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Reformulation of gender idea through the classic fairytale in Robert N. Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Abstract

Fairytales are told to children in order to imbibe some morals in them. These morals often play a major role in developing the behaviour of the children. Mostly they focus on gender positivity and other morals related to gender so that those morals will be caught in those young minds forever. The often heard fairytales contain a fair Princess waiting for her Prince charming in a castle and by the end the Prince in shining armour fights with the dragon and rescues the damsel. Robert. N. Muncsh's *The Paper Bag Princess* has given a wider and redefined prospective of this age old theme. This paper focuses on the reformulated idea of gender through the fairytale in Robert .N. Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Keywords; Gender idea, fairytale, moral.

Introduction

The classic fairy tales often set us into a typical mindset. We consciously or unconsciously are accustomed to those stories that are narrated to us from our childhood.

None ever bothered to change this mindset or none ever revolted against this idea. The princesses belong to a rich or high class whereas the prince belongs to the common class. These princesses are very delicate, attention seekers and quickly startled and the male rescuers belong to common or high class, handsome or not very handsome, stronger, brave and protective. Often these stories are about a princess who is locked up in a tower and her prince charming will come to rescue her from the tower guarded by a ferocious dragon. Or children are told the stories of Brothers Grimm like The Frog King, Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel etc. Most of these stories end with the enlightenment of the princess only after she is rescued by her prince charming. This was never changed and was widely accepted by all the generations. In one way or the other children are subjected to this mindset and they are imbibed by this theme that men, the prince is stronger and brave than the female, the princess. Another major trait of these fairy tales is that they always end with the dictum "*And they lived happily ever after*".

The basic concept of gender role was fixed until the second-wave feminism came into existence. The second-wave feminism focused on the wider range of rights to the women. The women, who were taught to be submissive in nature, came up with the idea that women are not to be treated in a biased manner on the basis of gender. They focused on the wider range of freedom and equality that they ought to carry forward with their life. The second-wave feminism originated in the United States in the early 1960s and it roughly was alive for a span of nearly two decades. It was soon spread to the European nations too. When the first-wave feminism gave focus to suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality, the second-wave feminism gave importance to a wider range of issues: sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, *de facto* inequalities, and official legal inequalities.

To establish their rights, women began to work in all fields and they began to pour out their inner feelings and their present state through the field of literature. Feministic

viewpoints and their suppression became the talk to the era. Eventually men and women became aware of the society and they began to rethink and reformulate the gender concept in all fields. This led to recreate the gender roles and writers began to switch gender functions. This resulted in the creation of no more princesses in danger and no more prince charming crossing hurdles to rescue her. One among such recreational writers was Robert. N. Munsch. He broke all the conventional ideas and he created a different and interesting fairy tale titled *The Paper Bag Princess*, which was worldwide hit for the breaking all the stereotypical aspect of gender roles.

Robert. N. Munsch, who was honoured with the Order of Canada, is an American born Canadian children's author. Noted for his exuberant storytelling methods with exaggerated expression and voices, Munsch has the unique ability to create stories in front of his audiences. His stories do not have a recurring single character; instead, the characters are based on the children to whom he first told the story, including his own children. He is also one of the most stolen authors in the Toronto Public Library.

The Paper Bag Princess was first published on 1 May 1980 by Annick Press and Discus Books. The story reverses the princess and the dragon stereotype. Due to the unique creation of the fairy tale, it was widely acclaimed by the feminists. The story revolves around the unconventional princess named Elizabeth and the typical prince named Ronald. The story begins with the happy preparation going on in the castle in regards with the wedding ceremony of Elizabeth and Ronald. In the second page of the book, unfortunately the dragon burns down the castle and everything in and around the castle and kidnaps the prince Ronald. With nothing left to wear Elizabeth wears a paper bag which alone was not burnt and she begins her journey to rescue her prince charming. She began to chase the dragon in order to get Ronald back. It was easy for Elizabeth to trace the track of the dragon as it left a trail of burnt forest and horses' bones. By following the traces that the dragon left, Elizabeth finally

reached the cave with the large door which had a huge knocker in it. She banged the door and the dragon stuck its nose out and said the princess to come the next day as it had eaten a lot and he also expressed his taste that he would love to eat a princess and the dragon slammed the door. Again Elizabeth knocked the door and this time she dealt the dragon with intelligence. She outwits the dragon and finally at the verge of rescuing the prince, the prince shames her for her un-princess attire and she leaves him for a “*happily ever after*”.

The tale which deals with the intelligent princess with a strong sense of wit and attitude and she proves that there is no need for a prince charming to rescue her in the state of distress. The book is meant for young readers with a total of 32 pages released in the year 1980.

