is of course, traditionally speaking, anatomically a woman. Yet when she dresses up as a man and goes to war, she is breaking free of the home and hearth boundaries that are assigned to her because of her anatomy. She invades a space that is predominantly masculine, one where a woman is allowed absolutely no space, and she thrives in it, not because she is a man, but because she is

performing as one. The movie features a couple of rather telling scenes, where we see the futility of binding people to gender norms. In the song where Li Shang is training the Chinese army to fight against the Huns, a line in the lyrics goes, “Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?” This line is at the same time funny and a critique of gender norms, because China did send its daughter. He goes on to sing, “Mister I’ll make a man out of you”. This again reveals that gender needs to be performed, because anatomically Mulan would never be a man, and yet she outperforms the rest of the Chinese army, consisting entirely of men, and thus becomes ‘manlier’ than the men themselves.

While traditional fairy tale narratives like those by Grimm, Perrault and Disney formulate a kind of discourse that binds women to the home and the hearth, and ties their role to their anatomy, that is, attributes attitudes like helplessness, passivity, childishness and sexual virtue to the idea of being a woman, feminist retellings of fairy tales attempt to exactly otherwise. Just as discourse is used to propagate the idea of girls and women being their daddy’s little princesses, discourse can also be used to negotiate a way out of it. The newer and consciously subversive versions of the tales show the characters and the readers that there is a lot more to being a woman than being obedient to the father and the husband, being infantile and being delicate and helpless.

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## Chapter 4

### “I Put a Spell on You”: Witchcraft as Agency and Witches as Humans

The word ‘witch’ is heavily loaded with centuries of exploitation and interpretation, and the witch hunts can be “read as an obviously gendered phenomenon” (Hester 3). “Witches are replicated in our minds through all modes of communication, and we employ the concept of witch in various ways, often changing the witch’s meaning, in information or stories, especially fairy tales” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 57). The image and status of the witch in literature, folklore and fairy tales, as well as in real life, have changed drastically from the time of the witch hunts to the present day. As we see in the earliest recorded fairy tales, now available in the English language, witches are sinister agents of evil, without a shred of conscience or remorse for their actions: villains through and through. “Witch is a word/concept/image that has undergone a process of ‘demonization’ that is still potent today” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 57) and writers and storytellers are constantly at work to shatter that status quo. It is worth noticing that the portrayal of witches in fairy tales and folklore went hand in hand with the way they were perceived in the zeitgeist of the era or the century. As the nature of portrayal of witches shifted from pure evil devoid of compassion, so did the way witches, or women who were perceived as such, were treated in the society at large. Or perhaps, it is the other way round. Regardless of which influenced which, it is undeniable that a correlation between the two exists. More light will be shed on it as the chapter progresses. While in case of the initial correlation it may be uncertain whether the correlation automatically implies causation, in these postmodern times, especially now in the twenty-first century, the image of the witch has been very deliberately



crafted to not fit entirely into any preexisting mold. This chapter looks into how women who had the power to threaten patriarchy were demonized as witches, and as we deconstruct the heavily layered idea of the witch through her portrayal in books, TV and films, we discover that the witch is as much human as the princess, if not more, and witchcraft is but a symbol of her agency. It can be argued that rewriting the witch as a well-rounded three dimensional character and casting her as the protagonist in literature and popular media is a conscious feminist endeavor that reclaims the witch and her craft as something to be accepted and celebrated instead of feared and shunned.

The vilification of the witch was not a randomly occurring phenomenon. The image of the witch has always served a purpose. In the past, circa the fifteenth to seventeenth century, it has very blatantly and unabashedly served the purpose of bolstering the already rock solid status of patriarchy, or the agents thereof. However, with time and shifts in the political realities of the world we live in, that has changed. When the role and character of the witch is consciously rewritten into a character that is relatable at the very least and likeable at most, this new witch forges acceptance in the minds of the audience. Nevertheless, as can be expected, this change did not happen overnight. It took centuries to forge the space for this transformation.

