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De-Mythologizing the ‘Cinderella Complex’: Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promise*

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Abstract:

The story of "Cinderella" is one of the most famous of all the fairytales. According to folklorist studies, it is the best known tale in history. It can be found in almost all cultures. Scholars from diverse fields such as literary history, psychology, feminist studies and cultural studies have been trying, from various perspectives, to explore more deeply the meanings and the influence of the Cinderella story. Probably the popularity of this fairy tale is mainly due to the fact that the story brings up issues that find resonance within many women. Young girls as they get older fantasize about getting carried off by prince charming or the knight in shining armor. Colette Dowling's well-known book *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* which appeared in 1981 examines the negative influence of the Cinderella tale. She points out that Cinderella is in fact a patriarchal instrument to produce and nurture a psychological dependence in women, which is very harmful to women and their development. Women who are affected by Cinderella fairy tales have an unconscious desire to be taken care of by other people and many women suffer from this complex. Dialectically, the Cinderella story contains a strong negative narrative which serves the patriarchal purpose of keeping women in a passive and subordinate position. The Cinderella story implies that external help is necessary in transforming women's lives. Apparently Perrault's version conforms to the patriarchal and bourgeoisie ideology of late 17th century France but now it is seen as a negative role-model for young females. However in Grimm's version and also in almost every version except Perrault's and its variants, Cinderella takes an active role in her transformation. She is shown as tough and resilient and as one who teaches us that wishes and desires are justifiable, but they are only obtainable if you are willing to pursue them. This paper explores how in her debut novel *Ancient Promise*, Jaishree Misra's de-mythologizes the 'Cinderella complex' by subverting existing patriarchal ideologies and practices that have given rise to this psychological complex in women through centuries of social and cultural conditioning.

Keywords: ‘Cinderella Complex’, women, psychological dependency, Patriarchy, de-mythologize, *Ancient Promise*, subversion

Introduction

Fairy tales existed in the oral traditions of many civilizations before they were adopted, adapted and transcribed into the corpus of literature, and more recently, popular fiction. They evolved and reflected the changes in society. Many of the ancient fairy tales were in fact dynamic and empowering discourse on womanhood which were later re-written in order to teach

women their passive, submissive role in society and aimed at maintaining the status quo. The intent and purpose of many of the original folk tales had thus been distorted to suit prevalent view. Hence it is clear that a certain social dynamics existed behind the telling and subsequently re-telling of these tales. The psychological approach to fairy tales is usually associated with Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Freud, both fairy tales and dreams used symbols to express the conflicts, anxieties, and forbidden desires that had been repressed into the unconscious. Focusing on the relationship of folk tales to myth, scholars looked to these stories for evidence of the values, customs, and beliefs that expressed a specific people's cultural identity.

The story of "Cinderella" is one of the most famous of all the fairytales. According to folklorist studies, it is the best known tale in history. It can be found in almost all cultures. The story dating back to 9th Century China is said to exist in 500 versions in Europe alone and has become a basic literary archetype in world literature. The centuries old folklore that has manifested into the contemporary tale of Cinderella is a fascinating glimpse at the historicization of women. Cinderella, embodies a classic folk tale myth-element of unjust oppression/triumphant reward, and refers to a fictional young girl who is saved from her stepmother and stepsisters by her fairy godmother and a handsome prince. In addition it may also be used as an allusion for a woman whose merits had not been recognised but who then achieves sudden success and recognition. Scholars from diverse fields such as literary history, psychology, feminist studies and cultural studies have been trying, from various perspectives, to explore more deeply the meanings and the influence of the Cinderella story. Probably the popularity of this fairy tale is mainly due to the fact that the story brings up issues that find resonance within many women. Young girls as they get older fantasize about getting carried off by prince charming or the knight in shining armor. However, Colette Dowling's well-known book *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* which appeared in 1981 examines the negative influence of the Cinderella tale. Dowling points out that Cinderella is in fact a patriarchal instrument to produce and nurture a psychological dependence in women, which is very harmful to women and their development. Women who are affected by Cinderella fairy tales have an unconscious desire to be taken care of by other people and many women suffer from this complex. So dialectically, the Cinderella story contains a strong negative narrative which serves the patriarchal purpose of keeping women in a passive and subordinate position.

From ancient times, women's relative lack of power and their low status in society may have lead to feelings to helplessness. Probably it is this sense of helplessness that has put many women at a greater risk for depression which contributes to the formation of Cinderella Complex. It is the largely repressed attitudes and fears that keep women from taking full advantage of their mind and creativity, forcing them to wait for someone or something to change their lives. There are many types of fear that a woman with Cinderella Complex face. They are fear of loneliness, fear of incompetence, fear of success, fear of something new, fear of rejection. All these fears are interrelated and interconnected to each other. Most of these fears arise from bad parenting or rigid socialization process. Women deal with such fears differently. Some hide their fears, while some deliberately avoid it whereas some deal with their fears by facing it. The key element to the Cinderella syndrome has women placing themselves automatically in the position of 'willing martyr' who consistently puts her needs last in the vain hope that others will recognize her patient sacrifice for others whose interest she has magnanimously prioritized

before her won. But in reality her efforts at best goes, unnoticed and at worst, unappreciated. This habit can have a deeply corrosive effect upon the psyche of a woman leading to the 'martyr' role being deployed as a passive aggressive tool which will never win respect for women within her own family or from her community.

