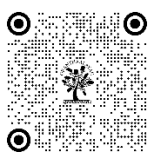


# THE ARCHETYPAL ROLES OF GENDER PORTRAYAL IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist literary criticism, cropping up in concurrence with socio-political feminism, critiques patriarchal language and literature by exposing how this replicates masculine ideology. It scrutinizes the functioning of gender politics and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their virtual standing, positioning, and marginalization within the written works. Feminist criticism relates itself with a trite illustration of genders. One will recurrently notice the term “patriarchy” used among feminist critics, referring to conventional male-dominated culture. “Marginalization” refers to being forced to the fringes of what is considered socially and politically mainstream; the female voice was habitually marginalized, or dismissed in total. Fairy tales are exceedingly indispensable components of literature and they should not be obliterated from children’s existence. Regarding the distinctive typecast present in fairy tales, it is a prevailing truth that inappropriate and one-sided portrayals impinge on females to a large extent. In fairy tales, we perceive that women are characteristically portrayed in an inferior or yet adverse way. They are pictured as feeble princesses and they by and large wait for a valiant and robust prince to salvage them. The archetypal representation of women and men in children’s literature causes the children to picture an illusory image of the disposition of females and males. It also intensifies the unfairness against both women and men. Concurrently, it aids in the configuration of children’s erroneous and prejudiced notions regarding the characteristic conduct patterns of females and males. In this paper, an attempt is made to embark on a critical overview of the Archetypal Roles of Gender Portrayal in Children’s Literature, tracing its history to get hold of a deeper insight into the gender characters.

**Keywords:** Archetypal Roles, Feminism, Gender, Fairy tales, Children’s literature, Marginalisation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Barry in his Beginning Theory has said that the current feminist literary criticism is nothing but the upshot of the ‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s. This progress was, in significant ways, literary from the launch, in the sense that, it realized the importance of the descriptions of women disseminated by literature, and saw it as essential to contest them and question their power and their consistency. In this way, the women’s movement has constantly been momentarily concerned with books and literature so feminist criticism should not be seen as a derivative or a by-product of feminism which is distant from the eventual aims of the movement but as one of its most realistic ways of persuading everyday demeanour and outlook.

The depiction of women in literature, then, was considered to be one of the most significant forms of ‘socialization’, since it supplied the role models which pointed to women, and men, what composed adequate versions of the ‘feminine’ and rightful feminine goals and ambitions. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century narratives very few women labour for a living unless they are driven to it by grim necessity. Instead, the centre of interest is on the

heroine's choice of conjugal partner, which will decide her final social ranking and determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these. Within feminism there is a strong prominence on the 'contractedness' of femininity, that is, on such matters as conditioning and socialization, and the sway of images and representations of femininity in literature and culture. All these formulations are ways of shunning 'essentialism', which is the opposing view that there is some natural, given quintessence of the feminine, that is collective and unalterable.

M.H. Abram's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* identifies feminist criticism as "a distinctive and concerted approach to literature" (88). An abundance of feminist literary criticism persists in our era to be interrelated with the movement by political feminists for social, legal, and cultural sovereignty and egalitarianism.

Gender roles are intimately allied with feminism. As we grow, we learn how to conduct ourselves from those around us. In this socialization process, children are by and large initiated to certain roles that are characteristically linked to their organic sex. The term gender roles refers to society's notion of how men and women are expected to operate and behave. Gender roles are cultural and individual. They decide how males and females should reflect, converse, dress, and interrelate within the framework of society. Masculine role is generally connected with strength, aggression, and supremacy whereas feminine roles are linked with submissiveness, nurturing and passivity. These gender schemas are profoundly ingrained cognitive frameworks concerning what defines masculine and feminine. While various socializing agents - parents, teachers, peers, movies, television, music, books, and religion - teach and strengthen gender roles throughout the lifespan, parents possibly put forth the maximum influence, particularly on their very young progeny.

The term 'gender' has evolved as one of the most intangible ideas in the present. It means a category of syntax where nouns are categorized as masculine, feminine and neuter; a 'sex' which is an anatomical distinction, and of late a 'cultural' artefact which indicates the urge, flavour, aptitudes, satisfactions and psychic traits generally associated with the nurturing of the biological male and female.

One of the easy starting points in the discussion of gender is the axiomatic assertion by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman" (90). It implies that distinctions are traditionally drawn between gender and sex, the latter being understood as the sum of the physical characteristics that make us biologically 'women' and 'men'. Beauvoir argued that men tyrannize women by characterizing them, on every level as the other, defined utterly in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. In essence, it was a theory of the social construction of gender where she was urging a modification of the basis of stereotypes. She insists women take up accountability and question her permanent framing as an object because she resolutely considers that the irreversible biology cannot be a reason for further refutation of justice. By attacking the basics of genetic determinism and essentialism, de Beauvoir was suggesting that gender was the ascription, if not insertion, of meaning to some biological traits and functions like reproduction and childbirth (91-92).

The term 'Fairy tale' is derived from the French word *contes des fees*. The derivation of the term 'fairy tales' and its foundation can be traced three centuries earlier. Chris Baldick in his book *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* elucidates the term 'fairy tale' as "a traditional folk tale adapted and written down for the entertainment of children, usually featuring marvellous events and characters, although fairies as such are less often found in them than princesses, talking animals, ogres, and witches" (361). Emer gives another definition for the term 'fairy tale' in his work *Historical Dictionary of Children's Literature* as "fairy tales, fairy stories, or wonder tales, a subdivision of folktales that usually involve magic, tell of transformations and wondrous changes in fortune of a disadvantaged protagonist, usually culminating in a happy end" (94).

