

Once Upon a Time in Nature: Interrogating *Grimms' Fairy Tales* in an Ecocritical Light

Mousrisha Roy

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
University of Kalyani,
Kalyani, Nadia, India.
mousrisha@gmail.com

Structured Abstract:

Purpose: Interrogating Nature in popular folktales manifests the societal ecological perspectives.

Design: Selected tales from *Grimms' Fairy Tales* are analyzed as primary texts through the methodology of discourse analysis within the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism.

Findings: Banishment of characters into forests projects nature as 'other' -ed space outside realm of the civilized and the familiar where rules of civilization are non-functional. Nature acts as judge, rewarding characters for goodness and punishing them for wrong-doings. Tales like "Mother Holle" suggest symbiotic relationship and interdependence between human and environment. The divide between humans and non-human creatures, which leads to perceived superiority of and exploitation by human beings, is blurred by frequent interactions and transformations between human and non-humans. Environmental influence on man and aspects of human-Nature relationship are also manifested by portraying differences between persons living in close association with nature and being endowed with mystical power, and civilized men.

Value: Investigating the ecological implications of these tales suggest how they function as ideological apparatus impacting eco-consciousness of (children) readers.

Keywords: Binary, Ecocritical, Folktales, Interdependence, Nature.

Paper Type: Research Article.

At first orally transmitted and only later collected in written documents, folk tales have their origin in time immemorial, and have been subjected to innumerable literary re-workings. Thus the written tales, as they exist presently, not merely record the beliefs and conventions of the particular geographic and temporal spaces in which they are born, but they portray the cultural and ideological orientations, as well as the ecological-consciousness developed by a nation in the course of a long tradition. Moreover, since folk tales are widely read by children, its various aspects play significant role in shaping children's attitude to nature.

Therefore the folk tales function as immensely powerful ideological apparatuses, its significance in constructing the ideologies of a child being no less significant than that of apparatuses like school, church and family –the apparatuses discussed by Louis Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.¹Therefore, an ecocritical analysis of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, which has enjoyed worldwide tremendous popularity among children readers, is of utmost significance.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, applying “an earth-centric approach to literary studies” and thus interrogating the relation “between human culture and the physical world” (Glotfelty 1906, p. xviii, p. xx). Indeed, the nature-culture binary constitutes the very basis of folk tales, nature being often presented in contrast to manmade society. In many stories the central characters must transgress the boundaries of the civilized human society and enter the realm of nature in order to experience the central events. Nature, particularly in the form of dense forests, mountains etc., thus becomes an exotic, ‘other’ -ed space outside the periphery of the civilized and the familiar – a magical, mysterious space where the laws of civilization no longer function and where anything might happen - where animals can speak and magic is abundant, both in its positive and negative sense.

Hansel and Gretel are left into the depth of the forest on the assumption of their stepmother that these little children will be incapable of finding the way to get out of the forest, and therefore, will not be able to return home. The forest here becomes the place of banishment for Hansel and Gretel where not only they are confined, but also they are exposed to the danger of being attacked and killed by any ferocious animal. However, as the camouflage of leaving them behind, the parents pretend going to collect wood from the forest, while the children are instructed to rest by fire amidst the trees. Thus while on one hand the evil act of deserting children in the forest becomes connected to another evil, anthropocentric practice - the human exploitation of natural resources by cutting trees in order to gather fuel, on the other hand, the place of exile also unproblematically becomes a space of warm comfort where Hansel and Gretel can rest, and can even fall asleep. So although nature is the ‘other’ -ed space, it is not devoid of the cajoling care, and although the misfortunes of Hansel and Gretel are caused by natural creatures - birds who eat the pieces of bread scattered by Hansel with the intention of following those pieces to find the way home, yet it is another natural creature – the duck – which eventually performs a significant role in their returning home

after they are finally able to escape the captivation of the witch. Thus an overwhelming benevolence of nature is implied through the tale.

Nevertheless, this mother-like nature turns into, what Lord Alfred Tennyson calls, “Nature, red in tooth and claw”,² in “The Little Red Riding Hood”. The forest becomes a site of the struggle for existence, and if the little girl is not always alert, both she and her grandmother are to be trapped and devoured by the predatory wolf. Natural beauty, including beautiful flowers on the trees and the warm sunlight, loses its aesthetic appeal and functions as mere temptation by which the girl may be seduced into being late to her grandmother’s house. Thus this tale suggests that viewing nature in a simplistic positive light might bring sinister consequences.

