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Gender Stereotyping in *Peter Pan*: ‘The Doctrine of the Two Spheres’ and ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’

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Abstract:

J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* or *The Boy who wouldn’t Grow Up*, a popular children’s classic has been doing the rounds since 1911 when it was published as a novel. This paper intends to identify the subtle elements in the novel that serve to inculcate gender stereotypes in the minds of the child and the adult readers alike. For this purpose, ‘The Doctrine of the Two Spheres’ and ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’ that gained a strong foothold during the Victorian Era with the emergence of Industrial Revolution, are invoked. The characters Peter Pan, Wendy and Tinker Bell who have amassed world-wide acclaim and adoration, seamlessly follow, exhibit or subvert the aforementioned concepts. Thus, the readers who identify themselves with the protagonists unconsciously imbibe the stereotypes endorsed by the latter. The novel seems to serve a didactic purpose by promoting a certain way of thought associated with gender roles, that has perpetuated over centuries to evolve into a stereotype.

Keywords: J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, popular children’s classic, The Doctrine of the Two Spheres, The Cult of True Womanhood.

Peter Pan or *The Boy who wouldn’t Grow Up* by J.M. Barrie was initially staged as a play before it was published as a novel in 1911. According to early children’s literature scholars, Barrie is often hailed as the originator of Anglo-American children’s theatre with *Peter Pan* as the first play written especially for children. However, some of them also claim that aspects of Barrie’s work echo “the phenomenon referred to as ‘the child drama’ plays centered on child characters but aimed primarily at adults” (Guber476). From this perspective, gender stereotyping that can be discerned in the text seems to not just introduce the gender roles that a child is expected to perform in due course of time, but also reinforce the same, in the minds of the adult audience (spectators or readers).

Children’s literature irrespective of the different subgenres it may entail, invariably tends to be didactic, hoping to teach a moral lesson. As Perry Nodelman remarks “they are short, simple, often didactic in intention and clearly positive in their outlook...”(1). *Peter Pan* too obeys the dictum by subtly exhorting the ‘ideal’ masculine or feminine virtues that one must inculcate according to his/her gender, such as being tough, chivalric, protective in the case of the former, while being docile, motherly and literally ‘an angel in the house’ in the case of the latter. According to Linda Brannon,

The current gender stereotypes, especially those about women, reflect beliefs that appeared during the 19th century, the Victorian era. The Industrial Revolution changed the lives of a majority of people in Europe and North America by moving men outside the home to earn money and leaving women at home to manage households and children. As men coped with the harsh business and industrial world, women were left in the relatively unvarying and sheltered environments of their homes. These changes produced two beliefs: the Doctrine of Two Spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood (161).

‘The Doctrine of Two Spheres’ is the belief that women and men have their separate areas of influence where in women’s areas of influence are home and children, whereas men’s sphere includes work and the outside world. ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’ endorses the idea that the attributes of ‘true women’ are piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Brennon 162). The former works out in the novel through the personas of Wendy’s mother Mrs. Darling and her husband, and Peter and Wendy herself. Wendy and Mrs. Darling also assume the role of cult feminine figures through their virtues as ‘true women’ in the domestic sphere.

As the novel begins, the reader encounters Mrs. Darling who is a dutiful wife and a loving mother. She is always addressed as the wife of Mr. George Darling and nowhere is her original name mentioned. It asserts the idea that a woman’s identity gains validity only through the men in her life. While her life is confined within the four walls of her house, attending to the needs of her husband and children, Mr. Darling spends most of his time outside the domestic sphere, working for the family. Also, Mrs. Darling shows great respect towards her husband and ensures that others too, especially the children pay due attention and respect to him. The patriarch enjoyed and demanded this kind of admiration. “Mr. Darling used to boast to Wendy that her mother not only loved him but respected him” (Barrie 1). At times when he had the feeling that Nana, their pet dog did not admire him, he was greatly disturbed by it and Mrs. Darling would console him saying, ““I know she admires you tremendously, George, ... and then she would sign to the children to be specially nice to father” (Barrie 3). This reinforces in the minds of the readers, the need to treat the pater familias with respect and awe. Mr. Darling’s position as the breadwinner of the family has indeed led to the stature he demands, while the efforts of his wife are rather unacknowledged. However, the narrator hails her qualities as a mother, though not as an individual.

