

REINTERPRETING SEXUALITY FROM THE FAIRY TALES: NOT MY BEST SIDE AND RAPUNZEL BY U.A.FANTHROPE AND ANNE SEXTON

Neha Kumari (Net, JRF)
Research Scholar, MA (2016-2018)
Banaras Hindu University, India

Abstract:

Folk tales and fairy tales across cultures share some similar motif and elements. In these narratives at most of the places, the ideal women are represented as victims and docile woman. Through these stories patriarchal values get appropriated and the children learn the ways of society. The behavioral mores get rooted in the subconscious of children by the telling and retelling of the stories. The figure of ideal man chiefly comes as the redeemer of woman. Ideal man is an active agent while ideal woman is passive. During the second wave of feminism, women authors were trying to find their own voices. They rewrote the cultural myths from the feminist perspective. This paper discusses two such poetess and their poems. Not my Best Side of British poet U.A.Fanthrope and Rapunzel by American poet Anne Sexton are the two poems which have been discussed in this paper. This paper also tries to elucidate the formation of women literary culture among female writers based on the shared feelings and conflicts regarding their creativity and social credos.

Keywords: Stereotype, autonomous space, homo sexuality, heterosexuality, women culture

Studying and analyzing folktales of his country, Russian theorist Vladimir Propp drew out a possible structure to be applied on all folk tales in general. In *The Morphology of Folktales* he found total 31 elements which are usually present in such stories, the number of elements may vary from one story to the next story. Identifying common themes and elements in the stories, he identified 31 elements as Narratemes (narrative units) that comprised the structure of many of the stories. The general plot line of such narratives always has a female character in some situation of danger, waiting to be rescued. In the general psyche of readers, this is the common motif of all popular fairy and folk tales.

But all these stories may unfold a different picture, if the woman retells the story or interpret the mythical, stereotyped fairy tales. Women authors when put their imaginative energy to establish literary canon for exploring their own voices, they change the emotions and disposition of the involved characters, specially the maiden. They tell the story from female perspective. Gertrude, the naïve mother character from the tragic world of

Shakespeare turns out to be a strong headed, vile character when Maragret Atwood gives her a new life in *Gertrude writes back*.

Ursula Aksham Fanthrope and Anne Sexton, both these poets of twentieth century demolish the established cultural myths of traditional society. They subvert the heroic characterization of male characters as redeemer of the damsel in distress. U.A. Fanthrope(1929-2000) was a British poet and Anne sexton(1928-2004) was an American poet. They both penned different types of poems, Anne Sexton wrote in confessional feminist strain while Fanthrope penned her poems with humorous touch to the themes. Still they both paid attention to psychological dilemma in their poems. Both of them attacked on the stereotypical presentation of women in their poetry. Not My Best Side is a humorous poem by U.A Fanthrope in which the character of woman does not want to be rescued by the knight. Rapunzel is one strong poem of Anne Sexton, in which the narrator sees the character of witch in positive light.

The lady speaking in Not My Best Side

The poem Not My Best Side is based on the famous painting by Paulo Uccelo, 1870. The name of this painting is St. George and the Dragon. There are three characters in the painting, A lady abducted by dragon, the dragon himself and a knight as rescuer. The narrative of this poem challenges the orthodox presentation of these characters in Uccelo's painting. The lady who is about to be rescued in poem does not want to be rescued by the mercenary knight. She is attracted towards her abductor, the dragon who is being presented as humanoid in the poem. Such behavior is misappropriation on part of the victim. But the lady is entirely free to behave her way in the captivity. The captive space does become a free space to voice her dreams, fancies and whimsicalities. Her voice and thought process is not mature and intelligent. Yet the readers can see her questioning the traditional roles; she is not mentally prepared to fit in gender specific roles. The poem opens with the line, It's hard for a girl to be sure\ if she wants to be rescued.

In this autonomous space, the woman feels free from social mores of behaving in a lady like manner. Princesses and duchesses are made to behave in larger than life manner, if not followed they can meet an end like that of duchess ambiguously described in My Last Duchess by the Victorian poet Robert Browning. In the narratives of folk and fairy tales, they are but a mere prop to highlight the chivalry and bravery of knights. As the poem unfolds, it is clearly visible that the rescuer has no interest and attachment with the lady; he is obsessed towards increasing the number of his bravery badges. The bestiality of dragon is preferred by the lady over the chivalry of rescuer. The promise of the ordered life post being rescued has insecurities of love. She finds the gaze of man to be impenetrable. She is not able to find his essence beyond virgin reclamation, spear and armor. His behavior is mechanized lacking emotional quotient. On the contrary the demeanor of dragon is depicted as attractive.

