

The Transmutation of “Cinderella” from the Feminism Perspective

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Abstract: The story of “Cinderella” in the “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” has been extensively popularized, featuring characters with a lasting and profound impact, while numerous live-action adaptations have emerged over recent years. In this paper, the feminism perspective of the “Cinderella” fairy tale and its film adaptation will be taken into account to explore the evolution of the prescribed female image conveyed by the ideology of patriarchal culture to the new female image of pursuing self-happiness after the awakening of the independent and equal self-consciousness of females, as well as the reflected cultural characteristics.

1. Introduction

Feminism originated in the American feminist movement in the nineteenth century, while feminism criticism refers to the outcome of the penetration of feminism into the field of culture and literature, which develops as a manner of commenting on literary works on the basis of feminism. Since the 1970s, there has been a rise in children’s literature criticism, resulting in a large volume of rereading and reinterpretation of children’s literature. In this context, feminism theory has taken a major role and is exerting an increasingly significant influence on British and American children’s literature criticism and writing, with three principal points: “the rereading of the text to identify new methods of interpretation and implications; the revision of traditional literary history to uncover the works of writers who have been buried and to rewrite the text of discrimination against females; the new orientations for children’s literature criticism and creation, which scrutinize cultural traditions and practices.” [1]The “Grimm’s Fairy Tales”, a masterpiece of world children’s literature, has been reread and reinterpreted at various levels over recent years, with feminism analyses asserting that Grimm’s fairy tales are permeated with the ideology of patriarchal culture, which portrays the female figure as it is defined by patriarchal culture.

2. Sense of Ownership: From Attachment to Male to Chasing Individual Ideals

Yang Wuneng concluded “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” by suggesting that the story frequently commences with a person being confronted with a puzzle, a dilemma, as well as a compelling and unquenchable desire. The characters in the story are broadly categorized into three types: the main character is mostly characterized as the good guy; the antagonist of the main character is always characterized as the great bad guy, such as the wicked stepmother, the witch, the evil dragon, the wolf and so forth; the assistant of the main character is either a jealous person or a failed competitor, such

characters serve as a foil for comparison. [2]It can be detected from the many stories of “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” that the main character is normally the object of jealousy or ostracism. With a goal in mind, he breaks through the difficulties with the assistance of the helpers and triumphs over the antagonists, with the bad guys being punished in the end, while the good guys receive a blissful ending with a satisfying canvas. The story of “Cinderella” also extends this law of creation. Cinderella lost her mother since childhood, who was born with benevolent nature, whereas being bullied by her stepmother and sister, doing menial work, being mistreated, resigning herself to adversity. The problem of getting rid of this subordinate life was Cinderella’s problem. Afterwards, she was assisted by a bird, dressed up in a beautiful manner at a ball held by the prince, and was admired by the prince, who eventually took her as his wife, while her two wicked sisters were blinded and received their due punishment. Thereafter, Cinderella spent her days in happiness. It is apparent that the female in this story pattern holds no value of her own existence, whose happiness lies in the hands of the male, while the only means by which they can achieve free and equal rights is to appeal to males through their beauty. The only struggle of Cinderella in the fairy tale lies in her request to go to the ball with her stepmother. Despite the fact that the text states that she is there to witness a one-of-a-kind and spectacular ball, the purpose of the prince’s ball is to select a bride, with all the girls to be married going to the ball for the sake of marrying the prince. As a result, it is readily obvious that the real intention of Cinderella is nonetheless to get rid of the status quo with the power of male authority. The ever-submissive Cinderella was admired by the prince, which implicitly indicates that her patient and submissive “good qualities” eventually yielded her a satisfying ending -- being chosen by a male with authority and wealth as his wife, and henceforth living a “happy” life. This symbolizes that the objective of their survival is to count on males, rather than to develop and elevate their own value. Apparently, such a story pattern is employed by a patriarchal society to subliminally indoctrinate females and reinforce the status of males.

