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Fairy tale and its trans-generic identity

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Abstract

My paper looks at the common ground between the process of genre formation and nation formation. Both proceed by rigid differentiation and exclusion. In Benedict Anderson's concept of nation as 'imagined communities', 'nations' begin from the rigid 'territoriality' of space. In fairy tales, a similar rigidity constitutes its generic core, making it possible to develop in a more flexible direction.

Todorov establishes the similarities and differences between literary genres and other 'speech acts', thus positioning 'folk tale' as the point of departure from which 'fairy tale' as a genre surfaces. Looking into the development of one genre from another genre (like the nation from a nation), through the tales *Puss in Boots* and *Cinderella*, I will problematize the relationship between various genres and fairy tale as a genre; an individual fairy tale and 'fairy tale' as a genre; and fairy tale as a meta-genre, the very essence of literature. Propp identifies mechanisms like 'reduction', 'expansion', and 'contamination' in order to elucidate the adaptation of 'traditional' genres. However, the limitation of this formalist approach lies in its denial of a more historical and dialectical approach.

The paper explores the dominance of some genres through their subordination of others. How do we read individual tales through the lens of genre understood as a constantly evolving category determined by trans-generic appropriations across media?

Keywords: Fairy tale, genre, nation, magic, folk tale

Introduction

The term 'genre' has variously been defined as 'kind', 'class' or 'sort' which classifies world literature, oral or written, into various categories historically. With the proliferation of stories, their categorization into types allowed ease of understanding and drew similar responses. As the genres became rigid and strictly defined, the term began losing its dynamic identity, so much so that during the Romantic period, 'genre literature' became synonymous with low literature, depicting fixed writing styles and themes; to be understood in contrast with 'high' literature, synonymous with individuality and artistic creativity.

The ambiguity associated with the term continues in contemporary genre theory, although it has lost the derogatory label. It has been argued that an inclusive classification of texts according to either 'content' or 'form' is necessary to understand a text in all its diverse meanings. Genre Criticism according to Frederic Jameson, "has always maintained a privileged relationship with historical materialism." (Jameson, 2013, p. 102) ^[1]. Within a genre, a text rises above its isolated existence to be interpreted both as a part of the social, political and economic conditions within which it is produced and received and in relation to other texts belonging to the genre.

Fairy tale, the genre under consideration in this paper, similarly draws its identity from various genres of the past and present, to be recognized in its present form. The genre with which it is intrinsically related and of which it is supposed to be an extension is that of folktales. The relationship between folktales and fairy tales has been explained by the renowned fairy tale scholar, Jack Zipes. According to him, fairy tales developed initially as a sub-genre of folktales, gradually becoming recognized as a separate genre. He supports his claim by acknowledging that a 'pure genre' does not exist. Genres emerge, gain relevance, and become extinct or dormant as a result of transformations of existing genres. Owing to the dominant socio-political conditions, certain features gain prominence in one and get subdued in the other genre. Primarily, folktales are believed to have an 'oral' origin whereas fairy tales are more 'literary' and secondly, 'magic' is more central to fairy tales.

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Zipes refutes the theory of treating the literary fairy tale as a separate genre from the oral tales. A fairy tale cannot exist in isolation from other genres. It has something in common with tales that have always existed and are as old as language itself. He criticizes scholars like Ruth Bottigheimer for her claim that a fairy tale did not exist till it was written down by Giovan Francesco Straparola in the sixteenth century. Her theory is based on the assumption that a fairy tale has a fixed form, the form which has been accepted as the 'standard' one over the years. This form, according to her, includes fixity of character types, plots, a compactness of narrative and the use of magic amongst others as necessary elements for any text in consideration to qualify as a fairy tale.

Folklorist and Critic, Lutz Rohrich provides a connecting link between the two contradictory approaches by elucidating that the history of a fairy tale can be traced in two ways: through "datable texts," that can be traced to a particular culture and time or through the "antiquity" of motifs and themes that can be found in otherwise historically and culturally disparate tales. (Rohrich, 2008, p. 369) ^[9]. The similar patterns connecting various tales are indeed present, and it is these patterns that provide an alternative to the 'paper trail'.