Some of the oldest known and written down fairy tales, like the ones by Giambattista Basile and Charles Perrault, have featured witches who more or less followed the same stereotypical motifs. They were evil and often ugly women, whose defeat or demise was necessary for restoration of peace and good. As mentioned earlier, fact and fiction went hand in hand. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and possibly much later after that, witches constituted a significant role in the lives and psyche of the European people. Although men were accused of witchcraft, “what is of utmost interest to this study, taking precedence over religious

and political issues arising from the phenomenon of the hunts, is the feminization of the witch figure, and how it has remained predominantly female throughout history; even in modern times witches are largely classified as feminine” (LaBeouf 2). Volumes were written and preached about them by the scholars and intellectuals of the time. “The witch is clearly an emotional and practical necessity for the villager, but she is also an intellectual necessity for the demonologist” (Vogele 49). It was not all that surprising, given that “the world to the scholars and intellectuals at the time... was seen as a place where two hierarchical, opposing energies are at work” (Vogele 49). The philosophical narrative of the time was based on the binary aspect of things, like God and the devil, light and dark, good and evil, right and wrong, man and woman. “The linguistically constructed world saw hierarchical opposites at every turn” (Vogele 50). Since woman was considered the binary opposite of man, and since man was created in the image of God itself, it was only consequential that women came to be accused of witchcraft a lot more often than men did. Hence, a certain type of woman was also more likely to be accused than others. Namely, women who did not fit the image of Mary or Madonna, were in big danger of being put on trial. Mostly these ‘anomalous’ women were considered to be the ones who:

Aimed to overthrow the natural order of things and end up on top. Women who challenged patriarchal rule or were willful and domineering (‘shrews’, ‘amazons’); women who usurped male control of language (‘scolds’, ‘gossips’, ‘women preachers’); women who sought sexual superiority or behaved like men (‘whores’, seductresses, viragos) – these were the stereotypes of disorderly and criminal females made possible by the prevailing classification of gender (Clark 131).

In a world of male virtue, viewed through a masculine lens, female virtue had no room. “The woman with the argumentative personality is the woman most likely to be accused of the

crime of witchcraft, and the term ‘intellectual’ all too often translated into death sentences” (Vogele 51).

In fairy tales as well, the ‘anomaly’ of the witch figures are reflected. A meek powerless woman who does not necessarily exert her own agency is no threat to the patriarchy, or the Church and State which were rooted in patriarchal values. The women who do make themselves heard are of course, a completely different story, and that is where terming them as witches came in handy. In fairy tales too, the witch was no meek powerless woman, subject to the mercy and whim of her fate and the men around her. Quite often, they did not even have a man in her life. These women were willful and domineering, and thus, they challenged the authority of the man. Hence these women needed to be controlled. One of the way in which fairy tales did it was by pitting the females against each other, by dividing them into the ‘good woman’ and ‘bad woman’ binaries. This way, control was not only exerted over the rebellious women, but also over the ones who were meek and passive and needed to be kept that way. For example,

“‘Little Snow White’... should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale – indeed its only action – arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active: the one sort of an angel, the other an undeniable witch.” (Gilbert and Gubar 201)

The father, whose attention, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the Queen and Snow White were battling for was not even physically present in the narrative of the Grimm Brothers’ version of the tale. However, his presence is conveyed through the male voice that dominated the mind

of the Queen, and due to her actions, that of Snow White. That voice was the one emanating from the Queen's mirror. While currently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dividing women against each other is still one of the most effective tools of maintaining female powerlessness, back when the Grimm Brothers were writing, more drastic measures could be taken against a woman who did not conform, or simply, was not everyone's favorite.

The church had the liberty and the luxury of accusing any woman of being a witch, and witch hunt frenzy took over Europe. The social and political unrest of the time, like the plague, the Reformation threatened the previously unshakeable status of Christianity, and in retaliation to anyone or anything that potentially proved powerful against the Church, the Church expanded its definition of heresy. Witches, who were previously pagan symbols, suddenly became anti-Christian entities: evil, diabolical and satanic. They were the worshippers and mistresses of Satan, who would eventually bear his brood. "Now, the Church could charge those accused of witchcraft for heresy, and through this act Christianity regained some sense of control over the heathen masses" (LaBeouf 1). Also, conveniently, not believing in witchcraft was also an act of heresy. "With the threat of witchcraft everywhere and threatening the security of Christians" (Labeouf 2), it is easy to see how the Church would have exploited it to regain and maintain their political and sociocultural control. If we look at medieval literature and the depiction of witches in the folklore and fairy tales of the time, we see that the witch figure is invariably one exuding pure evil and one that is a threat to peace and balance of the society, one that must be vanquished. This is not surprising, given that "witches represented a political, religious and sexual threat to the Protestant and Catholic churches alike, as well as to the State" (Ehrenreich and English 33).

