ABSTRACT

Arts in education are an instrumental piece of the learning process. By having arts and education in this paper seeks to focus on the psychological relevance of fairy tales. The distancing of the context is a vital concern when a reference is made to fairy tales. Nevertheless they are important in terms of the emotionally enabling encounters they may prove to be for young children. Four fairy tales have been chosen here for the analysis and an endeavour has been made to explore the recurring themes relating to family and self emergent in these tales. An effort is made to explore the relevance from the standpoint of children and not reduce the texts to symbolic interpretation. The relevance of this analysis is based on the idea that fairytales are widely read and enjoyed by children and they are a part of the reading experiences that children have.

"Fairy tales; psychological relevance; children 'Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life.' (German poet, Schiller)"

INTRODUCTION

In this paper an attempt has been made to study childhood as a human development life-stage through the prism of myriad themes that unfold in fairy tales. Fairy tales have been chosen as a desirable medium as their readership primarily comprises of children. Thus, particularly in context of developmental psychology, their significance as a potent mode of shaping personality, constructing an image of the self in relation to others, enabling a cathartic release of emotions, developing emotional responsiveness, etc. cannot be ignored.

“Psychologists view the fairy tale as having a significant and positive role in the psychological development of children.” (Zipes, 2000, 404) They are considered not simply as a useful therapeutic tool in clinical practice, but as children's literature they are deemed to be an important part of every child's experience. “The basic premise is that children learn how to overcome psychological conflicts and grow into new phases of development through a symbolic comprehension of the maturation process as expressed in fairy tale.” (Zipes, 2000, 406) Also, the widespread popularity of these representations for a long span has been instrumental in exploring them as a potential source for studying child development.

For this paper four fairy tales, namely Cinderella, Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarfs, Hansel and Gretel, and Jack and the Beanstalk (A brief summary of these tales has been attached at the end of the paper. These have been constructed on the basis of popular renderings of fairy tales) have been chosen, keeping in view the themes that are explored in each one of them. The predominantly western context of the tales cannot be disregarded. However, taking into purview the colonial influence that tends to
loom large in the post colonial world, the tales however culturally alien they maybe are marked by a hint of familiarity. Thus based on the aforementioned ideas the primary objective of the paper is to identify themes from fairy tales that are salient for analyzing childhood as a life-stage. These will be based on a reading of the original texts and relevant critical interpretations of children’s literature. The second objective is to explore these with reference to characteristics of childhood elaborated in the domain of developmental psychology.

This paper has been divided into three sections. The first section focuses upon delineating the theoretical framework that has been used. This will comprise of a brief description of the views forwarded with respect to the psychological relevance of fairy tales and their salience in developing the argument. Also relevant paradigms from developmental psychology will be briefly discussed. The second section will be a detailed discussion of the themes culled out. Though the fairy tales present a predominantly Western perspective an attempt has been made to contextualize the discussion to the Indian context. The third section or the conclusion will be a brief summing up and an attempt to revisit the objectives spelled out in light of the analysis.

Psychological relevance of fairytales

Fairy tales, in context of children and adults alike, are a significant mode of entertainment. The degree to which they stir the imagination of children, inspiring strong passion and loyalties among them, is best captured in the famous author, Charles Dickens’ confessional comment - “…I felt if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss.” (Dickens, as quoted in Orenstein, 2002, 3) Without seeking to add drab complexity to the sheer fun and enjoyment of reading fairy tales, especially in case of children, the emphasis is on the complex cognitive process of meaning-making, relating them to one’s own life-situations, drawing pleasure from the inherent idealism, fantasy cognition etc that occur simultaneously during this engagement. These processes are inextricably intertwined with each other (Simonsen, 1985).

Drawing from the multiple views forwarded on the psychological interpretation of fairy tales the attempt is to seek to employ an eclectic paradigm for the analysis of the aforementioned tales. Bruno Bettelheim’s widely popularized treatise, The Uses of Enchantment (1976), on the psychological value and uses of fairy tales in the upbringing of the child is one of them. Bettelheim’s work is based primarily on the concepts embedded in psychoanalysis. In this book, “Bettelheim poignantly describe(s) how the child’s imagination is served by romantic stories, especially those told to the child and, in the telling, elaborated by the child’s freely created variations” (Zelan, 2000, 5). Also “Bettelheim emphasized the collaboration of parent and child in sharing fairy tales to enhance the child’s developing sensibilities” (Zelan, 2000, 5). Also, since this viewpoint has been contested and questioned by later commentators, such as Maria Tatar In the book The Hard Facts of Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1987), an attempt has been made to look at those also and drawn insights from the same. Tatar (2007) in her thesis attempts to escape the adult perspective on children’s literature. She offers a completely opposite view. As she highlights in an interview, “(t) he psychosexual readings have become predictable. I’m trying to capture what happens in the child” (Tatar, in an interview Craig Lambert, 2007).