“He was So nicely physical, with his claws
 And lovely green skin, and that sexy tail,
 And the way he looked at me,”

In his critical essay, *Through the Looking Glass: when Woman Tell the Fairy tales* (1983), Ellen Cronar Rose comments that fairy tales undermine the effects of various alluring fantasies on which further helps in attributing feminine virtues as innocence, self-sacrifice and obedience

Revisiting fairy tales in Rapunzel of Anne Sexton

Anne sexton, the Pulitzer Prize winning American poet wrote mostly confessional poetry. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm are known as the best story tellers in European culture. They collected fairy tales from all cultures, edited and published these stories in 1812 with name. Later these stories were popularly known as Gimm fairy tales.

In her paper, Paulina Korenjiwaska says that fairy tales have shaped the archetype of female protagonist. In her collection of poems *Transformations* Anne Sexton revisited Gim fairy tales and its characters. She destabilized the stabilized notion of femininity which is naturally shared by the plot line in general fairy tales. Anne sexton opposed the ‘happy ever after’ trope of these tales. Chiefly she rejected the naïve, frail and tender portrayal of women characters. In the anthology *Transformations*, characters like Snow white, cindarella and rupanzel are given different shades. Her depiction of snow white is similar to that of gim brothers tales yet negative in which she talks about her as a shallow, socially unfit character between childhood and adulthood. The poem Rapaunzel based on the fairy tale of a caged princess with long hair comes out as remarkable contribution. It voices homosexuality, mother’s protective nature that wants to save daughter from oppressive patriarchal forces. The character of witch changes into character of foster mother; and companionship between two women is prioritized before the companionship of man and woman.

The story in the poem unfolds as the stereotyped narrative of witch, her abundant garden and the pregnancy of king’s wife. Pregnant queen demands the king for red carrots. The king goes to steal from the garden of witch Gothel. Getting caught Gothel demands that the child born should be presented to her. He promised his child to Mother Gothel. The narrator takes the witch to a revered position by calling her mother gothel.

“so of course when it was born
 she took the child away with her.
 She gave the child the name Rapunzel”

The poem opens with the line, A woman who loves a woman \is forever young. Thus Gothel assigned herself as the foster mother of Rapunzel. About their bonding and act of love

it is named as ‘mother me do’ thing. The critical significance of Sexton's recreated tales makes them resonant with the feminist task of deconstructing those narratives which bear the imprint of a patriarchal indoctrination over women. Homo sexuality and homo social behavior is prioritized in the relation of Mother Gothel and the Rapunzel. The bonding between Gothel and the Rapunzel is the connection of wombs, the shared societal oppression of women and of empathy.

“come touch a copy of you
 Let me hold your heart like a flower
 lest it bloom
washing in the same mirror.
 We were fair game
 but we have kept out of the cesspool.
 We are strong.
 We are the good ones.
 Do not discover us
 for we lie together all in green
 like pond weeds.
 Hold me, my young dear”

Heterosexuality appropriated by Traditional Fairy Tales

Away from the traditional lifestyle and social behavior, Rapunzel had no conception of man and sexuality. The strange appearance of the prince repels her at first but she falls prey to his charm. The psychological change of Rapunzel character is crucial to convey the idea that heterosexuality is a compulsive mode of sexuality to fit in this world. Phrases like dancing stick, Moss on the leg, prickly plant on cheek, deep voice indicates towards sexuality of man.

“What is this beast, she thought,
 with muscles on his arms
 like a bag of snakes?
 What is this moss on his legs?
 What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?
 What is this voice as deep as a dog?
 Yet he dazzled her with his answers.
 Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.”

One crucial note about these two revisited poetic tales is that despite their personal rebellious and different attitude, at the end maidens return to their social roles. By reverting

back to the social mores they expose the hypocrisy of society that recommends marriage as fundamental concern of a woman's life.

“Still, what could I do?”

The dragon got himself beaten by the boy,
And a girl's got to think of her future”

In the last lines of poem the character of mother Gothel comments about heterosexual behavior of the world. just as a tricycle, The world\ some say\is made up of couples.

In the closing lines of the poem not by best side, the knight provides the social commentary. He asks both the dragon and the lady about their wishes, if they do not want to be killed or rescued in traditional way. In the next line he imbibes the oppressive tone of society and warns them to carry out their social and mythical roles. In the essay, *The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of women and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar comments,

““Myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts.”

Conclusion

Such literary alteration of established mythology, sociology and fairy tales by women writers indicate towards search of women culture in writings. Theorist Gerda lerner opines that women culture redefines women activities and goals from a woman centric point of view. Sisterhood, communality of women and writing from their muted experiences form the common traits of women culture. While searching for women culture in their works, women authors spontaneously make alliance of writers resisting male hegemony in literature. In her essay *Feminist criticism in wilderness*, Elaine Showalter comments that all feminist criticism is in some sense revisionist, questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures.

References:

- Cronar Rose Ellen, *Through the Looking Glass: when Woman Tell the Fairy tales*(1983).
- Fanthrope, Ursula Aksham, *Not My Best side*.
- Gilbert Sandra and Gubar Susan, *The queen's looking glass: feale creativity, Male images of women and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity*.
- Sexton Anne, *Transformations*.
- Showalter Elaine, *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness*.