However, demonization of women as witches served purposes beyond that of the church's political agenda. It came to shape the way women in general came to be irrationally feared, marginalized and punished, mostly just for being women. It served to propagate the good woman- bad woman dynamic. It also came to control female sexuality and fertility, and took away their right to knowledge of and control over their own bodies. "Recent research suggests that until up to 1450, 1500, or 1550, with the help of knowledgeable midwives, women in much of Europe were able to control their own fertility to a very large extent" (Bottigheimer 40). In the same century, however, the infamous book *Malleus Malificarum*, the witch hunters' guidebook of the time, was making way into the hands and heads of people, and as a result witch hunts came into prominence. Not coincidentally, many of the "witches" being hunted were women who delved into medicine and healing. Although the records are not conclusive, since the convicted people's professions were rarely recorded, except for spinners (read: spinsters), *Malleus Malificarum* mentions that "no one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives" (Ehrenreich and English 45). The Medieval crusade against witches and their 'craft' can be interpreted very much as a war against women's health and their control over and understanding of their own bodies. As the church continued to diabolize midwives, "Western European women gradually lost control over their own fertility between 1450 and 1700" (Bottigheimer 40). As a result, women who could and did previously control any possible consequences of sex outside the bounds of marriage, could no longer do so. It also served to take the authority over the field and study of medicine away from women. The midwives' knowledge of contraceptive methods threatened to take power away from the church, because according to Church's ideals, only God had the power to bestow or withhold the conception and birth of a child, and anything that attempted otherwise, had to be a source of evil, an act of Satan. This stripping of power from the

midwives happened at about the same time men began to study medicine as a scientific field. Even today, midwives are mostly women and their status in the contemporary world of modern medicine is a lot beneath that of a doctor who specializes in gynecology and women are still denied their right to motherhood as a choice. Abortion is still illegal in lots of places.

This condemnation of the women of knowledge, who are in fact in control of their sexuality and reproductive abilities, is readily visible in the classical European fairy tales. For the most part, we do not see the witch figure in the fairy tales as being a biological mother, making it clear that she is either incapable of conceiving a child (which seems unlikely given her powerful magical prowess or medicinal knowledge) or she consciously made the decision to not bear a child in her womb. The witch in Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel" is a terrifying woman who is also a loner. She has no family or children. Not only does she not have children, she makes it a point to devour any that come her way. The other, perhaps more terrifying witch-like figure is the children's stepmother who convinces the father to "take the two children out into the thickest part of the woods, make a fire for them, and give each of them a little piece of bread, then leave them by themselves" (Grimm and Grimm) so that the children would be lost in the woods and the father and the stepmother would be by themselves. Maleficent in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* has no children either and the Queen in Grimm Brothers' "Little Snow White" is not shown to have any biological offspring. Fairy tales seem to have a love affair with casting subversive women who reside outside the traditionally expected family structure, as witches or witch-like figures. Unsurprisingly, these women are quite often stepmother figures- women who were not bound by maternal instinct and had come into the family having been previously married to someone else. In other words, they are sexually experienced women who do not set much store by the glorification of motherhood. However, as knowledgeable women began