“The female is Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, passively accepted and obeyed. The male who appears in the lyrics or stories frequently pursues the female against great odds, for which he subdues evil dragons and defeats giants, while she is imprisoned in castles, palaces, gardens, caves, or as a captive, tied to a rock, or drifting off to sleep, waiting patiently for ‘One day he will come, the one I love’, such popular lyrics are constantly appearing in her patient and promising dreams. In conventional children’s literature, the heroine is typically characterized as the ‘second sex’ who has lost her subjectivity. In the patriarchal system, the person is the male.” Rather than defining female on the basis of the female herself, the male interprets her as a person who cannot be autonomous relative to the male. She is subordinate, a secondary in opposition to the primary. He is the subject, the ultimate, whereas she is the other. Such a sense of “male’s rib” has been perfectly manifested in the fairy tale Cinderella. Cinderella does not resort to the available injustice, but rather relies on the male authority for her salvation, and her weakness, meekness and eternal loyalty are the products of the loss of the consciousness of the subject.

In the 2015 version of “Cinderella” film and fairy tale, the story pattern has not been drastically modified, in which case it can be recognized that the objective of Cinderella has shifted. The self-awareness of Cinderella has been strengthened, not simply pursuing the favor of the prince so as to be rescued. In contrast, the theme inclines to the initiative of Cinderella in pursuit of true love, in which Cinderella and the prince meet by chance in the forest. The prince deliberately concealed his identity, stating that he is an apprentice in the royal palace, which is equal to the identity of Cinderella. Since Cinderella is the maid of the family, which makes the false identity of the prince and fluttering manners struck the heart of Cinderella. In the fairy tale, the primary motivation for Cinderella to attend the palace ball is her adoration for the prince. In the film, the reason why Cinderella attends the palace ball lies in her desire to meet her beloved apprentice in the ball, rather than to meet the prince by chance. The author of the film script deliberately designed the scene of the first encounter

between the prince and Cinderella, especially the prince concealed his identity, which adequately embodies the concept of the pursuit of equality of Cinderella's consciousness. If the prince indicates his true identity when he first meets Cinderella, Cinderella will not attend the palace ball.

In the 2021 version of Cinderella, the original "patriarchal" structure of the fairy tale was refined to portray a rhythmic kingdom where "only males are allowed to pursue their careers and females can only cling to marriage". [3] The primary obstacle for Cinderella lies in the oppression of individual pursuit by the whole country as well as the fettering of freedom for females by the society. Cinderella has gotten rid of the inherent sense of being clinging to males for certain objectives and transformed into a career female with entrepreneurial dreams. In "The Second Sex", Beauvoir noted that "females are not born, but rather progressively developed." While reminding the general public of female awakening, she also presented three avenues of female emancipation, one of which was to take on the role of a professional female. The only possibility for a female to take control of her own destiny is to work in society, where the practical distance between female and male is significantly transcended through gainful employment. There is no other assurance of actual freedom, as soon as she ceases to be a parasite, the system to which she is attached will collapse. The film delivers a new kind of princess in the modern sense, which breaks the "male" monopoly on the market by stepping out of the original story structure, in addition to portraying a "new independent female" -- Cinderella, who owns the costume dream and has regained her transcendence. In the meantime, the film also demonstrates for us a prince who is fatigued by political marriage, but holds illusions about true love. The prince proffers to let Cinderella marry himself, which also means that Cinderella is forced to renounce her dream of costume. Instead of reluctantly declining to marry him, Cinderella refuses the proposal of the prince in the spirit of "freedom is worth more". Lastly, the reciprocal choice of the two sides eliminates the discrepancy in status and discourse between the two in the original fairy tale, with the prince giving up his throne in favor of his sister who is talented in management, and Cinderella achieving her costume dream as well as her willingness to marry the prince, thereby bringing about the tradition of a happy ending. The film makes every effort to break away from the traditional fairy tale, the awakening of the main character has transcended the framework of the shaped story, with more purpose of modern thought and post-modern feminism ideas conveyed.

