

Challenging Western Fairy tales for Partisan Portrayal of Characters in Nikita Gill's *Fierce Fairytales & Other Stories to Stir Your Soul*

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Abstract

*This paper aims to investigate the stereotypes prevalent in classic Western fairy tales concerning characterization in Nikita Gill's *Fierce Fairytales & Other Stories to Stir Your Soul* (2018). An intrinsic feature of this research is to analyze the partisan portrayal of characters in fairy tales. It estimates the demarcation of qualities possessed by heroes and villains. It throws light over the clear distinction between good and bad characters having such a callous impact on the mind of readers, especially children. Hence, it confirms that dominating stereotypes in fairy tales are engaged in promoting suppression represented through the characters in fairy tales and reflects Gill's effort to reappraise the fairy tales in order to prevent the projection of such stereotypes.*

Keywords: characters, fairy tales, heroes, partisan, reappraisal, stereotypes, villains

1. Introduction

Nikita Gill, an Irish-born Indian poet and writer, was brought up in Gurugram, Haryana in India. Currently, she lives in the south of England. She is one of the most eminent writers who represents social media writing community and strives to bring forward thought provoking narratives. Gill's collection of poetry and prose fairy tales *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) is adorned with beautiful illustrations drawn by the author herself and has received vastly favorable views upon its release. Apart from this collection, Gill is also an author of many other books comprising of prose poetry and short

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stories. She also expects to release more books which reflects her drive to continuously contribute to the existing literary body.

Fierce Fairytales (2018) is an empowering collection of fairy tales in the form of poetry and short stories, accompanied with stunning hand-drawn illustrations. It gives classic fairy tales a well-deserved modern makeover such that these tales are retold for a new generation especially women. There is no space for stereotypes like obliging lovers, damsels in distress and clearly defined heroes and villains in these fairy tales reappraised by Gill. Instead, readers get to see brave female leads who do not need to be rescued by men, warrior princesses reclaiming their identities as strong women without depending on male characters and lines blurred between heroes and villains of fairy tales. In this book, traditional fairy tales have been reconstructed and presented by Gill with modern twist of events to be deemed more suitable for the readers of the new generation.

While discussing classical fairy tales, Gill mentions important names like Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault. Majorly, this study adopts a comparative analysis approach with Western authors' fairy tales including the Brothers Grimm and Gill's reappraisal of those tales. Majority of the fairy tales and myths have been narrated by Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. Some literary scholars have charged Brothers Grimm for tempering with the spirit of certain folk tales to misguide the general folks. Sexist and racist elements in their fairy tales have been identified by other critics which, according to them, need revision. Alternatively, psychologists also argue over the possible mentally adverse effects of the tales collected by Brothers Grimm on the general public. In her book *Fierce Fairytales* (2018), Gill highlights clichés in Brothers Grimm's tales like partisan portrayal of characters that rob humanity of essential values like redemption in life.

This research specifically focuses on the way she challenges partisan portrayal of characters in classic fairy tales. It throws light over the significance of art of characterization in fairy tales and how it plays an essential role in influencing the thought process of the multitude. In *Fierce Fairytales* (2018), Gill questions the distinct demarcation of boundaries between the moral and immoral qualities of heroes and villains in traditional fairy tales. In classic fairy tales, clearly defined heroes and villains leave no

space for mankind to understand the coexistence of evil and good in a human being and disregard the concept of individuality, thus confining people to specified molds of heroes and villains.

This research will persuade other writers to look for the subterranean meaning or other interpretations besides the literal meaning in fairy tales. It also analyzes the role of *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) that throws light over the stereotypes in classical Western fairy tales including partisan portrayal of characters.

2. Research Methodology

Qualitative research method has been used for data analysis. It consists of utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include data taken from words, phrases and dialogues in *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) by mainly focusing on stereotypes found in Western fairy tales. Secondary sources are comprised of reviews of critics taken from books, journals, newspapers and interviews.