to be accused of witchcraft and heresy, feminist scholars began to take interest in the symbol of the witch, and so did commercial media. As the witch hunts were no longer in existence in the twentieth century, people began to take a renewed interest in the witch. What if, all witches were not necessarily evil? What if some witches were benign? Women who just simply happened to have magical powers? Of course it would be threatening to the patriarchy to have a woman who could wield magical powers, and thus she needed to be rendered powerless in some way. This is the kind of scenario we encounter on the 1964 American sitcom *Bewitched*. Samantha was a typical American girl, who married the typical American boy Darrin. They “had a typical wedding, went on a typical honeymoon in a typical bridal suite. Except, it so happens that this girl, is witch!” (“I, Darrin, Take this Witch, Samantha”). All of a sudden, a witch was no longer a diabolical Satan worshipper, but a regular woman who happens to a little bit of advantage over others. To ensure that even that does not become a threat, her husband Darrin, upon finding out about her magical powers, forbids her to use them ever again. Samantha Stephens is powerful, in terms of her magic, but she is powerless against Darrin because her romantic inclination toward him effectively robbed her of her powers. She is one of the first incarnations where the princess and the witch of a fairy tale are the same person. She is powerful as the witch figure, and yet powerless like the typical passive princess, whose powerlessness is romanticized. In short, her magical powers bowed down before that of patriarchy. Yet, *Bewitched* was nothing if not subversive. While she does not argue with her husband or defy him directly, she does continue to use magic. *Bewitched* feels like a stepping stone where a woman was powerful and yet did not threaten to overturn the patriarchal hierarchy. Samantha uses magic, but only to bolster her marriage. She uses them to help her with chores, to strengthen her relationship with her husband and to help him out whenever he needed it, without ever really letting him realize his

powerlessness. Samantha does not ask for her space to practice magic. She simply goes ahead and practices it!

However, while *Bewitched* is a great portal that would serve to usher in the acceptance and celebration of witches over time, the medieval attitude toward them did leave its mark, as we will see in relatively newer pieces of work like Roald Dahl's children's novel *The Witches* and the 1993 Buena Vista film *Hocus Pocus*. Both of these works, both of them iconic enough to have stood the test of time, with the book becoming a children's classic and the film becoming a cult favorite, serve to condemn witches as agents of evil. The witches in both these pieces of work, work to decimate children. Although their motives are quite different, it is safe to say that being around the witches from either of the works would not be safe for children.

As time progressed, witches came to be sorted into two types: the old hag and the beautiful seductress. We see a little bit of both in the 1993 movie *Hocus Pocus*. We are confronted with three witches, Winifred, Sarah and Mary, the Sanderson sisters, who steal the life force of children to stay young. Winifred can easily be seen as the aging, hag-like witch, while Sarah is the seductress, but all three of these women are portrayed as quite literally, slaves to Satan. It is quite evident in the scene where the three sisters walk into the house of a man dressed as the devil and they refer to him as 'master', and Sarah goes up to him in a manner that is not difficult to read as coy and submissive, and asks if he would like to dance with her. The sisters are remnants of the Salem Witch Trials, who happened to be resurrected on a 20<sup>th</sup> century Halloween night. Though *Hocus Pocus* is clearly a comedy, meant for family viewing, it brings to the minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century viewers medieval ideas of witchcraft. In Roald Dahl's *The Witches*, the witches simply hate children for no good reason. They find the smell of children revolting, and hold yearly meetings to vanquish children all over the world. "A witch is



always a woman”, Roald Dahl tells us in his book, and all witches are evil entities that plot against innocent little children. Although he graces women with the consolation sentence of “Most women are lovely”, he does not shy away from making his readers look upon every woman with suspicion – “She might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment. Look carefully at that teacher. Perhaps she is smiling at the absurdity of such a suggestion. Don't let that put you off. It could be part of cleverness” (Dahl).

It is not until the birth of Hermione Granger and the 2014 reincarnation of the beloved Disney villain Maleficent with the movie *Maleficent*, that witches are seen as something more than simply stock characters. It may be argued that Sabrina the Teenage Witch also brought about acceptance and celebration of witches. However, Sabrina was not too different from Samantha Stephens, and neither of them displayed the same depth and complexity of character that Hermione and Maleficent did. Maleficent was a woman scorned and violated, and through her act of revenge she legitimizes female anger and retaliation. At the end of the movie *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Sirius Black says to Hermione, “You really are the brightest witch of your age”, and in that dialogue right there, the knowledge, intelligence and agency of a girl is acknowledged without any trace of spite or power struggle, and for once, being called a ‘witch’ was truly a compliment.