Also, while reading through the fairy tales there were several issues and concerns which could be related to different theoretical perspectives from psychology. These cannot be delimitied to a certain particularized theory. Therefore briefly it has been attempted to identify and correlate them with diverse theoretical formulations that relate to the socio-emotional development, cognitive development and the specific cultural context of growing up. These pertain to various sub-themes, such as self-image, familial contexts, fantasy and imagination, cultural embeddedness etc, that are salient for the crystallization of various facets of identity and development.
Thus taking into purview the above mentioned points the analysis will involve the examination of the fairy tales at two levels. Firstly what characteristics, conflicts, dilemmas and developmental milestones of childhood do the fairy tales highlight or exemplify? Secondly how do instances, events and depictions in the stories function as a resource for children. These are overlapping concerns and will be dealt with simultaneously in the next section of the paper.

**ANALYSIS**

One salient feature of this analysis is that the attempt in this paper is to focus on ‘understanding’ fairytales and not subjecting them to a symbolic interpretation. In case of the latter, the propensity of meaning-making and the sheer heterogeneity of perspectives is narrowed down and reduced to singular overarching representations. Thus, it can be suitably deduced that the word - understanding – connotates or brings to fore a unique, individualized and dynamic relation between situation and the person who experiences them.

Reading a fairy tale is often accompanied by epiphanic moments of wonder and delight for the child. Also the sheer fact that it is ‘Once upon a time’ entails that it isn’t real and that one can laugh about it is a licensed form of release. Thus when the child encounters death, violence or neglect in the tales it helps allay many childhood fears. As Tatar explains, the wild curiosity among children about what adults keep from them is addressed when they just dive right in and identify powerfully with the characters (Tatar 2007). Relating from personal experience of reading fairy tales as a child and drawing from the available literature, I would like to sum up certain identifiable key characteristics that add to the psychological relevance of these tales.

- The sheer simplicity of the narrative, not discounting the emotional range – joy, sadness, bereavement, loneliness, sympathy, empathy, delight, pleasure, excitement etc – that they offer.
- The element of the fantastic which allows a wide scope for imagination is a prominent characteristic. In comparison to the visual medium that gives a singular interpretation to the story, reading fairy tales/stories enhance the imaginative capacity much more by giving scope and leverage to individual imagination.
- They offer wit, wisdom, warning, counsel, humor and moral messages through stereotypical characters and stock situations.
- The dichotomies woven in the fabric of the tales - vulnerability and strength, risk and reward, loss and restitution – also offer a range of perspectives. Also the juxtaposition of opposite characters is not for the purpose of stressing right behavior. Rather one may argue that the characters permit the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two. However one can not overlook or negate the polarities embedded in these representations, often far-fetched from the ‘real’ world.
- The tales have a highly romantic/idealistic resolution; and for the same, the protagonists in peril are often aided by preternatural creatures in one way or the other. An adventure – such as traversing through a perilous forest, climbing an un-ending beanstalk, encountering a fairy etc - are deployed and intended to resolve fundamental human problems – poverty, grief, isolation, absence of affection etc.
- The setting of the narratives, though explicitly stated, often tend to bypass aspects such as assignation of specific temporal-spatial location.

In light of the above mentioned characteristics following is the analysis of the four tales. To begin with, the representation of family dynamics in the stories is significant. In the tale of Hansel and Gretel the parental figures are characterized by a heartless step-mother, pitted against a weak, hapless father figure. The latter fails miserably to express his love and affection for his children. Instead Hansel plays a father figure to his sister by consoling and taking care of her in the ‘dark, deep forest’. The latter too
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ingeniously saves her brother’s life during the encounter with the witch. Thus what is witnessed here is a brilliant display of sibling solidarity, strengthened in absence of parental figures. They provide strength and solace to each other and join forces in order to overcome the hardships faced.

The representations can prove to be significant experiences of learning and the manner in which the reader/child relates to these symbolic expressions of emotional experience are instrumental in shaping behavior. It brings to fore the idea that there is not a naive acceptance of circumstantial irregularities on the part of the child; rather, it involves active negotiation with the environment. The responsiveness to familial spaces is characterized by moments of vulnerability and shared happiness.

Further, with respect to parenting all the four tales highlight a visibly evident pattern. Consangunuity is always accorded a higher pedestal than affinity in kinship. For instance in Hansel and Gretel, the father, however gutless his attitude maybe is always shown as a positive figure. The female representations, wherever they are not blood-relations, are unerringly vicious and conniving, be it Cinderella, Snowwhite or Hansel and Gretel. In case of an audience/subscription, especially children, from cultures which are collectivist in orientation and where the upbringing of the child is particularly participatory in nature these representations might generate a dilemma.