The crystallisation of fairy tale - as a compact, written and magical genre, separate from the folktale exemplifies the process of genre formation. The dominant socio-cultural and political ideas at a specific historical moment find a reflection in the dominant genres of the period. Venice in the fifteenth century provided a platform for the emergence of the popular understanding of the genre 'fairy tale' with Straparola's collection titled, 'The Pleasant Nights'. It re-emerged in France in the sixteenth century (Perrault's *The Tales of Mother Goose*) and again in Germany in the nineteenth century with Brothers Grimm's collection titled 'Children's and Household Tales. Fairy tales, like other genres, evolved over time from already existing genres "by inversion, by displacement, by combination". (Todorov, 2014, p. 197) ^[10]. In fact, as Todorov argues, "any instance of a genre will be necessarily different." (Todorov, 2014, p. 198) ^[10]. Genres evolve constantly; therefore, any particular text at any given time is necessarily different in form or function from the codified set of rules governing the genre and the other texts constituting the genre.

Vladimir Propp's path breaking text *Morphology of the Folktale*, defines the genre of fairy tale. According to him, fairy tales share a common fixed structure, which can be studied as the basis of including certain tales as a part of this genre and excluding others. He divides fairy tales into a set of thirty-one 'functions. A function is an event or action (a constant), which according to the structural approach has a fixed place in the plot and is independent of the actant's age, sex, occupation or motivations (variables). Functions follow each other in a given sequence, although all tales might not have all the functions.

Propp's exposition provides a detailed analysis of one aspect of the fairy tale genre – its form. The form or the outer structure, according to him, is fixed while the content may vary. His approach provides a common ground for the analysis of a vast repertoire of tales in comparison with each other as long as they can be broken down into the thirty-one constant functions. Every tale follows the linear sequence to reach the same conclusion. While this approach is advantageous to study the genre synchronically, it

disregards the diachronic aspect of it. However according to Levi Strauss, one of the limitations of Propp's model is precisely it's not being 'synchronic' enough. He does not make a distinction between the narrative surfaces (manifestation) with an underlying narrative structure. Or in Jameson's words, Propp's fault lies in having "rewritten the primary narratives in terms of another narrative, rather than in terms of a synchronic system". It fixes the tales in a particular time frame without regard for its past existence or future possibilities. This teleological method reduces the genre to a mere device for classification, with no room for growth or expansion. The inclusion or exclusion of a text within a category is decided on the basis of strict rules. The sole emphasis is on the extent to which the tales are similar to each other where any deviance from the prescribed model is seen as an imperfection. The 'variables' or the factors distinguishing one tale from the other, within a genre, such as the historical context, the physical attributes or the psychological conflicts of the characters are discredited. In Propp's opinion: "all the functions of the fairy-tale belong to one and the same narration." Propp, 2014, p. 54) ^[8].

The mechanisms provided by Propp such as Reduction, Expansion, Inversion, Contamination and Modification take into consideration the tales of the past only to foreground the 'skeleton of the fairy tale', which he believes remains the same in a tale irrespective of its geographical, spatial or temporal attributes. The text is valued in itself without taking into account the social factors resulting in its production.

In an analysis of the popular fairytale 'Cinderella', the various functions listed by Propp can be traced, in the following manner: Absentation (The death of her father after marrying the step mother), Interdiction (Cinderella is ill-treated by the step family), Trickery (Cinderella is made to believe she can attend the ball), Complicity (Cinderella bears her victimization), First Donor function (Cinderella is banned from the ball), Receipt of Agent (Fairy Godmother appears) and so on till the stepsisters (villain) are punished and Cinderella marries the prince.

This structural composition of the tale and the various functions listed above, remain the same for innumerable versions of the Cinderella tale, whether it is *Sheh Hsien*, a tale by an unknown author composed in 9th C. CE or *Cindrellion* composed by Perrault in 1697 or *Aschenputtel* created by Grimms bothers in 1812. Regardless of the dominant ideology and the cultural conditions which consciously or unconsciously govern any textual production, Propp's model reduces all the versions to a single tale owing to their similar configuration.

Apart from the oral-written division the most defining feature which is believed to separate the genre of fairy tales from all other genres surrounding it, is the presence of magic as a constitutive factor. The close association between magic and fairy tales has reached a stage where it is impossible to imagine one without the other. This was however not always the case. Magic has been an intrinsic part of medieval European societies and its presence has been documented in various medieval genres.

Fifteenth century Europe saw the emergence of two related phenomena. Firstly, as discussed above, the genre of fairy tale diverged from the parent genre of folktales by being recorded as a written genre. Secondly; the prevalent notion of magic underwent a significant change. The two phenomena are not to be seen as isolated occurrences. For

any new genre to emerge, both the form and function of the previously existing genres has to undergo an evolutionary change. The changing perception of magic in society led to the emergence of a new genre in the written form which reflected as well as marked this change. At the same time, the content of the genre fairy tale became associated with the specialized depiction of magic.