By the different perspective of this fairy tale, Elaine Blakemore says that children are capable of forming the stereotypes about the gender roles at a very young age even by the age of one year old. Elaine Blakemore is a psychology professor in Indiana Purdue University. She says that a child will be capable to identify a sex by the age of three years. The role that fairy tales play in this aspect holds a big efficient part in the child’s mind and the fairy tales help in punching an image about gender roles and their traits in the minds of the young children.

The fairy tale begins with the introduction of the characters as –
“Elizabeth was a beautiful princess. She lived in a castle and had expensive princess clothes. She was going to marry a prince named Ronald.”

It should be noted that the princess had expensive clothes and she was going to marry a prince named Ronald. It is by the turn of the page the readers come to know that a dragon burns down the castle leaving behind no clothes to wear for the princess and the dragon carries off Ronald. By the depiction of the fairy tale it is clear that both the prince and the princess are the victims and not any specific gender is victimized. Elizabeth resolves to save

her prince Elizabeth wears a paper bag and goes behind the dragon to rescue her prince. The princess unlike any other fairytales goes behind the dragon wearing just a paper bag giving no importance to her unattractive dress and to her delicacy she needs to carry forward as a princess. Elizabeth chases the dragon through the forest by following the traces that the dragon left by burning down a trail of the burnt woods. He is the typical depiction of the European dragon, with green scaly skin, an alligator belly, two small wings, and four scaly feet with eagle talons. He can breathe fire, which puts him at the very top of the animal food chain and makes him physically superior to mankind in the medieval time period in which the story is set. His flames are extremely powerful. Elizabeth bangs the large door of the dragon and the dragon is portrayed as a very busy dragon and acknowledges that fact by himself to Elizabeth when she knocks the door of the dragon's cave.

"I am a very busy dragon. Come back tomorrow".

Elizabeth bangs the door again and this time she questions the dragon –

"Is it true that you are the smartest and fiercest dragon in the whole world?"

From here Elizabeth outwits the dragon. She asks the dragon whether it has the ability to burn down ten forests with its fiery breath and the proud and foolish dragon breathes out fire that it can burn up to fifty forests. Impressed by the ability of the dragon, the dragon breathes out much fire to burn up one hundred forests. *"Magnificent"* exclaimed Elizabeth and the proud dragon now breathes out fire but this time it didn't even have enough fire to cook a meatball. Elizabeth now asks the dragon that-

"Is it true that you can fly around the world in just ten seconds?"

The dragon proves it and Elizabeth asks to do it again but the dragon was tired by this time. Still the dragon does it again in twenty seconds and by this time the dragon was very tired to walk and talk went straight to sleep. Elizabeth now tried to wake up the dragon but it went to a deep sleep. Elizabeth went straight to into the dragon's cave and opened the door to

the cave. She saw Prince Ronald. To her surprise, instead of praising and appreciating her effort to rescue him single handedly, Ronald looked at her and said,

“Elizabeth, you are a mess! You smell like ashes, your hair is all tangled and you are wearing a dirty old paper bag.”

And he asks her to

“Come back when you are dressed like a real princess.”

The reply that Elizabeth gave was that even though the prince had all expensive clothes and even though his hair was very neat, the princess remarks him as

“You look like a real prince, but you are a bum.”

This reply shows that physical valor and strength is not necessary to fight against a battle but a good wit and attitude and succeed at any situation. The reply instills various kinds of perceptions into the readers. It shows that woman need self esteem, be witty and must also have the ability to make quick and spontaneous decisions. Moreover the tale ends with a unhappy note that,

“They do not marry after all.”

Though the story is not the typical happily-ever-after, it portrays how even an unexpected disappointment can be treated lightly, just like Elizabeth, who walks and dances in the sunset all by herself without worries.

The unconventional fairy tale proves to be the best among the feminists as they always wanted woman to be independent, rational and not as a woman decorated according to the whims and fancies of men’s wishes. This different and unusual way of narrating a fairytale helps the children to have a different perspective about gender that no gender is higher and all that matters is the use of wit and intelligence. Another perspective of this fairy tale is the ability to make spontaneous decisions and take the situations in a light manner to lead a carefree life. It is evident that Elizabeth is happy by the beginning of the tale when she

was a princess and she was equally happy by the end which is depicted through the artistic illustration that she leaves Ronald and dances and walks by sunset. The story can also reveal the patriarchal society. By this tale, Robert. N. Munsch became a pioneer of this kind of tales and paved way for positive gender centric plots. It is very important to impart the knowledge about the gender positive roles and tales in the young minds of children to have a healthy generation and there is no need to demarcate the roles of femininity and masculinity into the young minds unless they are taught against a specific gender.

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