3. Literature Review

Fairy tales are comprised of many elements that perpetuate numerous tropes, motifs and stereotypes. The characters in these fairy tales are mostly archetypes that usually appear to be same after every story. Such stories have seemed to evolve over the years with the changes in cultural trends but the social conventions in these tales are rarely challenged. Retellings of fairy tales tend to present changes in minor details but tempering with the course of tradition or even questioning it has been a foreign idea until recent times. Nikita Gill takes the role of challenging deeply rooted stereotypes in Western fairy tales through her book *Fierce Fairytales* (2018). In an interview with *Marie Claire* in September 2018, Gill highlights the significance of having a critical response towards every narrative while reading it;

Question everything—question the stories you’re told, question the things you’re reading. It’s almost treated like it’s a bad thing these days, but critical thinking is so important...I do understand that people will want fairytales to remain as they are. However, when something is very mainstream, you need to ask questions and encourage your children to ask questions. (Epstein)

Gill's rendition of fairy tales deeply questions the compulsion to carry the conventional allegiance in response to stereotypes incorporated in these tales for centuries. She urges the readers to challenge the blind acceptance of such stereotypical narratives because avoiding blind acceptance is a crucial step to initiate critical thinking. Historical narratives like fairy tales collected and jotted down by Brothers Grimm play a very important role in shaping the perception and responses of readers towards these stories. Similarly, Marie Catherine d' Aulnoy's fairy tales praise the "everlasting attractiveness, bigheartedness, and affection for the fairies" (Khan 114). Despite this fact, Gill dares to unlearn all previously taught ideas that constitute these fairy tales and brings forward alternate perspectives that question long held beliefs regarding such tales.

Reviewing *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) in *The Hindu*, Susanna Myrtle Lazarus, an Indian journalist and editor, quotes Gill to show how she remembers the important precept of staying intact with classic fairy tales in order to reappraise them. "The first phase of my writing is always to read classical texts. For this one, since I wanted to write retellings and a few of my own tales, I read the Grimm Brothers, Charles Perrault and Arabian Nights, amongst others" (Lazarus). This depicts Gill's strong dedication with her aim to reconstruct the stereotypical ideals projected in classical fairy tales. She understands that revisiting these tales time and again not only helps her in recognizing the clichés but also aids her in improving her own craft by questioning the stereotypes and not repeating the same trends.

Gill highlights the partisan portrayal of characters in fairy tales in her book *Fierce Fairytales* (2018). In the classic fairy tales, there tends to be a clear boundary between heroes and villains. Heroes are portrayed as brave and handsome characters who are good at everything and things turns out in their favor by the end of fairy tales. On the other hand, villains are bad creatures who are full of hatred and don't possess any good quality so meeting a bad end in fairy tales is normal for such characters. It is this 'normal' that Gill challenges in her version of fairy tales and draws characters that are humane and possess both good and bad qualities.

Susanna Myrtle Lazarus writes in her review of *Fierce Fairytales & Other Stories to Stir Your Soul* (2018) that "Unlike the classics, there are no well-defined heroes, hardly any damsels in distress, and the characters are more

grey than black or white” (Lazarus *Nikita Gill on fairytales and followers*). She continues to quote Gill to delineate her aim of portraying characters with humane qualities. “I wanted to confront the concept of good and evil inside every human being. We are the sum of all of the best and worst actions of our lives and everything in between” (Lazarus). Gill challenges the prejudiced depiction of heroes and villains in fairy tales and brings forward a narrative that introduces heroes with human flaws and villains with a logical explanation behind their negative behavior and decisions.

4. Partisan Portrayal of Characters in Western Fairytales

Characterization is one of the most essential narrative elements as it is the way in which the authors express crucial information regarding their characters. Many aspects of a character’s personality are conveyed through the art of characterization. It is either done directly through author’s narration about the character or portrayed indirectly through the character’s dialogues, actions, and thoughts. Everything from a character’s behavior, appearance, way of speaking to their thought patterns and decisions that they take combine under the term characterization. Whether used directly or indirectly, this has proven to be a technique that is very significant for making a story compelling for its readers.

The art of characterization constitutes of many minute aspects and the variety in their nature distinguishes the way every writer models the characters in their narratives. There are numerous approaches that can be adopted concerning the technique of characterization and it is an important aspect to be discussed when a text is being critically analyzed. Most of the writers create their characters in the light of famous literary character archetypes that have been introduced to people through famous myths, folk tales and fairy tales and still remain a part of literature after ages. The reason behind their relevance after eons is because these archetypes put forward set of qualities that depict universally recognizable human behaviors. They are in no way biologically constructed in human beings. However, they do resonate with people due to the general human emotions that succeed to convey.

Despite the archetypes introduced by classic fairy tales, contemporary writers produce unique narratives owing to the specifics that they add to the stories to make them unpredictable for the readers. It is the specific details,

dialogues and distinguished turn of events in the plot of a story that reconstructs the archetype of lovers in modern stories and makes it unpredictable and different from lovers in traditional fairy tales like Cinderella and her prince charming. Traditional fairy tales are riddled with flat characters that show no signs of inner conflicts, character development and conform to certain stereotypes. Contemporary narratives, on the other hand, focus on putting forward more round characters that face intense inner conflicts and resolve them in order to develop as characters.