Cinderella never disobeys an order, never defends her rights, and never challenges authority. She is powerless to control her own fate in her own home. Unable to control her own time, she is also unable to control her own destiny. Cinderella does not act; she only reacts to those around her, a sure sign of both external and internationalized oppression. She has to tolerate all her stepmother's ill-treating because she has no income and cannot make a living. Even when she finally marries the prince, her happy life is based on the prince's great wealth and she has to rely on her husband all her life. From an economic point of view, she is not an independent woman, and without career and aspiration she is but an accessory of her husband. In the era of Cinderella women regarded families as their whole career, especially when there was a lack of choice and when women were uneducated and were taught only domestic duties. They were raised to become wives and bear children and nothing else. Hence, marriage turned out to be their primary concern. As a result, *Cinderella* cheered up women from generation to generation in the belief that if you marry a good husband, and you will live happily ever after. Cinderella Complex is the product of centuries of social conditioning. Women fear that if they develop themselves fully they will end up alone, unloved and uncared for.

The Cinderella Complex can be interpreted in different ways in today's society and culture. Many romantic novels and movies expose this. For instance Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and the movie *Pretty Women*. In *Transforming the Cinderella Dream: From Frances Burney to Charlotte Bronte* (1990), Huang Mei makes a systematic study of the formation and transformation of the Cinderella theme in the English novel. The Cinderella syndrome often distorts the view women have of themselves, allowing the opinion of others to dictate her conduct. This can manifest itself in an uneven or even schizophrenic way of expression herself. This aspect of the Cinderella syndrome is particularly prominent in the areas of a women's life determining personal ambitions, work and career aspirations. Many women are frightened of the external world and prefer to be shielded under the 'protective' shadow of their husbands or in the safe refuge of their homes. Unlike men, women are trained by society to be dependent and wait for some external agency will come along to rescue her and recognize her worth, like the prince in the fairytale and that this 'rescue' will subsequently transform their lives. This leads her to abandon her own passions and ambitions to slot neatly into his scheme of life. It is this attitude that holds down women from achieving their true potential. Dowling calls this as the "psychological need to avoid independence" and she feels that this is probably the most important issue facing women today.

The Cinderella story implies that external help is necessary in transforming women's lives. Apparently Perrault's version conforms to the patriarchal and bourgeoisie ideology of late 17th century France but now it is seen as a negative role-model for young females. Submissiveness and dependence, basic characteristics of womanliness are central to the feminine virtues described and celebrated in the original Cinderella tale. However in Grimm's version and also in almost every version except Perrault's and its variants, Cinderella takes an active role in her transformation. Clearly, it is through her own efforts and because of the person she is, that

Cinderella is able to transcend magnificently her degraded state, despite what appear as insurmountable obstacles. She is shown as tough and resilient, and as one who teaches us that wishes and desires are justifiable, but they are only obtainable if you are willing to pursue them.

It is against this background I wish to examine how in her debut novel *Ancient Promise*, Jaishree Misra de-mythologizes the 'Cinderella complex' by subverting existing patriarchal ideologies and practices that have given rise to this psychological complex in women through centuries of social and cultural conditioning.

Ancient Promise is about a woman's painful journey of self-discovery. It is a Cinderella kind of transformation of the young and vulnerable Janu into a more determined stronger and empowered woman who is capable of taking decisions about her own life. "My marriage ended today". With this stark statement Misra begins her novel. "Ma has said, as we left the court, her voice and her eyes brimming with sadness, that it had been my fate"(3). Narrated in the first person in flashback, Janu's story, by Misra's own admission, is a thinly veiled autobiography. The author traces the events leading up to Janu's divorce, as she travels back home from the court on a rainy night in Kerala. As a young eighteen year old girl from Delhi, Janaki or Janu was forced to give up Arjun, her first love, who leaves for England to pursue higher studies. Pressurized by her family she enters into a loveless arranged marriage with a businessman who is several years her senior. Suresh Maraar, heir to the Maraar fortunes is seen as a prize catch for an ordinary middle class family like Janu's. The pressure from her extended family is subtle when the mighty Maraar clan approves of her so easily: "What are they going to think? They could even retract their offer by tomorrow!". "Be grateful for what you're getting". "They don't even want a dowry...It's nothing less than arrogance to say no to people like that' (61). Janu's feeble protests are brushed aside. She is forced to sacrifice her love for Arjun because she says she is 'tired of fighting off my family". Ridden with guilt for the pain she has caused her parents by transgressing the boundary they had set, and daring to fall in love, she looked upon her marriage to Suresh as a kind of compensation-"to ensure that I began to pay off some of the debt that has accrued against my name somewhere'(68). Suresh has nothing in common with her but agrees to the 'alliance' because she fits into his specifications of being pretty, young enough to 'adjust', and able to speak English so that he could take her to Bombay in the hoped-for expansion of his motel business. "Nothing else was too important"(96). Suresh as it turns out is neither good nor bad but simply an 'expert in the art of escape'. Soon the young bride realizes that she is far from welcome in the Maraar House. The behavior of the women is cold, indifferent and hostile. They call to mind Cinderella's awful sisters and stepmother, who in this story is the haughty domineering acid-tongued mother-in-law and her sly and nasty cronies, the overbearing sisters-in-law and the taciturn father-in-law, for whom she is always the 'fashionable' 'city-type' outsider, not schooled in Kerala's ways. Her indifferent husband is too busy to notice or care about Janu's lonely battle against the family's veiled jibes that tear her self-esteem to shreds and make her feel totally unwelcome. With no sense of self-worth, she feels powerless to fight back. Like Cinderella, Janu is a "figure of abandonment and abuse in search of self worth" (Asper 1993). All her efforts to endear herself to her husband's family seemed in vain till she learns that she is pregnant. She sees a flicker of hope of earning the Maraar family's love and respect if she does manage to produce the much yearned for first grandson. But she gives birth to a daughter who turns out to be mentally challenged. Life in the Maraar household turns from bad to worse to unbearable.

