



Research Paper

## Childhood and Disability: Cultural Representation in Children's Literature and Folktales

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**Abstract:** Historically it is seen that characters with disabilities in folk and fairy tales have been the reason for gross misrepresentation. Since folk and fairy tales are the initial window for children to the outside world, a lot of negative beliefs and stereotypes are transmitted to fertile young minds. The portrayals are usually extreme in nature and devastating leading to the perpetuation of deeply problematic and negative ideas of deformity and the marginalised. Such negative portrayals lead to negative attitudes about people with disabilities unless contradicted in some way in the process of socialisation of children. However, reading stories which have disabled is equally vital in increasing knowledge or in expanding children's experience with people with disabilities as a process of sensitisation is achieved through maximum exposure. Disabled people in folk and fairy tales are referred to as hideous, laughable, evil and socially ostracised. Disability is also seen as a punishment, as a way of halting non-conformity to social hierarchical trends. Language plays a crucial role in perpetuating disability bias adding a complex dimension in the way which perceptions and appropriation occurs.

In my paper I primarily intend to look at some popular folk and fairy tales from Grimm's Hausmarchen and some Indian tales that endorse such a representation touching upon popular characters from the Marvel franchise. I shall also make an attempt to re-evaluate children's literature within these contexts.

**Keywords:** Folk and Fairy tales, archetypes/ stereotypes, disorder, good/evil, abandonment, sensitisation, childhood

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### I. Introduction

"I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent" (Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*).

This significant line from Beckett's one act play *Endgame*, speaks volumes about the inevitable nature of disability in a world of ever increasing technology and gradual dissociation. The word disability in children's literature variously includes deformity, disfigurement, disorder, disruption, impairment, monstrosity, mutilation, deformation, crippledness or physical disability, thereby, expanding our awareness of a social construct that works towards exclusion rather than inclusion. It has been satisfactorily observed that objects that do not fit into the normative within society is unceremoniously discarded even belittled and ridiculed. Therefore a discussion on the sensitive issue of disability evokes a willingness to engage though with unease, towards a grim reality of human history. One particular reason for such a long period of negligence is that disability and impairment can be traced to the fact that it is seen as something that will probably not touch our lives or that disability will never directly impact our day to day existence. There exists two distinct parts to the issue of disability which becomes even more clearly defined in children's literature, one being dealing with the social discomfort that skirts around disability and secondly, the sensitivity that necessitates the presentation of disability to the juvenile minds. Stories for children become an important and relevant medium to both address and create awareness towards the sensitive issue of disability. Children can and do learn through literature, yet it seems to me that many authors are highly ambivalent about how much they actually want youngsters to understand. This results in texts that are politically correct, but factually inaccurate, or that the engagement with "spare the child" concept occurs to such an extent that they are misleading (Kokkola 2003).

In 1977, The Council for Interracial Books for Children, USA published a landmark issue of their *Bulletin* on "Handicapism." In it Douglas Biklen and Robert Bogdan presented an analysis of children's literature as it relates to the people with disability. The stereotypes cited were:

1. Person with a disability portrayed as pitiable and pathetic.
2. Person with disability as an object of violence.
3. Person with disability as sinister and/or evil.
4. Person with disability used as a "background". Basically undeveloped as characters, persons with disabilities are often peripheral to the main action, as a blind musician etc.
5. Person with disability as an "overachiever."
6. Person with disability as laughable.
7. Person with disability as his/her own and only worst enemy. This is the popular portrayal of the self-pitying person with a disability that would succeed only if he or she shed the cloak of bitterness.
8. Person with disability as a burden.
9. Person with disability as asexual.
10. Person with disability as incapable of fully participating in everyday life.
11. Persons with a disability as being isolated from disabled and non-disabled peers. (Rubin and Watson 1987)

Children's books have been described as both a window and a mirror (Blaska, 2004). A book is a window when the child is able to experience something new (regardless of his or her own experience), and a mirror when the child can see himself or herself in a character who shares similar experiences and feelings (Blaska, 2004). Children's books can help to change attitudes and knowledge about disability (Dyches et al., 2006). They also play an important role in helping children to interpret and understand the world they are born into, and disabled children just like other children need to read about characters similar to themselves. The sole presence of a disabled person is, however, not enough, as poorly written stories or badly portrayed characters have limited potential to impact readers (Dyches et al., 2006). (Sigurjónsdóttir 2015). Children's literature have a kind of imaginative reality, and if a child has not known them in his earlier reading, he will be less ready to accept the conventions of fairy tales. Very early in life children have to come to terms with the ambiguity of real and created worlds. Children exist in their world of perceptions and feelings while at the same time they have to acknowledge the world which exists around them. Their own world consists of private space and time, the world of the imagination, where anything and everything is possible. But children must also learn to inhabit the outside world, which exists whether they are in it or not. However, listening to other people talking about these worlds is not enough, children need to participate and experience them at first hand, actively engaging with the language.