3. Character Image: Reject the Stereotypical "Angel" Image, Independent New Image Appearance

Over the centuries, female human beings have perpetuated in the context of patriarchy, while being in an oppressed position, excluded from the major domains of society, confined to a tiny corner of society, warily abiding by the virtues of the "angel in the house", without benefiting from the basic rights afforded to the male. Virginia Woolf in "Three Old Gold Coins" has written that "There are two worlds in our lives, one for males and one for females, where males assume the mission of supporting their families and serving their country. The world of females is their family, husband, children and house." In addition to being subservient to her father, husband and son, a female must also exhibit the ideal virtues demanded by male society, such as fidelity, obedience, indifference to the world, self-sacrifice as well as reticence. Those females who abide by the rules are referred to as "angels" or "ivory tower females", while the females in the fairy tale "Cinderella" are portrayed in the patriarchal context. It goes without saying that the young, attractive, gentle and benevolent Cinderella is the ideal angel, who bears the requirements of European society for the social standards of the ideal female at that time. Christianity holds that the method for the salvation of female is to reproduce, whereas old females who have outlived their reproductive age and are incapable of reproduction are apparently irredeemable, whose old age and decay leave males with an invisible sense of disappointment. As a result, they are portrayed as evil females and devils in male texts. [4]

In its root, these “female devils” are portrayed as the opposite of the ideal “angels” in patriarchal texts, which are the means by which patriarchal culture defines and shapes females. The elderly, decrepit, and selfish stepmother is undoubtedly a cursed “devil”. The depth of feminism archetypal criticism can be demonstrated by analyzing the root cause of the positioning of the stepmother as a devil. The stepmother is the devil not only on account of her malevolent personality, but also on account of the fact that in male texts, male culture and the subconscious of males, the “old female” is constantly regarded as an object of negation. Since her experience, shrewdness, and wisdom render her far less easily accessible to males than the naive, ignorant, and meek young girl, males perceive a potential threat. The male figures of the fairy tale “Cinderella” are the father and the prince. The stepmother and her two sisters leave Cinderella in old gray clothes, living in a pile of ashes by the fire, turning her into a “gray” girl. However, it is weird that the fairy tale does not mention the reaction of her father, which is indeed a kind of default and ignorance. We can interpret this as a patriarchal society which calls for a female attitude toward adversity to be submissive. While the protagonist of the story - the prince appears in the image of the savior. The fact that the stepmother and the two daughters are attracted to him demonstrates his status, whereas the ultimate fate of Cinderella can be transformed as a result of the favor of the prince. In the meantime, the prince also symbolizes the pre-existing social authority of males, symbolizing that males can be recognized by society and have a higher status than females without any effort and struggle on their part. In the text, the words of the prince at the ball are unpleasant. The attractively dressed Cinderella is invited to dance by numerous gentlemen, whereas the prince suppresses these suitors with his personal status: “This lady is my only dance partner, I only dance with her.” The fact that it is the invitation of gentlemen to Cinderella, the acceptance or not should not be the prince to take the decision for Cinderella, where the answer of the prince instead can also embody the female has no discourse rights in the patriarchal society.