## Chapter 5

## Circumnavigating Fairyland in Ships of Their Own Making: Fairy Tales Around the World and Women as Their Mothers

In 2011, Catherynne M Valente's book *The Girl who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* was published. Fairyland needed the help of the twelve year old September and she complied by traveling there. What fascinated me the most about this book was the title itself. It sounds like the highlight of female agency and autonomy and the successful creation and occupation of female space. This thesis concentrated on how fairy tales acculturated women to patriarchal norms and how by discourse realities were shaped, and how the process can be reversed in the same exact way- by using discourse, and in this case, by retelling the fairy tales.

Firstly we looked at a history of the fairy tale as a genre and how women were portrayed in these tales. We looked at how fairy tales came about from traditional and regional folk tales, and how the collectors of these tales, while recording and compiling them, added elements that are Christian and patriarchal. "The Grimms – Jacob and Wilhelm – published their first take on the tales for which they would become known around the world in December 1812, a second volume following in 1815. They would go on to publish six more editions, polishing the stories, making them more child-friendly, adding in Christian references and removing mentions of fairies before releasing the seventh edition – the one best known today – in 1857." (Guardian).

We looked at how fairy tales told little girls what kind of woman to grow up into and what to think, what to do and what to desire.

Secondly, we looked into the idea of spaces. We looked at how fairy tales carve spaces for people in society by having them identify with specific characters. Space is a relatively new but crucial complement to agency. To implement agency, space is necessary, and to expand the narrow and marginalized spaces that have been offered to women, the very tales that confined them to these marginalized spaces are being retold. These retold fairy tales give us newer perspective on the female characters.

For one, fairy tales are retold to give us a new era of empowered princesses. Unlike the traditional fairy tale princesses that we meet in the tales of the Brothers Grimm, Giambattista Basile, Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Perrault, where the heroines are tiny, fair, sweet, helpless damsels in distress, these new fairy tales feature damsels who may or may not be in distress, but they are certainly not sitting around and doing nothing about it. In certain cases, like Angela Carter's version of Bluebeard, she does fall into her husband's trap and needs saving, but unlike the Perrault version where she silently awaits her fate and needs to be rescued by her brothers, here the woman is rescued by her mother., thereby expanding the feminine role from simply being the rescued damsel to being the rescuer.

After tracing the formation of the new princess who does not "bet on the prince", the paper goes on to talk about deconstruct the character of the witch – a character that fairy tales cannot seem to get enough of. It traces how historical contexts of witchcraft and their representation in fairy tales and popular media went hand in hand. Witches were women of knowledge – women who had knowledge about their own bodies and in that way reserved the

power to control it. Midwives and female apothecaries came to be accused to witchcraft and with witchcraft coming to being labelled as heresy instead of simply being the pagan element it used to be, witch hunting frenzy took over Europe and any power midwives wielded was taken away from them, along with the space for women to practice medicine. In addition to midwives, women whom lived lives slightly out of the ordinary and expected also came under suspicion of being witches. Women who lived alone, women who owned a cat, women who had a sharp tongue, were particularly under threat. Anything out of the ordinary could have them branded mistresses of Satan and heretics. This trend was also reflected in the fairy tale witches – they were women who for the most part enjoyed their solitude and non-domestic lives. They were not fond of children and for the most part, they were mature and sexually experienced.

What remained beyond the scope of this thesis, however, is the examination of women as the tellers of these tales. Most of the retold feminist fairy tales today are written by women. Hence, women are not negotiating their spaces in society only through the characters of the tales, but also as the authors and the readers. As a reader, I not only know that is okay to be a subversive character, but that it is also within my power to create a subversive character along with being one myself. Women seem to be taking back the power of storytelling from men who set up and ingrained the patriarchal discourse in fairy tales. They are circumnavigating fairyland in ships of their own making.

What also remained beyond the scope of this thesis, is geographical diversity. Circumnavigation would never be complete if the entire globe was not sailed over. For that, one needs to look at the folklore and fairy tales of every region and people in the world, not simply Western Europe and USA. As we speak of feminine spaces, it is also important to ensure that

these spaces do not become exclusive to whiteness and European-ness. Therefore, to truly negotiate spaces for women in their respective societies, we must first know and understand the existing space that they are in, in terms of their own context, and strive to take into account the situations specific to them. This would include keeping in mind their specific social, culture, racial and political histories. Only then can everyone assume the agency to negotiate their own spaces.

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