

CINDERELLA COMPLEX- A STEREOTYPE IN CLASSIC FAIRY TALES: A FEMINIST READING OF CINDERELLA MYTH IN GARRY MARSHALL'S ROMANTIC COMEDY FILM, 'PRETTY WOMAN'

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Abstract

The present paper tries to examine the stereotypical representation of the classic fairy tale heroines like Cinderella and also seeks to delve deep into the Cinderella Complex condition as theorised by Colette Dowling. The paper also shows how fairy tales are created under a dominant discourse where gender plays a vital role. The Cinderella Complex not only shows women as the embodiment of beauty as well as submissive, dependent, awaiting for the prince to be redeemed so that they can live happily ever after, it also deals with the issue of how fairy tales also gender children. Through this feminist investigation of the female heroines like Cinderella, the paper finally deals with a similar Cinderella Complex situation in the heroine of the 1990 Garry Marshall romantic comedy film 'Pretty Woman'. The paper ends with a brief discussion to the deconstructed story of Cinderella Complex.

Key Words: Classic Fairy Tales Heroines, Cinderella Syndrome, Cinderella Complex, Gender, Walt Disney Film, Beauty Myth, Garry Marshall Film Pretty Woman, Prostitution, Fractured Fairy Tales.

"Some day my prince will come,
Some day we'll meet again,
And away to his castle we'll go,
To be happy forever I know..."

(Disney 1937)¹

So sings Snow White in the anticipation of the arrival of the Prince Charming to save the day, that would bring the reversal of her misfortune. This Cinderella Syndrome (Enter Angela Wilder) pervades many of the classical fairy tales as transcribed by the French Charles Perrault or the German Grimm brothers. In her book, *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independency*, Colette Dowling states her belief in a condition

which she names "the Cinderella Complex", being an intricate system of beliefs put upon women which make them feel as if they must be submissive to the wills of others, seemingly less intelligent than they truly are. The complex is named after the fairy tale character Cinderella. It is based on the idea of femininity portrayed in that story, where a woman is beautiful, graceful, polite, supportive, hardworking, independent, and maligned by the females of her society, but she is not capable of changing her situations with her own actions and must be helped by an outside force, usually a male (i.e. the Prince). 'Rags to riches' refers to any situation in which a person rises from poverty to wealth, and in some cases from obscurity to fame, sometimes instantly. This is a common archetype not only in literature but also in popular culture as well. The present paper, however, seeks to delve into this archetypal journey of a marginalised woman's misfortunes-being-overturned-story through the Cinderella myth as projected in the 1990 Garry Marshall romantic comedy movie- *Pretty Woman*. Vivian Ward, a Hollywood prostitute, is just like the quintessential fairy tale heroine, the beautiful Cinderella, who being disenfranchised and socially marginalised, and who having a Cinderella Complex of her own, must be finally rescued by the rich 'Prince Charming', Edward Lewis; and they will finally live happily ever after. The paper also deals with the problematisation of the gender role as indoctrinated through the Cinderella myth of *Pretty Woman*.

It is impossible to date the origins of fairy tales; they are in many ways timeless. Most of them come from oral traditions. This oral tradition continued across Europe and beyond until Gutenberg invented printing press in 1440. The Italian Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile were the first to transcribe such stories. In about 1550, Straparola published *Le piacevoli notti*, which provided translations of some common Italian oral tales. This secured his title as the father or progenitor of fairy tales. In France, Charles Perrault wrote down fairy tales in his *Couttes De temps Passe (Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals)* in 1697. The Grimm brothers (Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grim) collected stories from German folklore and published them during the early to mid 1800s in seven different editions, with an additional small edition published later. Their first collection of fairy tales was *Children's and Household Tales*, published in 1812. The Dutchman, Hans Christian Andersen, is the last of the early transcribers of fairy tales. The elderly women in Odense told him the folklore that would later inspire his works, mainly written in the mid-1800s. However, in the twentieth century with the advent of film making, Walt Disney produced the film adaptations of fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast* and so on. Disney instituted very few major plot changes in the fairy tales he adapted to film from the stories of either Perrault or the Grimm brothers, probably because he and his directors generally subscribed to their ideological content, including clear-cut gender roles that associated women with domesticity and men with action and power.