In most of the tales, however, nature stands in support of the oppressed, downtrodden people. A classic example of this can be found in an ecofeminist analysis of the story of Cinderella, where the factor of commonality between the female protagonist and her non-human helpers is the oppression exerted on them by the patriarchal, anthropocentric society. Cinderella is tortured not only by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters, but also by the patriarchal structure where a man may remarry within few months of the decease of his first wife, being least concerned about how amount of torment inflicted on the child from the first marriage by her stepmother and stepsisters; the structure where getting married to the prince is viewed as a valued trophy to gain which girls happily cut off their toes and heels. On the other hand, the hazel tree grows up with as much neglect as Cinderella herself, being watered only by the tears shed by her. The birds, dependent on the tree for shelter, also become sympathetic towards her. Thus the natural elements identify with oppressed position of Cinderella, and they actively help her not only in going to the royal feast but also in leading the prince to marry her.

Similarly the tale of Snow white, or Snowdrop as she is called in some versions, also promotes patriarchy. This story is problematic not only because it projects Snowdrop as a beautiful, attractive yet docile and gullible young woman who gains the favour of the males – be it the evil queen’s servant, the seven dwarfs, or ultimately the prince – solely by her physical charm, and, in case of the dwarfs, also by her satisfactory performance of her gender role (i.e., cooking and taking care of the household), but also because this tale suggests the patriarchally and conventionally upheld single conception of feminine beauty, as has been rightly pointed out by Tazeen Erum (Erum, 2009, p. 4-6). However, while Erum views the

description of Snowdrop's beauty through a feminist lens, and indeed the linear equation between a snowy 'white' complexion and 'beauty' might as well lead to an application of Critical Race Theory on the tale, yet an ecocritical examination of Snowdrop's beauty is also equally relevant. Both her white skin and her black hair resemble natural elements – snow and ebony respectively. Yet she is salvaged from the stark binary contrast between black and white by the lively red of her cheeks – red which resembles human blood, the vital element of human body. Thus visually Snowdrop herself stands for a synthesis between the human and the natural, which justifies the fact that she receives sympathetic treatment from not only men but also the non-human world – no wild beast harms her when she is left alone in forest by the queen's servant, and birds come down in order to mourn when she is found dead. On the other hand, while Snowdrop's stepmother's visual description is missing in the tale, the agent behind Snowdrop's misfortunes, i.e., the magical looking-glass of the queen, creates a counterbalance with Snowdrop's position. Glass is a super-cooled liquid, formed when natural elements like sand and rocks, often abundant in silica, are heated to high temperature and then cooled rapidly. Nevertheless, in order to turn the glass into a mirror human intervention is necessary. Yet its magical quality suggests that this mirror is not merely extra-human but also supernatural – thus it transcends the realms of both human and nature. Therefore both Snowdrop and the magic-mirror – i.e., the innocent protagonist, and the agent of the antagonist – remain on the margin between the human and the natural world, suggesting that neither of these spheres can be rendered either positive or negative value, and indeed, there exists no such mutually exclusive spheres with binary opposition between them. Humans are themselves a part of nature, just like any other species. Nature is therefore much more powerful than any human-build civilization; and this fact is reinforced in the tale when the queen, failing to murder Snowdrop using objects of civilized society like comb or lace, resorts to natural allurements – a fresh, delicious looking apple – in order to tempt and murder Snowdrop.

Often Nature acts as a judge of human actions, having both punitive and restorative capacity. It rewards characters for their goodness and punishes them for their wrong-doings. A great example of this can be found in "Mother Holle", where the beautiful maiden helps a tree to drop its ripe apples, thus helping in harvesting and reproduction of the tree. For this act of kindness, she gets the reward from Mother Holle which is denied to her step-sister who refuses to help Nature. Thus this tale also suggests the symbiotic relationship between human and the environment, by showing how the acts of one affect the other. Not only is the tree

dependent on human beings, but also snowing is affected by the human act of shaking Mother Holle's bed. This indicates that humans are not only dependent on Nature, but also have certain responsibilities towards Nature which, if unfulfilled, might bring dire consequences. The step-sister's being covered with pitch in punishment of breaking the mutual interdependence between human and nature can be read as a metaphor of the natural threats – of global warming and environmental pollution, for instance - caused by the selfish, indiscriminate behaviours of humans towards nature.