Mrs. Darling is portrayed as a concerned and loving mother. As “it is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day” (Barrie 4), Mrs. Darling does the same before she goes to sleep. She keeps track of all the events and memories of her children, Wendy, John and Michael, by entering their minds and thereby, ensuring that they are out of danger. She is a perfect mother who eliminates all kinds of worries of her kids and proves that a mother’s love is unconditional and unlimited. When Michael asks her “Can anything harm us, mother, after the night– lights are

lit?" she says , "they are the eyes a mother leaves behind her to guard her children"(Barrie 13). Then she goes about singing enchantments over them, to ward off the evil eye.

When she begins to sense that they are in touch with Peter Pan, the boy who lived with the fairies and pixies, she sees trouble brewing. However, George dismisses her apprehensions as utter nonsense. In fact, it's his arrogance and narcissistic obsession that leads to the tragic event of the childrens' abduction. Being too eager "to show who was master in that house, he lured her [Nana] out with honeyed words, dragging her from the nursery" once when she was naughty. In spite of Mrs. Darling's warning's about Peter, "he did it. It was all owing to his too affectionate nature, which craved for admiration" (Barrie 12). Thus, the man's yearning to show superiority and firmness as opposed to the mother's loving care and concern, invites danger in the novel. However, her unconditional love wins her back her children. "The stereotype of a mother whose love is "unconditional"" is portrayed through Mrs. Darling (O'Reilly 6). She leaves the window to the nursery open and checks every evening with great hope and tears in her eyes, if they have flown back to their beds. Thus, the perseverance of a doting mother who patiently waits for her childrens' return becomes the centre of focus. The overt motherly traits embedded in Mrs. Darling are surely feminine ideals endorsed by patriarchy. According to Adrienne Rich, patriarchy is "the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, political system in which man by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition,... determine what role women shall or shall not play" (57). The young and adult women reading the novel would unconsciously imbibe the characteristics associated with the persona of Mrs. Darling and would be persuaded to act in the same respect to be considered as perfect mothers. The gender stereotyping with respect to Wendy and Peter too would encourage similar performance from the part of the child audience. Thus, the fiction intended for dual audience serves its purpose.

'The Doctrine of Two Spheres' also works with respect to the child protagonists Wendy and Peter. Peter works outside the domestic sphere while Wendy is confined within the 'home under the ground' (Barrie 49). Peter battles the pirates, protects the boys and women in his life, and enjoys adventures. Though he says he never wanted to grow up into a man as his parents wished, ironically his actions and behavior tend to be along the same lines. He claims proudly that he has never cried in his life. "'Oh, I shan't cry," said Peter, who was already of the opinion that he had never cried in his life" (Barrie 16). At a certain point of time, he even says to Tinker Bell, "You know you can't be my fairy, Tink, because I am a gentleman"(Barrie 18), thus, falling into the traditional framework of the masculine. He also adorns the role of a chivalric warrior when he wages war against Hook. He resumes the battle only when he is convinced that the game is fair. "He snatched a knife from Hook's belt and was about to drive it home, when he saw that he was higher up the rock than his foe. It would not have been fighting fair"(Barrie 60). He is hailed as the 'Great White Father' who protects his family and society. "Peter had saved Tiger Lily from a dreadful fate, and now there was nothing she and her braves would not do for him. They called Peter the Great White Father, prostrating themselves [lying down] before him" (Barrie 65). His identity as a father is reinforced by Wendy too, by asking the children to pay

him due respect as her mother always did. “Secretly, Wendy sympathised with them a little, but she was far too loyal a housewife to listen to any complaints against father. ““Father knows best,” she always said, whatever her private opinion must be” (Barrie 65). Thus, the power of the patriarch engraved in the psyche of the woman forbids her from expressing her true opinions and emotions. Yet, the protagonist is shown to take pleasure in this subordination.

The idea of confining a woman to the household is implicit in the actions that the boys undertake when she arrives at the island, thus unconsciously endorsing ‘The Doctrine of the Two Spheres’. She is initially shot by Tootles, one of the boys, being told by Tinker Bell that Wendy is a bird and Peter wants him to kill it. However, Wendy does not die. Since she is very weak they try to move her to a house citing the dictum that that is where women are supposed to be. “Curly suggests “Let us carry her down into the house... “Ay,” said Slightly, “that is what one does with ladies”” (Barrie 43). Since Peter feels it would be disrespectful to touch the lady, Peter decides to build a house around her. This again reinforces the notion that a woman’s place is in the domestic front. It becomes evident in Wendy’s words even while she is in stupor. She says “I wish I had a pretty house ...and babies peeping out” (Barrie 46).