Fairy tales are often "[...] deemed of marginal cultural importance and dismiss as unworthy of critical attention".² But recently fairy tales have become a wonderful genre to explore how gender has been portrayed culturally. Historian Sylvia D. Hoffert defines gender ideal as the cluster of characteristics, behavior patterns, and values that members of a group think a man or woman should have, a set of cultural expectations. The fact under the mask is that fairy tales are created and reproduced through the dominant discourse. Now literature in general, and fairy tales in particular, gender children. The characters depicted in stories help children within the socialisation process to determine what it means to be male or female as it applies to behaviour, traits, or occupation within a child's culture.³ Girls come to know that their values lie in men's desire for them, and the characters and qualities that will assure their desirability are revealed in cultural storylines. Girls do not adopt these positions passively, however, but actively construct their subjectivities in response to the power of discourse and ideology. Women are positioned as the object of men's gaze in most of the canonical fairy tales, and beauty determines a woman's value. The 1970s saw a resurgence of feminism throughout the nation, with rallies and protests around the United States. Yet when Kay Stone conducted interviews with forty women and girls between 1972 to 1973, the influence fairy tales still had was quite apparent. She observes, "All had read fairy tales, almost all could name several favourite heroines but rarely any heroes, and most of these tales were from Disney or the Grimms [...] Some had admired the lovely princesses and hoped to imitate them- especially their ability to obtain a man and a suburban castle without much effort. An eleven-year-old told me, '[...] Cinderella should be my story'. Another admirer of Cinderella, a nine-year-old said, 'Well, I Wouldn't really want to marry a prince like she did- just somebody like a prince'.⁴ Most of these stories portray women as the embodiment of ideal beauty and at the same time weak, submissive, dependent, compassionate and self-sacrificing, while the men are powerful, rich, and dominant. Even in the modern versions too like in the Disney films, the females do not rescue themselves while in distress, but they sing. "The disenfranchised or oppressed heroine must be rescued by a daring prince. Heterosexual happiness and marriage are always the ultimate goals of the story".⁵ Fairy tales also convey the message that the women must suffer, if not be humiliated, before she is rewarded. In many traditional tales, being rewarded with the prince and the security of marriage is the result of the heroine's submission and suffering, along with her beauty, rather than her agency. The embedded messages of suffering in silence, attaining beauty, being chosen, and living happily ever after encourage young girls to adopt these desires. The traditional tales also divide women with the designation of good or evil. K.S Evans notes that in the traditional canon, a powerful female is most often ugly if not evil. Marcia Lieberman agrees that the women who are powerful and good are never human; those women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive. Another view is that when real help comes to the female protagonist, it is usually from a fairy godmother or other wise

women (as in *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*), and when real trouble is created, it is usually by a witch or wicked stepmother (like the step mother of Cinderella).

Disney's *Cinderella* was released in 1950, and became one of the highest grossing films of the year. In recreating this fairy tale for post-war audiences, Disney retained the basic story line and central characters. Cinderella, the only daughter of a widowed aristocrat, is oppressed by her step mother, Lady Tremaine and her two ugly looking daughters Drizilla and Anastasia, after her father's death. She not only has to do all the menial labour in the house, but at the same time she is also mocked by the two step sisters who are jealous of her beauty as she is "[...] a hundred times more beautiful than her sisters"⁶. The birds sing-

"Cinderella, you are as lovely as your name

Cinderella, you are a sunset in a frame

Though you are dressed in rags,

You wear an air of queenly grace,

Anyone can see a throne would be your proper place."⁷

Just like Snow White, Cinderella has dreams too. And one day the dream seems to come true when the king holds a ball to find a bride for his son. Cinderella remains behind while her step sisters go to the grand ball. A fairy god-mother comes to her rescue and prepares her elegantly for the occasion. She arrives at the ball, and immediately the Prince falls in love with her at the first sight. The clock strikes midnight, and she must leave quickly before the magic-spell is over. In her haste she leaves behind her slipper. The Prince searches the land for the woman whose foot fits the shoe perfectly. And finally despite other women's futile attempt to wear the shoe, the Prince finds the girl who captures her heart. The Prince never sees Cinderella in her rags, and he is the prize at end of a difficult race.

Written by J.F.Lawton and directed by Garry Marshall, a 1990 film, *Pretty Woman* was originally intended to be a dark cautionary tale about class and prostitution in Los Angeles with the title *\$3,000*, but finally it was reconceived as a romantic comedy with its present title, based on the Cinderellic rags-to-riches myth, in which Vivian Ward, starring Julia Roberts plays the role of modern Cinderella whereas Edward Lewis, starring Richard Gere, is the Prince Charming. However, our present heroine is not so submissive and docile like the archetypal Cinderella. Despite being a prostitute she is determined on her decision not to kiss any client on mouth other than her Prince Charming. Edward Lewis is a successful workaholic businessman and in Los Angeles on business, accidentally takes a detour on Hollywood Boulevard while looking for Beverly Hills. He unsuccessfully tries to ask for directions and ends up in the red-light district, where he encounters a Hollywood prostitute named Vivian Ward, who mistakes him for a possible client. Her roommate and best friend, Kit De Luca, encourages her to try and recruit him, though he only wants directions and makes a deal with her to pay her if she shows him the way. Intrigued by her knowledge and wit he hires her to spend the night with him for \$300 in his hotel's penthouse apartment,

treating her to strawberries and champagne and sharing personal information with her. He comes to trust her as she "surprises" him by flossing her teeth after eating the strawberries and not doing drugs as he thought she was more likely to do in her profession. When Vivian comes to know that Edward buys companies, takes them apart and sells the pieces for more than he paid for the whole, and "It's strictly business", she says unhesitatingly, "Oh, then you do the same thing I do."⁸ Yes his business is with the buying and selling of the companies, whereas hers is that of her body. And Edward, being fascinated with her talks, finally offers her \$3000 to stay the entire week with him.