One of the famous archetype in classic Western fairy tales is that of a hero who is courageous, strong and morally good. In most of the fairy tales, he is a stock character who is introduced as a prince charming and ends up saving the damsel in distress which is another archetypal character. These fairy tales also include another flat character that is a villain. Villainous characters are reflected as ugly and evil irrespective of their gender and are destined to meet a bad end at the end of the fairy tale due to their morally corrupt nature. Traditional fairy tales of these kinds aim to be didactic and highlight the aspect that being morally corrupt has no other end than being doomed as happens with villains. Passive and obedient females are rewarded with a prince charming at the end of fairy tales for their goodness, thus promoting socially acceptable moral qualities. As Amara Khan in her article titled “(Re) generation and (Re) interpretation of Malevolence in Gender Roles in Walt Disney’s *Maleficent*” says that “each admired fairy tale shows merely two categories of females: malevolent hags and harmless princesses” (*Maleficent* 97).

Nikita Gill, in *Fierce Fairytales* (2018), challenges such socially acceptable archetypes and questions their conformity to stereotypical traits. She takes the stock characters from classic Western fairy tales and deviates their modeling from stereotypes in her rewritten version of fairy tales. In her deviation from the norms, she aims to construct more humane characters that have both good and bad qualities and are difficult to confine into the archetypes of heroes and villains. The villains that are introduced in traditional fairy tales as evil characters without any particular reason are given a platform to provide their backstories and strive for redemption in Gill’s reappraised fairy tales. Such backstories not only help the readers to understand the reason behind a villain’s moral downfall but also convey the idea that it is possible to repent and redeem one’s immoral actions.

Henry Fielding, a famous English novelist and dramatist, throws light over the art of characterization concerning heroes and villains in his novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, Volume II* (1774). He depicts the adverse effects of creating archetypal characters confined to specific sets of qualities on humankind in the following words:

Nor do I, indeed, conceive the good purposes served by inserting characters of such angelic perfection, or such diabolical depravity, in any work of invention; since, from contemplating either, the mind of man is more likely to be overwhelmed with sorrow and shame than to draw any good uses from such patterns; for in the former instance he may be both concerned and ashamed to see a pattern of excellence in his nature, which he may reasonably despair of ever arriving at; and in contemplating the latter he may be no less affected with those uneasy sensations, at seeing the nature of which he is a partaker degraded into so odious and detestable a creature. (165-166)

A fairytale is a genre of literature that constitutes of many important components. Having originated from storytelling and oral traditions, these tales are commonly found in every culture. They usually end up providing moral life lessons particularly associated with the values of a specific region. These moral lessons, however, clearly distinguish between the heroes and villains and the conclusions they meet by the end of the fairy tales. In her reappraisal of traditional fairy tales, Gill adopts a more humane and balanced approach in her characterization techniques as encouraged by Fielding and pays deep attention to psychological and mental health of her readers dealing with issues like depression and traumas.

Fairytales have been passed on from generation to generation, whether oral or in scripted form, and hold a strong influence in shaping the ideals of their readers. Majority of the readers and audience tend to use fairytales as a means to escape reality while relating to the common human experiences simultaneously. Steven Swann Jones, a professor of English at Cal State-Los Angeles with

expertise in folklores and fairytales, defines fairytales in his book *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination* (2002) as follows:

narratives that have been shaped over centuries of retelling and that have achieved a basic narrative form that is a distillation of human experience. Their popularity is a confirmation not only of their aesthetic appeal, but also of their ability to speak to the human heart (5).

Owing to their ability to speak to human heart, Gill makes sure to reflect in her fairy tales that if a character has enough goodness to engage the liking and sentiment of a reader, then having traces of some humanly flaws will only evoke compassion in them instead of revulsion. A good character like a hero faltering in some of his moral actions highlights imperfections that can be of moral use because his short comings are more likely to leave an impact on the reader's mind than that of a wicked character whose evil actions are predictable and hold no element of surprise. The contrast of vices of a hero with his good qualities puts his foibles in more light and identify their disproportion clearly. Therefore, when heroes who are well liked by the readers face a downfall in a story due to some immoral act, it is bound to teach the readers that such vices should be shunned not only for their own sake but also for the misfortune they have brought on their beloved character.