The feminism narrative connotes itself as an independent and autonomous “other” character. In the 2015 version of the film “Cinderella”, the awareness of the independence of Cinderella is manifested in the hope that when she encounters difficulties, she can resolve them through her own efforts and will not seek help from males.[5] After the death of her mother, her stepmother would make things difficult for Cinderella when her father was not at home, in which case Cinderella did not tell her father, hoping that she can cope with these problems by herself. After the death of her father, Cinderella no longer has any relatives, despite the great sadness, she can still take care of herself, but also take good care of her two sisters and stepmother, to their daily lives with great concern. The stepmother uncovers the secret of the crystal shoes when she attends the royal ball, which she intends to threaten Cinderella in an effort to control the entire kingdom after Cinderella and the prince get married. When the whole kingdom and the prince were threatened, Cinderella did not bow down to her stepmother, nor did she demonstrate panic, fear and weakness. At this point, Cinderella made up her mind to lose the opportunity to identify with the prince and sacrifice her love at the cost of her words and refused the request of her stepmother, which made the whole kingdom and the prince achieve peace. At this moment, Cinderella is not a humble female who is in need of salvation from others, but a savior who saves the whole kingdom with her own power. Secondly, the most striking performance in the film lies in the characterization of the prince, who features a great sense of equality between male and female, treating Cinderella as an equal, regardless of her origin, status and family situation. Regardless of his opposition to the political alliance of the king, his obsession with seeking the maiden of the forest he first met, or his confession before Cinderella put on her crystal shoes, he did not care and was heartily inclined to accept Cinderella as a female, what he cared about was the person of Cinderella, not her family origin or social status. The love concept of the prince does not contain the consciousness of gentry in it, but simply the concept of equal love between male and female, which makes the prince a male with the ideology of feminism concept. Moreover, the stepmother has also undergone a transformation. In the initial days, she put all her

hopes for life on her husband, hoping that remarriage would enable her to have a better life. Especially after marrying Cinderella's father, she desires to take advantage of her daughter's marriage to bring about a change in the family's living situation. The successive departure of her two husbands has made her develop a female consciousness, in which she realizes that reliance on others is not the best way after all, but only by herself to obtain happiness can last. It is even her intention to take charge of the whole kingdom, so as to obtain lifelong prosperity.

The 2021 version of "Cinderella" also breaks away from the image of a meek "lamb", emerging on the screen as a new era of female image, bold, courageous, persistent and resolute. "Independence" does not represent a label, but a state of being. Cinderella encounters many obstacles in the process of pursuing her dream of becoming the owner of a clothing store. Firstly, she receives the cold shoulder for selling dresses, then her stepmother tries to marry her off, and then the marriage proposal of the prince also intends to kill her idea of opening her own store. However, she avoids the tragedy by her own efforts, refuting her words, escaping from the assigned marriage, and refusing the marriage proposal for the sake of her dream. In comparison with the first two "Cinderella", the character and initiative of the 2021 film version of Cinderella are much more powerful, with a new image of an independent protagonist being created in the story of Cinderella.

4. Story Details: Gradual Departure from Stories as a Means of Patriarchal Education

If the grand story pattern and meticulous characterization are not sufficient to illustrate the problem, then the details scattered in all corners of the story, like human nature, cannot be hidden. In the text of the fairy tale "Cinderella", Cinderella was called to her mother's bed before she died, whose last words perfectly demonstrate the good female example created by the patriarchy. The mother on her deathbed admonished Cinderella, "O my beloved girl, you must live as pure as gold, as tame as a lamb, so that our merciful Lord can always bless you." [6] Her biological mother did not encourage her to be courageous and independent at the end of her life, but rather expected her to behave in a disciplined and docile manner, which is in line with the image of a submissive female from the male point of view. Afterwards, Cinderella was helped by a small white dove on the grave of her mother, which is a continuation of her mother's image, encouraging the majority of females to act only in accordance with the determination of males in order to receive the support and blessing of God and others. Moreover, in the story of "Cinderella", there are numerous details that indicate that the objective of female survival is to attract males with beauty. The happiness of females all relies on being favored by wealthy and influential males: Cinderella dresses herself up with the fancy clothes given to her by the bird to appeal to the prince. "She looks divinely fabulous in this glittering gold dress." The next night, "the girl appears at the ball in this outfit, everyone who meets her is astonished at her beauty". In order for her two daughters to fit into the crystal shoes and serve as the queen, the stepmother is not hesitant to make them cut off their heels or cut off their thumbs such bloody things. These specific details are symbolic of a patriarchal society in which females are willing to sacrifice their individuality to mold themselves to male standards for the sake of pleasing males and satisfying their needs. For the self-development of girls as well as personality development, fairy tale details are also symbolic, such as the dating of Cinderella is restrictive. The sudden departure after each dance with Prince is a symbol of restriction. Not only does she date in a normative pattern, but she also displays herself with reservations. It symbolizes the fact that the female cannot pursue her love and happiness as she pleases but rather hold back. The shoes in the story are even more symbolic of the restraints and fixed pattern constraints on females. There are also details that embody the symbol of the control of the husband over his wife -- Cinderella hides in the dovecote during the first midnight escape, while the father and the prince destroy the dovecote. On her second midnight escape, Cinderella climbs a giant pear tree in the back garden in an attempt to shake off the prince, who,

