

Sreetanwi Chakraborty, *The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up* (Kolkata: Penprints Publications, 2019), Rs. 350, 144, Hbk, (ISBN 978-93-5361-186-6)

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Sreetanwi Chakraborty's thesis on a feminist interpretation of fairy tales came as a surprise and treat to my literary interest. One of my fondest childhood memories is intricately connected with the stories I used to hear as a child. These stories would range from tribal folk tales comprising mermaid to the stories by Grimm Brothers. Back then, I didn't realize in that small hamlet of Dooars, stories and fables written in Germany would seep into our local households in the form of oral narratives, cartoons and comics. It took me another decade of exposure to various schools of thought to understand the politics of representation in the tales that made our childhood.

The changes in the academia and politics which can be located more prominently in the fin de siècle of the twentieth century led to challenging and reproduction of the previously accepted concepts and ideas associated with representation of women. In this context, works like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* would be indispensable. The understanding of women and her gender roles assigned by these male authors came under strict scrutiny of the Feminist Literary critics. It is in this premise, we can locate Sreetanwi's *The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up – A Feminist interpretation of Fairy Tales*. As the subtitle suggests, her work argues and challenges various stereotypes associated with the representation of women characters. The stereotyping of women as victims, damsel in distress, agents of darkness has been a common practice in literature across ages and civilization. If the Greeks had Medea and Medusa, the Elizabethans gave birth to Lady Macbeth. The seemingly long title of the book, however, succeeds in laying out the

agendas forthright to the readers. The metaphorical 'Sleeping Beauty' is no longer ignorant, innocent and in darkness. Short and precise, the book has been divided into four sections. It is inclusive and encompassing in the sense that it takes into account the Russian, German, Czech, Danish, and stories from other regions of the world.

The text talks about the recurrent images of garden, forest, mirror in the fairy tales. What appears intriguing is the observation of the idea of woman as a fruit. It is also interesting to note that feminine *self* has been recurrently identified as the producer. The image of a fruit bearer can be found pronounced in the idea of Mother Earth or Mother India. This not only suggests that women as the producer but as the passive receiver of actions as well. It also successfully argues the various images of garden and forest as a site of pleasure and entrapment in the corpus of fairy tales. The idea can be identified in the following lines from the text:

The garden and the wood is a highly important site of conflict; therefore, in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Alice's quest is a gendered quest during which she investigates types of feminine representation.

I personally was quite fascinated by the working of some stereotypical images to generate certain mass consciousness. These pointers not only entrapped women to a certain space but also framed an ideology or base on the basis of which a superstructure of women's identity would be generated:

All images, ice, mirror, coffin, garden, everything, are used later on as bridges to cross, weapons to blind men, and to reverse the position of women and not reflect it. Beauty itself is a kind of entrapment that dominates most of the prominent fairy tales.

However, one can see the narrativizing of such images have changed in the course of time. In contemporary literature, forest as a space finds its way in Haruki Murakami's magical realism. The forest that Kafka resorts to find an escape from the situation around him is quite different from the forest that Naoko finds her peace in *Norwegian Wood*. In Murakami's magical world, forest is

no longer an entrapment, it is rather an escape. In case of Sigmund Freud, it would signify a bottomless pit or an abyss – the space of subconscious mind where all desires remain repressed.

One of the chapters discusses about the process involved in sub-conscious social conditioning done by the fairy tales thereby validating gender roles on the basis of fairy tale narratives. The narratives in active and passive ways are responsible for social constructs that subjectify and objectify women. It can also be noted in the manners how girls passively subject themselves with the constructs created in the fairy tales. Sreetanwi aptly points out the role of these fairy tales in promotion of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal values inherent in the tales. The idea of gender as performativity was taken by Butler from Derrida's reading of Kafka's "*Before the Law*". Gender as performativity is based on the premise that repetitive and ritualistic practice give rise to a sense of naturalization in the context of a body. It produces a series of effect to keep one in a gendered space. The reworkings of fairy tales as informal and subconscious way of practicing this act also leads to the creation of constructs. An important instance of gynocentrism can also be seen in Sreetanwi's referral to J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter and how the latter presents the narratives of men from her vantage point. However, Sreetanwi points that Rowling fails to deviate from the normative ways of representation and hence, has been highly criticized for "undermining women" in her works.

Even though the text covers the major corpus of fairy tales, it has certainly missed out certain aspects which would otherwise be possible only by telescoping down into certain texts. Compartmentalizing the texts on the basis of subjects and then dealing with the issues would have been more coherent and structured. The book is meant to be read to gain a clearer insight into the ideas and arguments associated to the question, ideas and politics of representation in fairy tales. It is indeed inclusive but at the same time, offers only the Western idea of representation

even though certain references to tales from the Middle East can be definitely seen. It has been thoroughly researched and is a delight to read. To conclude, I would like to point at the changing narratives of fairy tales in the contemporary discourse. These days one might see a commercial flashing on television where a famous actor acting as dad talks to his daughter about the change in the gender roles thereby asserting that it is the heroine who saves the prince. It only makes me wonder how socially validated constructs are slowly being deconstructed and reconstructed to create general consciousness and at the same time commodified.