In this chapter, I have analysed some of Gill's stories from *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) in the light of partisan portrayal of characters depicted originally in various original fairytales. These stories include "The Red Wolf", "The Step Mother's Tale", "Two Misunderstood Stepsisters", and "Beauty and Bravery". The process of reappraisal has been delineated through a comparison of the aforementioned tales with their earlier versions in *Grandma's Magical Storybook* (2007) designed by Katy Rhodes and written by a language consultant, Betty Roots. The book has been published by Parragon Books, a publishing company situated in United Kingdom, and is a collection of classic Western fairy tales for children.

"Little Red Riding Hood" is a classic fairy tale which was written by Charles Perrault, a French author, in his book *Stories or*

Tales from Past Times, with Morals (1697). It was later jotted down by The Brothers Grimm in their collection of fairy tales *Children's and Household Tales* (1812) under the title "Little Red Cap". In *Grandma's Magical Storybook* (2007), the story has been retold by Gaby Goldsack, a British author, in which she has restored the essence of Brothers Grimm's tale for the children. The story remains the same as the original tale of a young girl and her grandmother who are eaten by a big, bad wolf and ultimately rescued by the huntsman at the end of the tale. In this original tale, the wolf is the villain with typical appearance of a bad guy that is ugly and scary, the young girl is the archetype of a passive and obedient damsel in distress who relies on a man to save her and this man, who is a huntsman, turns out to be another archetype of a hero who is courageous and strong and ends up saving people's life in this fairy tale.

Gill titles her reappraised version of the tale, "Little Red Riding Hood", as "The Red Wolf" in *Fierce Fairytales* (2018). The title itself is significant as it predicts the change in dynamics concerning characterization and the nonconformity with the stereotypical traits possessed by the characters in the classic version of this fairy tale. The fact that the title of Gill's tale is named after the villain of the tale instead of the young girl clearly indicates that her version of story is meant to give the villain of the story a chance to change the stereotypical narrative. "The Red Wolf" as a title holds double meaning as it not only gives the wolf a representation despite being a villain but also relates the passive little red riding hood with a wolf, thus removing the stereotypical aspect of her being a damsel in distress. Instead, it calls this young girl a wolf which indicates of a rebellious and non-conforming attitude.

In "The Red Wolf", Gill subverts the stereotypical characterization of the "Little Red Riding Hood" and gives another perspective to the tale by modeling her characters with different set of qualities. Little Red Riding Hood's mother, who barely gets any introduction in the traditional version, is one of the most important characters in Gill's fairy tale. Not only is she supportive of her daughter's decisions in the tale but actively searches for her when she is gone and proves to

be strong and fearless in the face of hurdles that occur during her search for her daughter. Even the first time Little Red Riding Hood is introduced in Gill's tale, it is in relation to her mother. "Little Red Riding Hood went missing, a girl so beloved by her mother that she always told her she could be *anything* she wanted to be" (26). What is important to note here is the lesson that this young girl's mother teaches her.

While identities are being confined to specific archetypes in traditional tales, Gill creates a mother who gives her daughter the freedom to choose her own identity. A mother open to the idea of allowing her daughter to define herself instead of confining her to the social constructs is a very contemporary take by Gill on the classic tale of "Little Red Riding Hood". While mothers in classic Western fairy tales are either evil step mothers or passive, suppressed women, Gill dares to provide an alternate perspective to a mother in a fairy tale and breaks the stereotypical characterization of mothers in fairy tales.

In the beginning of "The Red Wolf", Gill describes Little Red Riding Hood's mother as someone "wiser" (26). Later on, she proceeds to sketch this mother's wisdom by highlighting her non-conforming attitude as she is accepting of rebellion against socially constructed ideals for women. This opens up another dimension for the readers including the mothers to understand that partisan portrayal of characters in traditional fairy tales restricts them and blinds the readers from looking at the alternate perspective of those tales. Gill stresses upon considering different outlooks towards classic fairy tales so the archetypal characters can be reformed into more subversive characters that seek to assert their individuality in a narrative.

Gill proceeds to foreground the importance of considering alternate perspectives in fairy tales to subvert stereotypical characterization by switching the places of the hero and the villain in "The Red Wolf". The woodcutter who "swung his axe and killed the wolf with a single blow" (115) in "Little Red Riding Hood" is actually delineated as an evil character in Gill's version of the tale where he

manipulates the mother and misleads her in her search of her child. He is also highlighted as a bad character who is a threat to the life of the forest because his cutting of the trees along with his evil friends is susceptible to lead to extinction of the woods which provide a habitat to so many animals.