In particularly Indian context the grandparents, aunts and uncles tend to play an important role in the upbringing of the child even if it is not a peculiarly joint family. Patterns of family, such as the extended families, living in same locality or geographically clustered etc. are examples of the same. It is only in case of Jack and the Beanstalk we come across a single parent who is caring and affectionate. In contrast, in case of Cinderella an image of neglect is etched out and the absence of significant others comes to fore. Based upon the Rogerian paradigm, it can be said that the environment of an unconditional positive regard or basic need of self-worth, fundamental for psychological well-being is not addressed. Rather than providing a protective cocoon the exploitative aspect is brought to the fore as she is coerced into submissiveness to her sisters. In contrast to the Hansel and Gretel unequal sibling relations are witnessed.

The name Cinderella, which literally means little ashes, highlights her position in the house. In the tale Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarfs the relation between the narcissistic and jealous mother and the vulnerable Snowwhite is highlighted. Also, ranging from Hansel and Gretel’s own home to the witch’s house there is a visible lack, a lack of congenial and conducive space. Though the representations portray polar emotional responses, yet one cannot negate their sheer presence.

It brings to fore significant insights regarding the psychosocial development of the child. By relating with the events or characters, the tales functions as significant learning experiences for children. “Fairy tales are existential dramas in which children subconsciously confront their own problems and desires on the path to adulthood.” (Bettelheim, in Zipes, 2000, 407) In light of the discussion above, these may be in the form of strengthening of the parental bond or the relation with siblings, allaying of fears of loss as romantic resolutions of being reunited are played out in the narratives or even enabling a cathartic release by venting of pent up emotions.

Further, the tales become conduits where wishes and fantasies come alive and become full-bodied presences. For instance “in a description of a princess, all you get are light and sparkle, dazzle, shine, golden dresses and silver shoes. You never get a description of her face. You have to use the power of your imagination.”(Tatar, in an interview Craig Lambert, 2007) Other examples include such as that of the witch’s house which is made of sugar and candy in Hansel and Gretel, the world of the dwarfs in Snowwhite, the appearance of the fairy godmother who generates splendid things from nowhere in Cinderella, the unending beanstalk which Jack climbs with relish and the singing harp and golden hen he manages to discover etc.

Especially in case of Jack a balance between the fear of the unknown and the curiosity to discover is remarkably depicted. Akin to the Piagetian thought, the child’s wonder and amazement to discover what the sky is comes through. And fantasy, according to the viewpoint of child-development experts,
has being recognized as a salient factor in understanding reality. Fairy tales thus can become an important medium during childhood for understanding reality as the world is steeped in fantasy cognition. So the beanstalk for Jack becomes an imaginative means to reach-up and unravel for himself/herself the world of the giant.

These are inevitably accompanied by fears and phobias that animate the imagination of the child. Phrases such as ‘frightening shadows’, ‘evil eyes,’ etc abound the narratives. The anxieties and tensions of being abandoned and devoured by forest creatures bring to fore the concerns that characterize childhood. Bettelheim’s (1976) analysis highlights that these experiences, though treacherous and even life threatening, help the child to get over separation anxiety when he/she comes of age and needs to discover autonomy. Also, in light of the Ericksonian paradigm one may argue that the developmental crisis, elaborated by him in context of the stage of childhood, is played out quite elaborately in the tales. For instance Hansel’s decision of throwing pebbles or breadcrumbs can be read as an instance of taking initiative or autonomous decision making that involves undertaking, planning and attacking a task.

Further, the fairy tales become an important source of engendering perceptions about the self and identifying with the accepted and recognized cultural stereotypes etc. The feminine ideal exemplified in the tales such as Cinderella and Snowwhite are potent indicators of the same. Children are bound to associate themselves with the figures valorized. The social importance attached to this ideal is reinforced and the display of normative behaviors is socially rewarded. However if one seeks to look at them in the Indian context the propensity of generating conflict in the mind of the reader/child is inevitable. The patterns of socialization in both cultures vary. In the western context social interaction with the opposite sex, after attaining puberty, is accepted. This has been a predominantly urban phenomenon in the Indian context; in fact, puberty marks the phase where the interaction of girls with boys is restrained.

Besides being artistic reproductions these tales are cultural products too – legitimizing and reproducing the dominant gender system. It brings into play the notion of class differences and the imposition of the norms of a certain section/class of the society. Cinderella meets the prince only when she is dressed in all her finery, whether it is at the ball or at the end of the story when she is united with the prince. Implicit in the warning about returning at time is the notion of making the child aware that heeding to time limits set by the parents, in this case the fairy godmother, is significant or else there would be have to bear the consequences.