Children's stories presuppose a considerable component in the life of children as they are the foremost sort of writing the youthful perusers are familiar with. As Zipes discusses in his work, "We all pass through fairy tales, which inscribe indelible marks on our imagination and affect our behaviour and role-playing" (*The Trials and Tribulations* xi). This bothers not only our ethical values but also the way we see the world around us. Zipes again in his work (*Don't Bet on the Prince* xii) has said that fairy tales have made a huge impact on the little one's psyche and also in their perception of reality, and it has been proved by "psychologists and educators time and again that stories and fairy tales do influence how children conceive the world and their places in it even before they begin to read" (Carpenter and Prichard 179). Even the American psychologist Bruno Bettelheim was conscious of the significance of fairy sagas and held the view that fairy tales contribute to the emotional well-being of the child and he also helped fairy tales to develop in society using his discourse called *The Uses of Enchantment* and its claims about the psychologically beneficial aspects of fairy stories in general (1976).

Terri Windling in her article "Les Contes de Fées" points out that it is indispensable to bestow our attention on the disparity between "the oral folk tales and the literary fairy tales of Europe" (3). Without a doubt, oral folktales and in addition, children's stories have a remarkably affluent and extensive history which has existed in society for a long time. As individuals were first ready to talk than compose, at the very beginning, tell tales were passed on orally and the subjects they worried about were tightly allied with the life of the common people within the group. Windling, in addition, elucidates how the oral folktales and tell tales are distinct from the literary ones. It is clear that the stories that are passed on through generations are humbler stories than the grand cosmological myth cycles or long daring romances and these kinds of stories have been passed on through the generations mainly by the marginalized portions of the society such as women, peasants, slaves and outcast groups such as the gypsies, which can be supplemented by Zipes' description of very early fairy stories:

Fairy tales were first told by gifted tellers and were based on rituals, intended to endow meaning to the daily lives of members of a tribe. As oral folk tales, they were intended to explain natural occurrences such as the change of the seasons and the shifts in the weather or to celebrate the rites of harvesting, hunting, marriage and conquest. The emphasis in most folk tales was on communal harmony. A narrator told tales to bring members of a group or tribe closer together and to provide them with a sense of mission, a telos (Fairy Tale as Myth 10).

Concerning the very first written records of fairy stories, it had been believed that the history of these tales is rather young. Nevertheless, it is apparent that fairy tales are much older than had been believed. The historical milieu of the European consciousness of the composed stories is steadily linked with the invention of printing in the fifteenth century.

Regarding the audience, just high society of individuals was able to read and, in this manner, appreciate the abstract fairytales and stories that were extremely and most loved in the seventeenth century not just in France. As Zipes explains, fairy-tale books were "written in a standard "high" language that the folk could not read, and it was written as a form of entertainment and education for members of the ruling classes. Indeed, only the well-to-do could purchase the books and read them" (Fairy Tale as Myth 13).

What can be exciting is the fact that chiefly ladies were the originators and tellers of the fairy tales. As Windling notes, "Even very famous male writers such as Straparola, Basile, Perrault, and even the Brothers Grimm made no secret of the fact that their source material came largely or entirely from women storytellers" (Les Contes de Fées 7). On the other hand it's not astounding as it is usually realized that ladies remained at home with the kids and consequently they had time to narrate stories other than commitments about keeping the family, though men needed to work outside to have the capacity to support whatever is left of the family.

As it was already mentioned, the primary telltales were expected basically to entertain grown-ups. In any case, the kids' crowd was not disregarded at all as there were purported chapbooks that were tremendously loved sort of writing particularly among English youthful readers and these "did include such tales as Tom Thumb (first printed in 1621) and The Seven Champions of Christendom (1596-7), as well as versions of many medieval romances which contained marvels and exquisite happenings, such as Guy of Warwick and Fortunatus" (Carpenter and Prichard, 177). As Zipes further presents, the first "chapbooks . . . also contained numerous abbreviated and truncated versions of the literary tales" (Fairy Tale as Myth, 12).

Nonetheless, fairy tales did not always assert only their approval since especially educators in the Puritan practice discarded fairy tales for their want of moral instruction and the presence of ignorant false notions. Therefore, as the authors (Carpenter and Prichard) further explicate, there was "the growing popularity of moral tales by such writers as Mrs Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth . . . which led to the belief that fairy stories could be entirely dispensed with as nursery reading" (Carpenter and Prichard, 179).

Fortunately, a few distributors did not pull back from issuing children's stories and they continued distributing "collections of them with such regularity that it is evident there was still an audience for them" (179). Moreover, "in 1823, the number and diversity of fairy tales available to English children was significantly increased by the emergence of the first translation of the work of the Brothers Grimm" (179). The English translation of these tales by Edgar Taylor, *German Popular Stories* (1823), brought about a change in outlook toward this genre for children in the English-speaking

world, leading to the recognition that imaginative literature was a significant ingredient for children's leisure (O'Sullivan, 95) and fairy stories became popular anew. There were additionally diverse other English interpretations of foreign pixie stories, for instance, those by Hans Christian Andersen or deciphered adaptations "of collection of Danish, Indian, and Russian tales . . . and this renaissance of the traditional fairy story was related to a new wave of imaginative writing in Britain and elsewhere" (Carpenter and Prichard, 179).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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