On the other hand, “the wolf, who wasn’t nice at all” (112) and is described as a wicked creature with a sly grin in “Little Red Riding Hood” becomes the rescuer of the young girl in Gill’s version of this fairy tale. The mother addresses the wolf as “Brother wolf” (26) which shows her trust in the wolf and his pack. Not only do the wolves rescue Little Red Riding Hood from the attack of cruel woodcutter and his horde but also defend the forest from extinction by combating against them.

In “The Red Wolf”, Gill completely overturns the roles of heroes and villains from those in the original classic fairy tale to delineate that these roles can be easily reversed; villains can become heroes and heroes can become villains in another dimension. Therefore, human beings should always be prepared to find the balance in their good and bad qualities as Gill over-throws the partisan portrayal of characters in the traditional fairy tale through Little Red Riding Hood in the following words:

Dear Mother, I am sorry I never came home. The evil woodcutter and his friends were trying to destroy this forest world. When I came through the woods, I happened to hear of all of their plans. They saw me listening, followed me to grandmother’s, killed her and tried to burn her house down with me in it so they could continue their wicked plans. The wolves came to rescue me, and trained me to be one of them. I am now the Alpha and protect them from the woodcutter and his evil friends. (28-29)

This presents another character archetype reconstructed by Gill in “The Red Wolf” that is damsel in distress. The young girl is miserable in the classic Western fairy tale and has no way to step out of her predicament without a man’s help but Gill questions such a flat characterization of Little Red Riding Hood. In “The Red

Wolf”, this young girl is brave enough to face the wolves as her rescuers, has a strong sense of justice to train and live with them, possesses leadership and combat skills, and knows that she can take her decisions for herself. She is, in every way, a contemporary heroine of a modern fairy tale who topples the stereotypes that confine her abilities as a human on the basis of her being a female. Gill questions partisan portrayal of characters throughout the tale irrespective of their gender and opposes enclosing them in boxes of specific traits. She ends “The Red Wolf” in verse form, asserting Little Red Riding Hood’s subservience of all archetypal characteristics;

*Her mother told her
she could grow up to be
anything she wanted to be,
so she grew up to become
the strongest of the strong, the strangest of the strange,
the wildest of the wild,
the wolf leading the wolves. (29)*

Classic Western fairy tales create moral boundaries through partisan portrayal of characters. This makes people, especially children, more welcoming to the moral content and repulsive towards anything defined as immoral by fairytales. As Jack David Zipes, an American academic and folklorist, writes in “The Struggle for the Grimms’ Throne: The Legacy of the Grimms’ Tales in the FRG and GDR since 1945.” that, “the special attributes of the artistic fairy-tale forms make... children more receptive to the moral content.” (190) Characters in fairytales are presented as prototypes of good and bad, usually highlighted in a black and white light, thus leaving almost nothing to be read between the lines. Steven Swann Jones continues to state in his book *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination* (2002) that,

Fairy tales affirm a belief in the morality of the cosmos, and they simplistically depict a polarization of good and evil in the world in order to show the benefits of adhering to the good (63).

Such stereotypical portrayal of various ideals in fairytales have endured the test of epochs and continue to prevail in communities within stories and plots in numerous adaptations and movies. One of them is the famous fairy tale of “Cinderella” which has several variants famous around the world. However, the most popular version is the one written in *Stories or Tales from Past Times, with Morals* (1697) by Charles Perrault. Afterwards, another version of the tale was also published in fairy tale collection *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (1812) by the Brothers Grimm. In *Grandma’s Magical Storybook* (2007), this tale has been retold by Gaby Goldsack who has preserved the essence of the tale under the same title that is “Cinderella”.

The story revolves around a beautiful girl named Cinderella who is poorly treated by her step mother and step sisters, works all day and leads a miserable life until she visits the prince’s ball under a disguise, leaves her shoe behind in a hurry and gets married to the prince at the end of the tale when that shoe fits her foot. In the classic Western fairy tale, Cinderella’s beauty has been stressed over time and again. She has been described as a beautiful maiden numerous times such that “[w]hen Cinderella arrived at the ball, everyone gasped at her beauty” (36). She presents the perfect archetype of a beautiful damsel in distress and the fairy tale being titled after her name shows her importance in the narrative.