CONCLUSION

Thus in the light of the discussion above one can deduce that fairy tales are a means to explain core life concepts and intrinsic human flaws that they may further unravel for themselves through experience. Thus the externalization of the internal processes in stories functions as a significant means to stimulate the intellect. By meditating on the conflicts presented children can find solution to their own problems. (Favat, 1977).

Further they function as a medium where the reader can come out and realize himself/herself; thus enabling an understanding of oneself and the world around. The empathetic response they yield is phenomenal as they bring to fore a wide variety of situations that the reader is facing or might encounter in subsequent years (Anand, 2012). The element of the magical and supernatural events makes these tales akin to dreams – translating the psychic realities to concrete images. The only difference being that they offer “collective truths and realities” that “transcend individual experience.” (Tatar, 2007, xxxiii) Thus the fairy tale, however stereotypical and idealistic it may be, relaxes the tensions brought on by socialization and change, and provides a fictional realm where children can re-experience the pleasure of a magical, egocentric world ordered according to their desires.
Brief summary: fairy tales chosen for analysis

- Cinderella: The story of Cinderella is that of a girl who is forced to do household chores while her step-mothers and step-sisters live a life of comfort and luxury. A ball is being organized and she ardently wishes to attend the party as her sisters. She cries while she is all by herself. The appearance of a fairy godmother is a significant juncture in the tale as she provides, magically, beautiful garments and a splendid carriage to take her to the ball. However she warns her to leave the palace by midnight lest her beautiful gown will change to rags. At the ball as soon as she hears the sound of the clock she dashes towards the door and by mistake leaves her slipper. On finding the slipper a messenger is sent across by the prince, who is smitten by Cinderella’s beauty, to find the girl to whom the slipper belonged. Cinderella’s sisters and mother are shocked when it perfectly fits her. The story ends when the Prince, eagerly awaiting her presence is able to find her.

- Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarfs: Snowwhite, as the name suggests, is the story of a girl who is extremely pretty. Her step-mother is extremely jealous of her beauty as she desires to be the most beautiful woman. She gets even angrier and envious of her daughter when her magic mirror answers that Snowwhite is the fairest one of all. To get rid of Snowwhite she bribes a servant at the palace who leaves her all by herself in the forest. All alone in the forest she is rescued by dwarfs who take her to their cottage. She begins to live with them and the step-mother believes that she had died in the forest. However she is filled with rage when the mirror once again declares Snowwhite as the fairest maiden. Dressed as an old peasant woman, she visits the forest and comes to the cottage where Snowwhite had been living. She attempts to kill her by giving her a poisoned apple. After consuming the apple she lies still and lifeless until one day a prince comes. Smitten by her beauty he kisses her and this breaks the spell which she had been put under on consuming the apple.

- Hansel and Gretel: The tale of Hansel and Gretel is a story of two siblings who are intentionally abandoned by their father in the forest, on being coerced and nagged by their step-mother. They manage to return for the first time as Hansel cleverly leaves a trail of pebbles to mark the way. However the second time Hansel commits the error of putting a trail of breadcrumbs, which are eaten by the birds and other creatures of the forest. Lost in the woods, they happen to chance upon a house, which to their surprise is made of sweet delicacies. As they begin to eat them they fall into the trap of a witch who locks up Hansel and forces Gretel to do household chores. Gretel manages to befool the witch and saves her brother, Hansel. They manage to find the way back to their home and carry the witch’s casket of gold coins with them where they learn from their father that the step-mother had died. Once reunited the father promises never to desert them.

- Jack and the Beanstalk: The story revolves around Jack and his mother who is barely able to make ends meet. One day on being left with no food she asks him to sell their cow in the market. As Jack is going to the market he meets an old man on his way who offers to buy the cow for seven magic beans. Jack is unwilling to offer the cow for a few beans. The old man asks him to sell the cow if he finds a better offer in the market. To his dismay Jack is not able to find a better bargain and he exchanges the cow for the beans offered. His mother is very angry and upset and throws the beans out of the window. To their surprise the beans grow overnight into a massive beanstalk. Jack decides to climb it but he is warned by his mother. Nevertheless he makes an attempt and encounters a fierce giant and his gentle wife on top of the beanstalk. He manages to procure a hen who lays golden eggs from the giant’s house. After a few days he climbs once again on the stalk and barely manages to flee in the nick of the time as the giant attacks him. He cuts the beanstalk as soon as he reaches on the ground. The giant disappears; however Jack manages to procure his magical singing harp for himself.
REFERENCES