The divide between human beings and non-human creatures, which leads to the subsequent superiority of and exploitation by human beings, is blurred by the frequent transformations and interactions between humans and non-humans. Animals and birds or even trees talk to men, and play vital roles in changing the fate of a person. Often a human character, because of some curse or conspiracy, turns into a bird or animal. In "The Golden Bird" the fox plays a significant role in guiding the gardener's son to the golden bird. While the original impetus behind searching the golden bird is a human folly - the king's greed for gold, since a single feather dropped by the bird is considered to be of more value than his entire kingdom - yet in the process of finding the bird the binary between nature and culture becomes functional. Cultural merrymaking – i.e., feasting, dancing, and singing – are presented as allurements which divert the searchers from their quest, just as beautiful women are shown to divert knights in medieval romances from their search of the holy grail. The eldest two sons of the gardener fail to find the bird not only because they get captivated by these allurements, but more importantly, because they pay no heed to the counsel of the fox who offers help and forbids them from entering the inn which offers those merriments. The youngest son, however, listens to all the advices of the fox, and in consequence of his respectful attitude towards it, the fox actively helps him multiple times. However, he also cannot resist the temptation of gold when it comes to selecting cage for the bird. Although he thus acts against the fox's advice, the fox still continues to help him throughout the subsequent events of the tale, and ultimately turns out at the end to be the lost brother of the princess who was compelled to live as a fox so long. This easy, fluidmetamorphosis suggests that there is no core "humanness" in a human being which might set him apart from other creatures, and the core of the beings of all creatures are the same or at least similar, because otherwise inter-species transformation would be impossible.

In the narrative of "The Frog Prince", however, this issue is much more problematic. The handsome prince is changed into a frog by a spiteful fairy on the condition that he will regain

his entity if any princess allows him to eat from her own plate and sleep on her own bed for three nights. It is indeed ironic that the princess of the story does these not out of any love or sympathy for the “nasty frog” as she calls him (63), but merely because her father compels her to fulfil her promise to the frog which she had made earlier with the selfish motive of getting her work done – i.e., getting back her favourite plaything, her golden ball - and without having any real intention of fulfilling it. Thus while on one hand equality between the different species is being proposed through the inter-species transformation, a hierarchy between different species is evidently established by presenting frog as nasty and detestable, which makes the tale predominantly anthropocentric. This anthropocentric attitude gets further reinforced when towards the end the ugliness of the frog is contrasted with the actual handsome appearance of the cursed prince.

In “Sweetheart Roland” the metamorphosis does not remain restricted within the human and non-human creatures, but also involves the non-living objects as well as the geological forms like the lake into which Roland is transformed. The female protagonist of the story transforms herself first into a duck, and later into a flower and into a red stone in the course of the story. The faith underlying these transformations, and, in a broader sense, underlying the whole tale, is the philosophy of Pantheism. According to the Pantheistic belief, the same soul exists through everyone and everything, and this soul is nothing but a manifestation of the soul of the supreme Divine Being. Any hierarchy between the human beings, the nonhuman creatures and the nonliving entities therefore become irrelevant, thus approaching the principles of deep ecology which states that all of these three kinds of entities are equally important and have equal rights to existence.

The binary opposition of nature and culture once again collapses when certain human characters are portrayed as being in no less harmony with nature than non-human creatures. Far from the civilized spaces, these human characters live in close and harmonious association with nature. Their physical and emotional proximity to nature endows them with profound wisdom, often presented metaphorically in the form of extra-human magical powers, which they may use in either positive or negative ways. These characters - hermits, witches and wise men and women – belong to what theorist Peter Barry calls a ‘gray’ area between Nature and culture. The witch from “Hansel and Gretel”, the seven dwarfs who sheltered Snowdrop – all belong to this category.

Therefore it may be concluded that the attitude towards nature in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* is non-linear and multi-dimensional. While the underlying impetus is always on constructing and reinforcing a harmonious bond of human beings with all living and non-living forms, the focus often shifts to the different dimensions of the human-nature relationship, ultimately suggesting that human beings should be viewed not as being separate from nature but as a part of nature itself.

Endnotes

1. According to Althusser, "in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce." (86) Now, although there are controversies among Ecocritics like Alan Liu, Terry Gifford and Jonathan Bate about whether nature actually exists or not, yet the importance of human perception of, and human attitude to, nature, is immense in determining the positive or negative environmental impacts of human actions. Therefore both nature-consciousness and anthropocentrism are "social formation's or ideologies, and either of them can survive only if it is injected into a child by the Ideological State Apparatuses.
2. Section 56 of *In Memoriam A.H.H.* by Alfred Tennyson.

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