Gill overlooks the archetypal character who waits for a man to rescue her from her miserable life just because she is beautiful and her beauty makes her entitled to such service in her life. Instead, she brings forward the narratives of the villains of this fairy tale. Her narrative includes the personal accounts of the step mother and the step sisters from “Cinderella”. In the traditional fairy tale, Cinderella’s step mother is described as a cruel woman who is the cause of Cinderella’s misery. “They were both very happy, until one day the man took a new wife. The new wife was not a kind woman” (30). Cinderella’s step mother is famous for her unkindness throughout history of fairy tales as she forces her step daughter to wear rags and work all day.

Gill questions Cinderella's step mother's villainous behavior and identifies a gap in the classical narrative that fails to indicate the reason behind her unkindness. Therefore, Gill takes it on herself to fill this gap and brings forward the stance of Cinderella's step mother in her story "The Stepmother's Tale". She supports the idea that no one is born evil and unfortunate circumstances force good people to react negatively towards people and life. Gill provides the readers with a backstory of the villain of "Cinderella" to show that she was no different than Cinderella herself;

She didn't start that way. None of us are truly born evil. Evil is man-made. Once she was a beautiful young girl...a good daughter with a light heart...and she never complained, no matter how hard or burdensome the work was. (32)

Gill proceeds to the matter of her marriage and brings in the hero who is not the stereotypical assertive man from traditional fairy tales. "Unlike most men of his time, he was progressive" (32). Instead of asking her father for her hand, he asked for the girl's consent to marriage first and then, long into courtship, they decided to marry rather than jumping into a happily ever after. Gill makes sure to point out that he was not handsome, thus breaking another archetypal trait of the hero of fairy tales. This stresses the point that a hero does not have to be handsome in order to win a girl's hand in marriage and him being good natured and gentle can make up for his ordinary looks.

In "The Stepmother's Tale", Gill closely observes the importance of preserving a person's mental health and depicts how mental traumas should not be ignored and left untreated as they lead people to commit villainous deeds. For Cinderella's stepmother, the death of her beloved husband, the intensity of whose grief Gill compares with the way Judas betrayed Jesus or Brutus betrayed Caesar, made her feel helpless. But what truly made her bitter and unkind was the way the society treated her poorly as a single mother of two daughters. Debt collectors started agonizing her for their money, no one gave her suitable work considering she being a mother of two daughters would not be able to do justice to the job and hence the

decline in the comfort of their life forced the stepmother to remarry a man out of desperation and not love.

At this stage of the tale, Gill does not fail to recognize that “Desperation can turn people sour” (33). Having experienced so much loss and then trying to survive in a patriarchal society that allows no place for women to survive without men, Cinderella’s stepmother started harboring a resentment towards Cinderella who was beautiful unlike her own daughters. She saw her happy past in Cinderella and her untreated mental trauma worsened by her misogynistic milieu made her commit evil deeds. Gill, through her reappraisal of “Cinderella”, highlights the major flaw in the partisan portrayal of characters in classic Western fairy tales. This flaw is that villains are dropped in these fairy tales out of nowhere without any backstory and it makes evil deeds abhorrent for the readers to such an extent that they refuse to acknowledge people’s mental traumas and their side effects in real life.

Gill also puts forward the story of Cinderella’s stepsisters in another tale titled as “Two Misunderstood Stepsisters”. The title itself signifies the fault on behalf of the reader who failed to understand the two step sisters and does not declare them as the villains of “Cinderella” right away. In the classic fairy tale, the two step sisters are described as bad-tempered daughters. “The two daughters were so mean and ugly that they were jealous of the man’s beautiful daughter. Indeed, they were so jealous that they took away all her fine clothes and forced her to work as their maid” (30). One of the aspects strongly highlighted in this version is the step sisters’ ugliness and jealousy. Gill questions the origin of these traits in the following words:

Children aren’t born abusive, it is nurtured in them. Children aren’t born ugly either. They learn to hate themselves from society’s narrow-minded ideas about how they must feel unsatisfied in their own skin. (37)

Gill challenges the archetypal character of a heroine in a fairy tale who is bound to be extraordinarily beautiful like Cinderella and also questions the fact that ugliness is associated with evilness.