Wendy emerges as the cult feminine figure when she assumes the position of an ideal mother. Like Mrs. Darling, she possesses the attributes an ideal mother should have, in spite of the fact that the persona is a child. Hence the child readers who try to identify with her are persuaded to take after her, who is a representative of the ‘cult woman’. She falls perfectly into the framework of a ‘feminine mystique’, a term popularized by Betty Friedan through her book of the same name. It refers to the notion that a woman’s role in society is to be a wife, mother and nothing else. She declares: “Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (15). This is indeed foregrounded through Wendy who is encouraged to go with Peter Pan to Neverland to be a mother to the Lost Boys. She performs the role efficiently and is sought after and hailed for her motherly attributes. This asserts the argument put forth by Rich in *Of Woman Born* that the term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male defined and controlled. Her concept is that it constrains, regulates and dominates women through a compromise of her independence and stifling her creativity and generativity (Rich 212). This becomes evident in the activities Wendy undertakes to take care of the boys. She shows great concern when she sees Peter sobbing unable to attach himself to his shadow. Wendy sews it on for him which is considered to be a typical feminine activity. She is also touched when she knows Peter is a motherless child. It’s her knowledge of stories and skill at story telling that tempts Peter to take her along with him to Neverland so that the lost boys can hear stories from her. Again, another activity considered typically feminine is attached to Wendy to exhort her value as a good mother.

She is deified in her mother’s role as the caretaker and mentor of the lost boys. At the same time, John and Michael see her only as a girl who is there to prepare food for them. Both the perspectives limit Wendy’s identity as an individual with unique capabilities. Instead, she is

glorified and venerated when she exercises the conventional feminine roles dutifully. She puts the boys to sleep after telling bedtime stories as mothers usually do. Wendy undertakes activities such as cooking, sewing and darning for the boys. “The cooking, kept her nose to the pot, and... she had to keep watching that it came aboil. Wendy's favourite time for sewing and darning was after they had all gone to bed”. Finally, “she would fling up her arms and exclaim, “Oh dear, I am sure I sometimes think spinsters are to be envied!””(Barrie 50). She is shown to be enjoying her life as a single mother (Barrie 50). Very soon, she also begins to address the boys as her children and is determined to save them from the traps the pirates(their enemies) must have laid for them. Thus, she takes after Mrs. Darling who too was very protective about her kids. Wendy's role in this regard is exemplified through the words of Hook, the leader of the pirates who exclaims that it is no longer possible to trap the boys as they have found a mother (Barrie 56). She also ensures that John and Michael never forgets about their parents by frequently questioning her brothers about them. Thus, she turns into an ideal daughter and an ideal female who takes pains to maintain long lasting familial bonds.

However, Tinker Bell can be seen as a direct contrast to Wendy. She who is mischievous and does not seem to exhibit any feminine ideals such as submissiveness, passivity, and maturity is shunned by others at a certain point of time. At the nursery, she goes about screaming noisily, using offensive language against Wendy and Peter.“She flew about the nursery screaming with fury. “You shouldn't say such things,” Peter retorted”. He informs Wendy, “she is not very polite. She says you are a great [huge] ugly girl...Tink was darting about again, using offensive language” (Barrie 18). Indicating that Tinker Bell is not only arrogant but also restless, Peter adds, she “never stays still” (Barrie 18). It adds to the fact that she is not someone who can be confined within a household, as she spends much of her time outdoors than indoors, thus, subverting the ‘Doctrine of Two Spheres’. As opposed to the protective figures Wendy and Mrs.Darling, Tinker Bell emerges as character who tries hard to ensnare and endanger Wendy as she is jealous of the latter. She tells the lost boys “Peter wants you to shoot the Wendy”(Barrie 39) so that Wendy would be killed. Definitely, these traits are antithesis to the concept of an ideal woman. Hence, she is depicted as a rebel thwarting the ideals endorsed by the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’. When her activities and behavior become unbearable, Peter chides her “listen, Tinker Bell...I am your friend no more. Begone from me forever” (Barrie 43). His words have great bearing as what he says and decides becomes the collective opinion in Neverland. Thus, the message to Tinker Bell is that she would be isolated by the society until she becomes refined in her manners and behavior. She is granted a week's time for the same, during which Peter possibly expects her to learn from and take after Wendy.

The novel through the personas of Mrs. Darling and Wendy exhorts the conventional feminine virtues that a woman is expected to embody, as has been described above. It also draws attention to the plight of yet another character Tinker Bell who tries to transgress these norms. Her plight is a clear indication to the readers that the failure to perform the destined role would invite the ire of the society. Thus, the novel in its entirety seems to serve its didactic purpose of

instilling the gender roles in the child readers by drawing on the notions of 'Doctrine of the Two Spheres' and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'.

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