Magic, at any time period is perceived in accordance with other structures of belief, especially religion. Silvia Federici in her insightful work *Caliban and the Witch* argues that secular magic has been a part of the everyday lives of the pre-capitalist societies. It was manifested in a variety of forms such as healing potions, charms, palmistry etc. and was seen as an extension of nature, with even the human body acting as a receptacle. The view of the body as magical was propagated by the Heretic sects of the 12th century. This view however, went contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church denouncing the body as well as magic as sinful. Ironically, according to the church, the supernatural was separated by a binary between the divine miracles and pagan magic. In spite of the distinction, the attitude of the Church towards magic such as healing rituals etc. was fairly tolerant till the middle ages. Christianity's position was absolute—that which was magic was demonic and therefore condemned; that which was approved could not be magic. Instead of relying on demonic power, approved rites were conceived as drawing on natural forces or divine power.

A sudden shift in this tolerant attitude can be observed towards the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century. Federici marks this period as the period of primitive accumulation signifying a move towards capitalism. The capitalist desire is aimed at disciplining the body, that is, to make it controllable and to maximize its productivity.

A nexus was achieved between the church and the state as is evident from the establishment of the 'Holy Inquisition' which allowed the crimes against Church to be legally punished. The 'unproductive' elements such as magic, which promoted a belief that 'one could get what one wanted without work' had to be destroyed for a complete mechanization of the body. The effective establishment of a capitalist ideology required a persistent suppression of subversive ideas advanced by magic. This in turn, gradually led to a changed understanding of magic as an unconscious, ever present force (inseparable from medicine and superstitions) to an activity practiced consciously and deemed to be dangerous and 'evil'. To reinforce the thought process, magic was not merely considered a social evil; it was also vehemently persecuted and the practitioners were condemned to torture by the state.

The changed attitude towards magic was accompanied by a change in the perception of the practitioners of magic as well. In the pre-capitalist era, magic was not specifically associated with women. It was with the publication of Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* in the late fifteenth century that the specific connection of women with magic became widespread. Women, primarily who lived outside the prescribed gender roles – as rebels, healers, midwives, heretics (practicing 'deviant' or non-procreative sexuality), or those providing 'forbidden' (and criminalized) knowledge of contraception or abortion were branded as 'witches' by the joint efforts of the newly consolidated capitalist state and the catholic church. These were also the women who symbolized a subversive agency and stood at

the forefront of the struggles against the advancement of capitalism. Fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe recorded the most violent witch hunts persecuting thousands of women for practicing 'witchcraft'.

The renewed interest in magic (albeit for its persecution), in the dominant discourse of the period is reflected in the genre of literary fairy tales. Ruth Bottigheimer lists the features which differentiate fairy tale magic from its earlier manifestations as follows: firstly, instead of a parallel world, magic, in the form of fairies and other supernatural beings, now enters the human world in order to benefit human beings. Secondly, human beings become the centre of narrative focus by acquiring magical gifts. Thirdly, magic brings about a 'this-worldly' happy ending for its protagonists.

In the period where the practice of magic was punished by persecution of witches, the literary fairy tale developed as a counter-genre effectively subverting the dominant ideology. Straparola's *The Pleasant Nights* featuring fairy tales had been put on Parma's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books) in 1580. It is important to note that of the distinction made by the Inquisition between black magic and white magic, Straparola's tales correspond to the use of black magic, which was deemed sinful. His treatment of magic is at times playful and mocking. Women give birth to pigs and a magic doll poops gold to help her poor mistress. In other tales such as *Constantino Fortunato* (Straparola's version of *Puss in Boots*), the cat in the story is a fairy in disguise and helps the protagonist in the attainment of a wife and immense wealth. The good fairy governed by a sense of love and loyalty counters the association of women and magic with evil. The division between fairy and witch was not firmly established during Straparola's time. The roles and appearances separating them in later versions were blurred in the fifteenth century cultural imagination.

The formation of the literary fairy tale as a genre highlights the fact: "Fantasy (like any other genre) recombines and inverts the real, but does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relationship to the real." (Jackson, 2015, p. 20) [4].

Owing to the fact that a 'genre' is the larger umbrella term, constituting and in turn being constituted by a number of texts, a formulaic approach (for instance Propp's exposition) confining texts within the concrete boundaries, neither foregrounds the individual characteristics of the text nor visibilizes the relationship it establishes with other texts and genre at large. A text has a dialectical relationship with the codified set of rules governing the genre to which it belongs, and other texts establishing the genre. Therefore, there cannot be a complete synchronicity between any two texts of a genre or between a text and the genre. This essential difference (fluidity) is not only a must to keep intact the individual importance of the text, but should also be indispensably celebrated.

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