Confining beauty with goodness and ugliness with evilness has adverse psychological affects on the readers as they begin beautifying their outer appearances instead of accepting their natural appearances in order to be accepted socially. Different beauty standards are inculcated in the collective consciousness of general public through classic Western fairy tales. Gill puts an end to this partisan portrayal of characters with qualities that project psychological complexes in the readers by giving voice to the two step sisters of Cinderella who grow up to be toxic women because they are constantly fed with the knowledge of their appearances being not socially acceptable. Gill begins “Two Misunderstood Sisters” with the following verses that highlight the adverse effects of a simple word “ugly”:

*If you ever want to have
a look at the way a word
can totally demean and destroy
the entire worth and value of a woman,
just look at what the word ‘ugly’
did to Cinderella’s two stepsisters. (37)*

Through “Two Misunderstood Sisters”, Gill also enlightens her readers about the negative influence of confining characters to specific boxes holding particular features. Such a way of characterization conveys to the reader a sense of competition between the characters. The idea that one character has to be better than the other on the basis of appearances is unacceptable to Gill. She encourages an accepting and supportive approach between the characters so that this partisan way of characterization doesn’t lead to unnecessary competition and negativity among the readers of fairy tales. Considering the stereotypes as patriarchal and social construct, Gill encourages female bonding and admonishes promotion of stereotypical standards of beauty in “Two Misunderstood Sisters”;

This is what happens when girls are taught other girls are competition instead of their sisters. This is what happens when we make women think their outer beauty is all that matters. We end up stealing from them their hearts, their

souls, their softness, by making them believe that none of that really matters. (38)

Another classic fairy tale that is universally well known is “Beauty and the Beast”. This story in *Grandma’s Magical Storybook* (2007) has been retold by Gaby Goldsack. In this fairy tale, the female lead is excessively beautiful. She possesses every good quality including kindness and sweetness. The tale proceeds to highlight her good virtues until the end. She is portrayed as the perfect character in the story. She “was also the prettiest, was kind and sweet. Indeed, she was so pretty and kind that everyone called her ‘Beauty’” (58). Her name highlights a perfect archetypal character, an epitome of beauty who is good and has no inherent flaw in her nature.

Gill reappraises this tale as “Beauty and Bravery” and starts the tale with Beauty giving a confession that her bravery to go and live with the Beast has nothing to do with goodness or perfection. With her tale, Gill makes sure to highlight the imperfections of Beauty through her own words so the stereotype of a perfect female can be broken. In “Beauty and Bravery”, Beauty confesses that a brave person lies about their courage for numerous reasons. They put on a brave face but, deep inside, they are affected by the unexpected turn in events. For her, setting out to save her father was more out of fear of losing her only parent instead of being brave;

They may want you to believe that I was simply being brave, but anxiety makes more heroes than history would care to repeat, it is better than sitting and waiting, letting the demon claw into your mind with worry. Anxious people are resourceful, they need to know how to keep the sea of panic at bay so they do not drown. (53)

She further confesses that the reason she decides to stay at the palace with the beast instead of her father is out of love for her father and not because of bravery. Similarly, her decision to return back to the beast is made out of devotion for someone who understands her love for books and her real self and not because she is brave. This reflects the dominance of humane emotions in her rather than the immaculate perfection with which she was portrayed in “Beauty and

the Beast”. While Western classic fairy tales portray good characters as flawless beings who possess all moral qualities and never falter in the sincerity of their actions, Gill portrays the main female lead of “Beauty and Bravery” as an imperfect human being who is an embodiment of a courageous person who lies about her bravery. “They make it out like the brave never lie, but the truth is, all of us lie at least twice a day and that has no bearing on how much courage you can hold in your heart” (53).

It is very unlikely to find the odd combination of courage and dishonesty in the heroine of a classic Western fairy tale as she represents the archetypal trope of a good princess who is innocent and knows no wrong. She does not depict human behavior that is bound to falter in its goodness at a certain point. However, Gill subverts such a blank portrayal of the main female lead in “Beauty and the Beast” and throws light over her short comings hidden behind the façade of her bravery in “Beauty and Bravery”. Gill gives an insight into the mind of Beauty in her version of this tale to foreground the idea that the partisan portrayal of characters in traditional fairy tales only puts forward unrealistic characters that promote impossible standards of goodness, thus putting unnecessary pressure on the readers to conform to such ideals in order to be socially accepted.

All these confessions by Gill’s Beauty from “Beauty and the Bravery” once again strive to challenge the partisan portrayal of characters in classic Western fairy tales that associates archetypal characters with specific qualities out of which they cannot exist. Gill subverts all such ideas of cliché characters in Beauty’s words,

*You do not have to be good to be brave.
You do not have to be perfect,
your mind completely clear,
your heart full of joy,
everything soft and sacred. (53)*

In “Beauty and Bravery”, Gill opposes the idea that heroes and good characters are meant to have clear minds and hearts full of happiness. Her Beauty is not a two dimensional character who does

not know how to think. Instead, she is a round character who is complex and is capable of inner conflicts and complicated thought process. According to Gill, heroines and heroes in classic Western fairy tales are flat characters who only know happiness and are depicted as perfect characters with a happy, fulfilled life. Characters like these only convey the idea that in order to lead a happy life, a person is supposed to be nothing but good. There is no space for committing a human error in traditional fairy tales if happiness is one's aim. Gill questions this notion by portraying Beauty as a complex character who has her fair share of fears and doubts despite her courage. An insight into Beauty's mind highlights the importance that Gill gives to the is absent in classic Western fairy tales.