Fairy tales also have a kind of imaginative reality which a child has not known in his earlier reading and will be at a loss to accept conventions of the hero story. Contrary to accepted opinion of the childish and apparently juvenile nature of the tales, folktales are "also dark with graphic depictions of torture, cannibalism, incest, cruelty, seduction, abandonment, and vindictiveness" (Zascavage 2014). Significantly, Wilhelm Grimm commenting on the universal truth of the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* stated that:

The tales live on in such a way that no one thinks about whether they are good or bad, poetic or vulgar. We know them and we love them just because we happen to have heard them in a certain way, and we like them without reflecting why (Zascavage 2014).

Grimm's analyses is extremely significant, bringing out the essence of the prevailing engagement with folktales, but along with it is also the quotidian approach to fairy tales that we are accustomed to. Scholars of Grimm like Jack Zipes contend that the tales through depiction of families that face starvation, abandonment of children and its consequential exploitation may very well reflect a lived experience and social attitudes of family in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Stories like Cinderella, Rapunzel reinforce the images of vision impairment, blindness as a result of a deliberate exploitation of another through actions that are based on selfishness, deceit and immorality. These impairments would most certainly lead to poverty, disrespect and disenfranchisement.

### **Isolation/ Abandonment in Disability**

Physical and psychological disability proliferates throughout folktales and fairy tales creating a sense of discomfort in countering actual persons with such disabilities. However, if one is to delve deeper into the nuances of such tales the fissures of discriminatory narration become even more disturbing. In a story like Hansel and Gretel which is extremely popular and quite well favoured among the populace has its moments which though not discoursed upon carries within itself a passive narration of faulty relationships. The story as can be seen remains passive towards the cruel parents who unsympathetically abandon their children. The focus and the image that one carries till the end of the story is that of the witch's meaningless pursuit of entrapping the children in order to later make a meal out of Hansel. Historically witches have remained a figure of controversy

being the subject of public and social ostracization. Iona and Peter Opie in *The Classic Fairytale* mention this concern in a children's opera of the story of Hansel and Gretel first produced in Munich in 1893:

The opera in fact omits the most painful part of the traditional story, the parents deliberate abandonment of their children to the wild beasts of the forest... (Opie 1974)

The disability in the case of the witch is her body deformity and she is also half blind along with her cannibalistic tendency which makes her a social outcaste who according to the story has created a trap of a candy house to lure children. She certainly does not fit into society and has to undergo a prolonged wait for lost and abandoned children to lose their way in the forest and to fall prey to her hunger. The story naturally carries a deeper meaning about the possible dangers lurking within the folds of society that can cause harm to unsuspecting children. However, to add disability as a conjoint to this figure of malice, social outcaste and threat for children creates perceptions which undoubtedly colour and maim the mind of children. The idea of the deformed outcaste runs as a common parallel in fairy tales generating a sense of deep-rooted suspicion and equating physical deformity with mental depravity.

The telling of fairy tales to children, and the telling even of tales of horror, is possible, and mind-stretching, and even in a curious way reassuring, if the tales are told in the right circumstances, that is if the child and the adult are already united by a bond of confidence or affection, if the child sees the teller of tales as a co-adventurer with him in listening to the exploits, and if the child appreciates that the story is fantasy, or that the action is distant in time, or distant in place. It is sad to report, as Jella Lepman has done in *A Bridge of children's Books*, 1969, that when the great exhibition of children's books were staged in Munich immediately after the Hitlerian war, an exhibition that was intended to be, and was, an opening of doors to the new generation in Germany, it was found that the story of 'Hansel and Gretel' was not always regarded as preposterous, that the fantasy was too close to reality, that for some the witch's oven too much resembled the gas chamber at Auschwitz. (Opie 1974)

In a situation like this when impressions as such can be deeply engrained in the mind- a closeted sense of discomfort begins to develop in the juvenile minds.