The novel endeavours to gauge the depths of paranoia, isolation and desperation that Janu is forced to face with the birth of a mentally retarded daughter. Her intense attachment to the baby forms her best protection and her sole means of salvation. Shut out by the coldness of her husband's family and his indifference to her and their daughter's needs, Janu starts to rebel against the snobbish conventions of the family. "I grabbed at the realization with a weary but dizzy, almost overwhelming sense of liberation. I was free. I neither had to struggle for their approval anymore nor put Riya through the same hopeless loop". Janu says, surprised at her hard won minor triumph. "I wasn't sure why I had so easily given up my own right to be loved"(132). As a mother, she instinctively knows that "a child like Riya, left unloved, would wither and perish". This probably gave her the strength to fight back for the first time. And paradoxically, her attempts to find school that will admit her child, opens a path forward for her. In all this, Janu is only vaguely aware that she is at last taking her destiny into her own hands. This is starkly different from the Janu—and her mother and grandmother—who have been forced to believe that "these were things we simply inherited". "What was the point in going on about something that could not be changed?". Janu realizes that if her daughter Riya is to make any progress at all, she has to get away. As the conviction that education—for herself and for her child—is the only escape route from their sordid existence grows stronger in Janu, she gets prepared to fight her own battles. Slowly she formulates a plan to escape from her stifling marital house. She works on her college degree with a vengeance and earns a bachelor and then a master's degree in English. She also manages to secure a scholarship to London University. Riya thus becomes an agent of Janu's empowerment and escape.

The transition from a sense of victimhood to agency is slow and gradual. It is then, when she is almost ready to go abroad that her panicky husband and in-laws try their best to thwart her plans by maneuvering to take away her daughter from her. Janu, who once passively endured her lot now become stronger and determined. So she goes abroad and completes her course. Meanwhile she runs into Arjun once again. This accidental meeting with her childhood love makes Janu realize, that her life is in her hands and that she can be happy if she chooses to be. She decides to get a divorce and live with Arjun in England. But before that she knew she had to get Riya back, even at the risk of losing the only other happiness of her life, the love of Arjun. When she braves Suresh's wrath to tell him about Arjun, she knows she has, in one swoop, removed a terrible burden from her husband's shoulders and transferred it squarely on to her own. "I was no longer the injured party, he was!" She astutely observes. Although jealousy and anger were the reactions she expected from a weak person like Suresh, he instead unleashes a complex manipulating plot engineered by the Maraars. When they conspired to prove her insane and drug her into depression, she found two allies—her aging and frail grandmother and her defeated and fatalistic mother. A bitter divorce and custody battle ensues and she is ostracized by her family and society. Although she is racked by guilt at every stage, guilt about bringing shame to her family, guilt for giving birth to a handicapped child, guilt as a married woman for loving a man who is not her husband, things turn out in her favour. She gets a divorce and Riya is returned to her and she is ready to start a new life with Arjun.

Conclusion

Tradition is so deeply ingrained in Indian women that none would dare to think to rise above one's situation and make a change. By resigning themselves to their condition and stoically enduring the treatment meted out to them, not only do women perpetuate patriarchy, but

inflict it on other women, generation after generation. Initially Janu's mother and her grandmother does not particularly think Janu's predicament as unbearable because at least she is not physically tortured. So like Cinderella, men are not Janu's problem, women are. It is the women of the Maraar family who subject Janu to psychological cruelty, more than men. Indifference is the weapon men use. All together perpetuate and perpetrate patriarchy. Bound by age long social customs formulated by men, it takes a courageous woman to stand up and fight for her rights and happiness. And that is what Janu finally does. In a brief chat with Pratibha Umashankar, Misra says, "It was quite important for me to show that she(Janu) was by now a woman in charge of her own destiny..." (Dec 7, 2010, online). Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promise*, full of keen psychological observations, is thus a sensitive account of a woman's effort to transform her life and live life on her own terms by breaking out of the Cinderella Complex that held her down from seeking her own destiny and happiness in life.

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