Although the film finally turns out to be a romantic comedy, it could not hide the issues related to prostitution. Like Cinderella, she is also oppressed badly, here by the so-called aristocrat higher society. She informs Edward that at one time she had "No money, no friend, no bum", and although she tried for different jobs, she could not make the rent, and her friend Kit, a hooker, helped her do it. So apparently, like a typical fairy tale, it was with the help of a female agency that she entered into the dark world of prostitution only to be humiliated by the so called moral society. Laurie Shrage makes a case for the radical feminist perspective when she says "female prostitution oppresses women, not because some women who participate in it 'suffer in the eyes of society' but because its organized practice testifies to and perpetuates socially hegemonic beliefs which oppress all women in many domains of their lives."⁹ Radical feminist Kathleen Barry, in *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, envisions prostitution as connected to a darkened world of sex, abuse, and violence.¹⁰ In the film too Vivian is abused for being a 'hooker', and then also molested by Edward's insensitive lawyer, Philip Stuckey as he claims that it is the profession of a hooker. Some of what Barry has to say is relevant and has elements of truth to it, but there are other important aspects of prostitution that are positive and life-affirming. And may be that is why Kit declares Viv that she does not want to leave her profession at any cost.

In the film we see that because of her overtly unsophisticated sexual appearance, Vivian is snubbed by the saleswomen of Rodeo Drive. Initially, hotel manager Barnard Thompson is also somewhat hostile towards her but slowly relents and instead like the fairy god-mother helps her find a dress and even coaches her on dinner etiquette. Edward returns and is visibly amazed by her transformation. This metamorphosis of look 'from a pauper to princess' also makes the Prince Charming fall in love with her. Like Cinderella too, Vivian is the beauty-incarnate, and we have the famous song-

"Pretty woman, walking down the street
 Pretty Woman, the kind I like to meet...
 I don't believe you, you're not the truth
 No one could look as good as you..."¹¹

She is also healthy, not on drugs, not on alcohol, not even a smoker. She is not a criminal, not inclined to steal anything, she even values love and dignity more than money- just like a good

hearted fairy tale heroine. Also like the Cinderella story the girls are in a race to win the heart of the prince and "[...] everybody is trying to land on him [Edward]".¹² But our Prince Charming is only for the beautiful Cinderella. Edward comes to know about Vivian's childhood dream as she says- "When I was a little girl, my mamma used to lock me in the attic [...] I would pretend I was a princess trapped in a tower by a wicked queen. And then suddenly this knight on a white horse with these colours flying would come charging up and draw his sword. And I would wave. And he would climb up the tower and rescue me."¹³ The transformation also takes place in her mind as like the *La Traviata* story, a prostitute falls in love with a rich man. True is her dream when Edward instead of going to the airport, goes to her apartment arriving with music from *La traviata*. He climbs up the fire escape, despite his fear of heights, with a bouquet of roses clutched between his teeth, to woo her. Edward, is a visual urban metaphor for the knight on a white horse rescuing the "princess" from the tower, the childhood fantasy Vivian told him about. But unlike the submissive Cinderella and the rescuer Prince Charming, who are only the flat characters in the story, Vivian and Edward undergo a mental change as Edward starts giving humane value more than the business world, and Vivian decides to leave her sex job in the hopes of a better life. Still it cannot be denied that the journey follows the same as that of Cinderella whose misfortune is overturned by the sudden arrival of the Prince Charming in her life and they will probably "live happily ever after".¹⁴ And the film finally ends with its emphatic suggestion to "Keep on dreaming".¹⁵

Interestingly enough, The Cinerella Complex is still an officially unrecognised psychological condition. This definition slightly touches on the dependency factor, but focuses more on another problem of unrealistic expectations and resulting disappointment. The dependency issue could come in because the woman is depending on an ideal man to come into her life and make her happy. The Cinderella Complex, in Colette Dowling's case, was mainly conflict with herself: "To have no confidence in my ability to make it in this world on my own, the new way and to be equally doubtful of my ability to succeed in woman's old way, which is to seduce a man into being her patron and protector."¹⁶ Dowling also talked about her frustration over her dependence: "Women who yearned for independence but were frightened by what it might mean."¹⁷ There is also "[...] a psychological need to avoid independence, the wish to be saved."¹⁸ This relates back to the prince charming aspect. On Colette Dowling's Web site, she even said that she thinks the response to The Cinderella Complex caused her to pursue a career in psychotherapy. So, there might be more to this complex than meets the eye. According to Mary Fraser, the part-time psychology instructor at De Anza College, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, by Naomi Wolf, is more of a modern, updated take and continuation of The Cinderella Complex. Before we conclude, mention must be made that the deconstruction of the stereotypical representation of the Cinderella Complex in classic fairy tales has already been started by the feminist writers. In 1985, a collection of short stories entitled *Rapunzel's*

Revenge: Fairytales of Feminists was released. Among them, is a version of *Cinderella* in which the heroine wants to start up a new business of her own, and turns down the Prince's offer of marriage so that she can achieve her life long dream. Although none of these tales became mainstream favourites, they are fascinating readings especially for the fractured fairy tales lovers.

End Notes:

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