### **Disability as a Punishment**

In a story like Cinderella, it is the stepsisters who are expressed as typically evil, hating and demeaning Cinderella at all possible occasions. They carry their meaningless hate tirade throughout the story and continues to stand in complete opposition to the young, beautiful and well-mannered Cinderella. This mistreatment of the female protagonist is duly punished with the stepsisters having their eyes plucked out by birds because of their wickedness and falsehood. This action brings us to a serious situation where being blind is perceived a punishment for previous misdeeds. Being blinded is considered to be a horrible fate for the stepsisters who will now be relegated to a life of poverty and destitution. Though within the context of the tale, the sisters perhaps deserved to be punished for their misdeeds and ill treatment however, there continues to be a close association between step mother/ sister hood with evil catering to a convenient social construct of the protagonist. Cinderella never makes any attempt to emerge out of her servile conditions and waits till the prince to see her as the maid that she is in the household. This further accentuates the atrocities of the stepsisters and the stepmothers to the outside world.

In another popular tale of Rapunzel, blindness appears as a punishment for the prince who loves the protagonist as he falls into the thorn bushes which the adopted mother of Rapunzel pushes him into. The prince and Rapunzel move through the wilderness separated from each other and his sight is restored only when the tears of Rapunzel fall upon his eyes. These are tears of happiness and remorse that rejuvenates the prince. Interesting to note that here too is the figure of the adopted mother who is not the biological mother of Rapunzel and therefore predictably becomes the cause of all suffering and pain that she inflicts upon her. The standardised version of the biological mother who can be the caregiver of the child certainly initiates and consolidates the incapacitated adopted mother. In both tales vision impairment or blindness is directly responsible due to the actions that are based on selfishness, deceit and immorality. This attitude goes a long way in confirming and conforming to many ways in which society functions as means of reprimanding wrong doers. Both tales speak of folk perceptions of the times which equated sinful action with visual impairment and a condition that led to poverty, disenfranchisement and disrespect and also a deserved action for their personal traits.

### **The Evil/Wicked Stepmother/sister**

Social structures of "wicked stepmothers" are reinforced in "Little Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel". Zipes in his translated edition of *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition* states the controversial figure of a "step" mother was an acceptable forum for evil. For instance, in the 1812/1815 edition of "Little Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel" the wicked stepmother is actually a biological mother, and these characters were changed to become stepmothers in 1819 clearly because the Grimms held motherhood sacred. (Zipes 2016) Evil stepmothers and sisters work like marvel for fairy tales,

being the point of concentration for all evil. Such images carry an extremely gendered perception. Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, Snow White all have the presence of father figures, yet they are quite non-obstructionist and continue to function as mute spectators in the narrative of the story. They are non-communicative, insipid, shadowy figures who mutely accept their more virulent counterparts. They are also oftentimes the biological fathers. Society revels in demonising women for all atrocities in familial constructs giving way to consolidate a monstrous figure of the woman. The demonised woman is oftentimes a witch or a step mother or step sister. Calumny becomes the easiest way to look at women as the source of all pain in the lives of the protagonists. Snow White a woman herself finds the greatest enemy in her stepmother, so does Hansel and Gretel and Cinderella. The fairy tale world is a world of fearful adventures and untold suffering and yet it is not Providence rather the closest to the hero/heroine who demands long and arduous trials for them. The figure of the witch attracts a lot of attraction from children, creating images of stereotypes of long noses and pointed hats with cannibalistic behaviour. The tales never give a substantial set of reasons for evil yet appropriates it within the fold of the tales with the hope for a naturalised perception of evil emerging from women figures. Disability as I see it is reinvented through multiple perceptions that have standardised themselves within a social that provides a deeply fractured representation of society. Easy to consume folk and fairy tales becomes initial tutors for children in constructing deep-rooted images within the infantile minds.

## **II. Conclusion**

The language of fairy and folktales rich with its cultural descriptions provide insight into the mindset of the times. Disability can be defined as an environmental, social or educational construct that prevents an individual from successfully meeting personal needs (Zascavage 2014). Existence of such bias in books cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Such representations affect the reader's self-image, the readers' philosophy of life, interpersonal sensitivity, and opinions towards minority groups and social problems. Insensitivity in one area percolates into our understanding of subsequent subjects. Therefore, it is essential that stereotypes be dismantled and that readers and writers both take an active role ensuring that stereotypes are not perpetuated. Yet representation of disability in children's literature frequently obscures these complexities in favour for the demands of the text, also in favour of the symbolic potential of the disabled figure, who often functions as a lightning rod for pity, fear, discomfort, guilt of the reader. By examining the "disabled figure" rather than discussing the "cripple" or the "grotesque" I have attempted to address the long existing bias and ignorance that exists in representation of disability in children's literature. By opening up a critical gap between disabled figures whose bodies carry social meaning and actual people in real-world situations, I would like to suggest that such representations only reinforces identities and often the fate "of real people with extraordinary bodies" (Thomson 1987).

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