Another aspect that Gill foregrounds is the beast's acceptance of Beauty's real self that is inclusive of all of her imperfections and reservations. In "Beauty and Bravery", Beauty does not conform to the stereotypical image of a heroine of a fairy tale. Instead, she discusses her uncertainties and her helplessness in the face of the ordeals that she faces which leads her to be courageous because she is left with no other choice but to be brave. In Gill's version of this tale, the beast embraces this non-conventional heroine of a fairy tale so Beauty chooses to return to him out of devotion by her own choice. Gill explains Beauty's choice in the following words:

This being, who had respected my love of books, who was the only one who had ever known the real me and esteemed me for who I am, I came back for him. We do not abandon those who truly accept us for who we are, and if you could save all the people who accepted you completely, wouldn't you go back to save them too? (54)

In her reappraisal of "Beauty and the Beast", Gill does not focus on creating her female character according to the conventional image of females in traditional fairy tales. She does not modify Beauty in align with the stereotypical notions for the beast to accept her. Instead, she challenges the partisan portrayal of Beauty in the classic fairy tale by proposing the idea that the male character in the fairy tale accepts the female character for "who she is" instead of pointing

out her imperfections. In “Beauty and the Beast”, Beauty returns to the beast out of compulsion but in “Beauty and Bravery”, the beast accepts Beauty’s real self and this understanding urges Beauty to return back to him. By rewriting this tale, Gill foregrounds the idea that characters do not need to be compartmentalized as good or bad. They can be imperfect, non-conventional and still be accepted for who they are without any modification according to the stereotypes prevalent in fairy tales. As Gill writes in “Beauty and Bravery’ that,

You do not have to be good to be brave.

You just need to know how to love.

You just need to unfold your heart

and recognise where you stand

and who you are. (54)

Gill’s *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) aims to talk about the stereotypes inculcated in the readers by the classic Western fairy tales through the partisan portrayal of characters. The writer has made an endeavor to survey the mental and psychological effects of such a way of characterization through numerous pages of interwoven fairy tales in a single book. It presents a very appropriate blend of both the archetypal characters in fairy tales that leave no room for humane emotions as well as the consequent trauma occurring in the life of the readers along with these characters. Nikita Gill manages to extract the grey in her reappraised tales out of the black and white characters presented in traditional fairy tales.

5. Conclusion

The strong influence of fairytales upon its readers cannot be denied. Presenting partisan archetypes like heroes and villains is one of the main characteristics of many folk and fairytales. Nikita Gill, in her book *Fierce Fairytales & Other Stories to Stir Your Soul* (2018) questions these stereotypes and highlights modern ideals by rewriting fairytales that project such stereotypes. She gives a modern make-over to stereotypical constructs like damsels in distress, assertive heroes and morally corrupt villains in traditional fairy tales. This proposed study aims at a better comprehension of such stereotypical notions presented in majority of folk and fairytales.

A close observation of the partisan portrayal of characters in fairy tales is depicted in this research paper. It highlights the clear distinction between good and bad qualities of heroes and villains and how it leaves no space for ideas like redemption in fairy tales. It estimates how the assertion of moral values through characters that do not even possess a healthy balance between their good and bad qualities impacts the readers of fairy tales. This study aims to call attention to Gill's effort to undo the black and white representation of characters in fairy tales and bring forward grey characters that possess human moral and immoral qualities in a balanced way. It discusses the replacement of archetypal characters with characters that are not blatantly good or bad in *Fierce Fairytales* (2018).

Gill's *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) serves the purpose of setting up a portrayal of clichés that confine the collective consciousness of readers to certain socially acceptable behaviors. Undoubtedly, the prejudiced and stereotypical portrayal of concepts and characters in fairy tales that have a deep psychological effect on both the character as well as the reader are the main concern of the author. It makes all her characters a pictogram of her protest against the oppressive ideals in these fairy tales. The struggle of the characters for liberation, power and individuality reflects Nikita Gill's struggle for the freedom from any notion that oppresses the collective mental and social psyche of numerous upcoming generations.

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