together with her father, cuts the tree down. The dovecote and the pear tree that hide here symbolize the shelter granted by the mother, while the destruction of the dovecote and the tree by the two males signify the control of the husband over his wife, as well as his disregard for the personal property of the females.

The Cinderella in the modern film, will never bind herself to a male for the rest of her life. The modern Cinderella is a self-sufficient entity, their future falls to themselves, they possess a broader world and a more diverse future beyond the prince. Digging into the 2019 and 2021 versions of “Cinderella” transformation, the reason for the metamorphosis has to be traced back to the Western feminist movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After more than half a century of development, it yielded dramatic effects, with numerous countries adopting new legislation on gender equality. Feminism marked a climax of the second movement, which brought with it a strengthened feminist consciousness, protesting that “the happiness of females lies only in marrying a good male”, while demanding not only political equality but also full equality of females with males in all aspects of social life. Some feminism writers frequently mock the traditional Cinderella story, “Afterwards, Cinderella and the prince lived on happily ever after, like two rag dolls in a museum cabinet, never bothered by baby diapers and dust.” [7] In the midst of such a vigorous movement, Cinderella-themed films were forced to reformulate their themes and values, adding contemporary elements to the archetypes. As a result, the traditional humble and meek Cinderella has been increasingly subject to questioning and feminism Cinderella has been increasingly portrayed in contemporary times. The live-action film “Cinderella” published and released in March 2015 features comparatively distinctive characteristics of the times, which profoundly embodies the arduous efforts of females in today’s society in the awakening of feminism ideology. The post-modern feminism narrative approach has been insightfully portrayed to make feminism consciousness sprout and awaken. As sung in 2021 “Cinderella”, “Stand up to express yourself, unless you try how can you be known success or failure, you must be bad, you must be bold, you must be smarter, you must be stern, you must be strong since I realize that only love can reverse the tide”. [7] The requirements of Cinderella for herself are no longer meek and submissive, but rather brave and bold and intelligent, which are more neutral adjectives that embody the new image of female after half a century of evolution. Anne Sextone’s poem “Cinderella” has written that “The world while still keeps on spinning, it is impossible to prevent time from moving forward, whether all are in search of a greater manner of life. The world is semi-dreamy and semi-awake, which will wake up to behold my achievements.” Cinderella has a pursuit of self, as well as the belief that self holds the capability to generate happiness. With even the queen, also putting up resistance in front of the king who represents patriarchal domination.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the centuries, the male perspective has permeated all aspects of human society, dictated the lives of females, and corrupted their souls. Feminism gives us another way to reinterpret “Cinderella”, another way to perceive the literary text. It reminds us that fairy tales in a patriarchal society are imbued with specific approaches to thinking and social norms. Meanwhile, the transmutation of the image of Cinderella over half a century can be traced to the development of feminism, the expression of modern feminist narratives in films, as well as the pursuit of happiness and the expression of female self-awareness in the new era of femininity. The modern film adaptation of “Cinderella” has nicely circumvented the patriarchy by adopting educational and literary means to reinforce his concept, which has illuminated a light for female emancipation and equal rights for male and female.

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